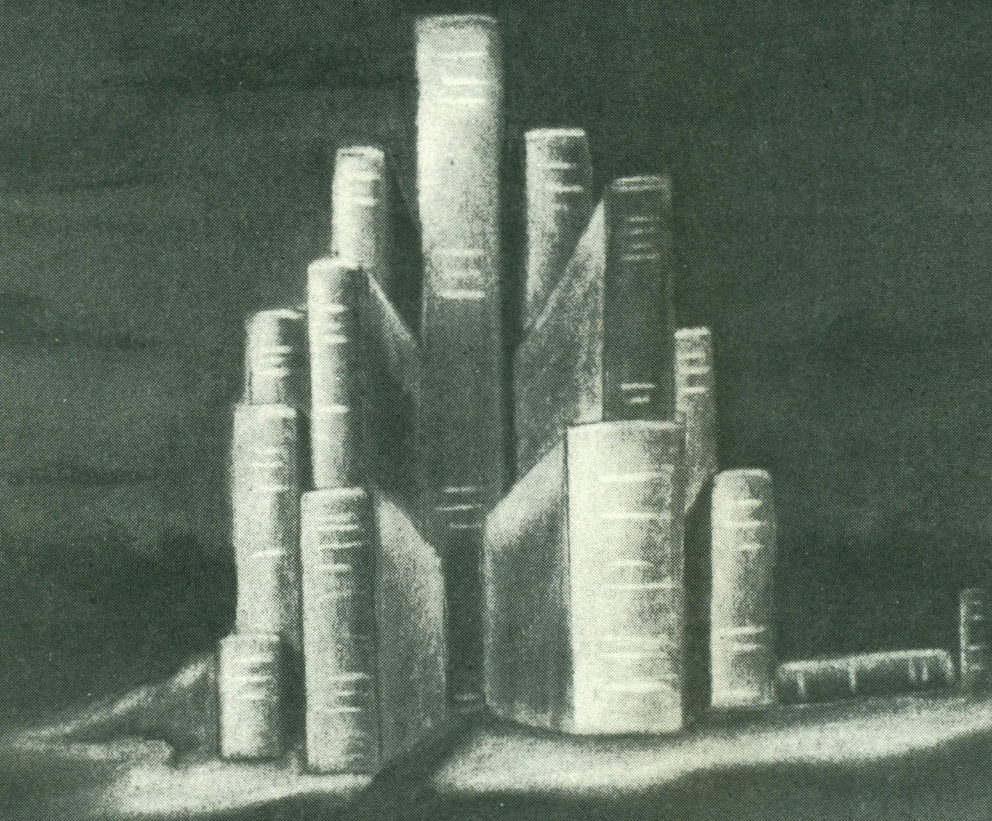


TALES FROM THE



WASTE AND

Tales from the Wasteland
Volume 1, Spring, 1992

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Preface

In the fall of 1991, a group of students expressed an interest in further development of their fiction writing skills'. With cooperation among faculty, students, and administration, a new class was born: Epiphany, Fiction Writing 299.

Inspiration comes from varied sources. Ranging in age from teenagers to grandmothers, the students comprising this class are an eclectic group academically, with interests spanning the gamut of majors available at BSC. While this is a fledgling attempt for some, many of these writers have written for years. They write for fun, they write with publication in mind, they write because they have to.

Mentor and creative love mate Judy Swartz held their hands, guiding the students across uncharted territory with reassuring shoves. Because the stories originating from this class involved humor, tragedy, futuristic satire, and slices of life, her mindset had to be as all-encompassing as her task. Judy deserves a pat on the back for her undying support.

This publication is the result of a semester-long search for epiphany. It is the culmination of sixteen weeks of rejection, success, frustration, and sharing. It is the hope of these authors that the reader finds these selections entertaining, thought-provoking, and an impetus for one's own search for Epiphany...

CLOISTERED

By

JoLynn Dockter

The day Harmony ran off with the vacuum salesman, it was raining. Bridget specifically remembered that because in Momma's haste to chase after them, she had forgotten Saul and Bridget in the berry patch. The two of them had to walk four miles home in the rain, and Saul screamed the whole way.

By the time Momma came back, it was dark. Shifting her bulk through the door, Momma announced loudly that she'd turned around at the state border because "If that fool had the gumption to take Harmony that far, he might as well keep her." After that, Momma hung up her old plaid coat, took off her overshoes, and ordered Bridget to do the dishes before she went to bed.

Since Harmony always blended into the background--except for when she did something crazy--no one really noticed she was gone. No one asked where she was, and the family never offered information to outsiders.

Then, two years later--on Harmony's fifteenth birthday--Harmony called. It seemed that the salesman had found another thirteen year old to "shack up with," as Momma said, and Harmony wanted to come home. She brought eighteen month old Raissa with her.

Harmony spent two weeks in her old bedroom, crying melodramatically. On the day she came out and went directly to town, she moved in with Jar Guthrie. Her tone a little too bright, she told Momma that she would leave Raissa there "Just a little while, until things are settled."

Jar was forty-four, round, and balding, with flat gray eyes. He had eight kids and a wife (somewhere--no one had really heard from her in months). Because Jar didn't have a job, Harmony started taking welfare and came out to visit Raissa once a month, while Jar was out of town.

Momma didn't say anything for once. Touching Harmony's long brown hair with one hand, she told Harmony "I hope you'll be happy." But Bridget noticed that Momma left all of the furniture in Harmony's room just where it had been for the last two years.

The next several months were quiet, except for the brief period when Pearl broke up with her boyfriend. She strutted into the house, in her platform heels, jeans, and dime store jewelry, announcing that she had found him in bed with "the little sleaze from next door." Momma looked up at her oldest daughter, then continued shelling the peas.

Pearl was out all night, and slept most of the day. She would come out of her room about eight or nine in the evening, and leave. When she came home at four or five in the morning, she would wake everyone up with her high heels clattering up the creaking steps. Then she found another boyfriend, and moved back out.

In November, Harmony found out she was pregnant again. "Jar's thrilled," she told them--visible for once because she was glowing. Momma cried a little, loudly--happy tears because when she was sad she cried quietly. A month later, Harmony was in the hospital, hemorrhaging.

Momma didn't say a word when she saw Harmony's black and blue marks, or when the doctor told her Harmony had lost the baby. She just marched over to Jar's house, her plaid coat flapping in the breeze, and her overshoes squooshing through the snow. Silently gathering Harmony's things, Momma glared at Jar the whole time, and kicked him on the way out. Since he was passed out on the floor, he didn't say a word, either.

For the first few days Harmony protested, claiming that she "loved Jar desperately." But Momma ignored her, and when Harmony checked out of the hospital, she came back home.

That evening, Momma watched as Pearl painted her nails so she could go out and Harmony took a few minutes to play with Raissa.

Momma sighed before she walked to the kitchen and started to make super. When Bridget asked her what was wrong, Momma answered "Nothing. Peel the potatoes."

Mother's Milk

By

Tadd Franklin

She stood there, elbows resting on the bar, her sparsely covered rear contrasting sharply against the vinyl backs of the bar stools as she ordered another drink.

He was staring but couldn't help himself. She had walked in alone, wearing just a bikini. Small drops of sea water glistened on her tan body, inviting the stares of all the patrons. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He would have her, control her, command her. She would plead like the others. He would wait until she walked out the door then he would make his move.

He was slowly stirring his drink, still staring when she turned and looked directly at him.

"What's the matter Carl," she said, taking a step in the direction of the table, "didn't your mommy teach you not to stare?"

Carl just sat there, mouth open, unable to answer. He surely wasn't expecting this to happen and had no idea how to react.

"Nothing, nothing's the matter," he managed to say nervously. He wanted to slide under the table and crawl out of the place. Everyone in the bar was now staring at him, faces filled with odd amusement, as if waiting for him to say something else stupid. As he was taking a quick survey around the room, a loud "click" made him aware that the beautiful gal in front of him was up to something else. He turned back to stare directly into the barrel of .357. Somehow she had managed to move right up to his table without being detected. Where in the hell did the gun come from, he thought to himself, briefly exploring the idea that maybe he had blacked out temporarily. How did she move so fast? It didn't matter. In what seemed an eternity he watched her index finger tighten on the trigger. The bar crowd was still focused on him, looking as if it were about to burst with laughter, as the gun fired.

He didn't hear the loud crack of gunfire. Instead, a loud commanding voice filled his head, saying nothing, but frightening him to full consciousness. He awoke sitting upright, heart beating heavily, hands clasped over his ears, searching the darkness of the bedroom for whatever had made that sound. The voice reminded him of God's voice in a Bible movie he had half heartedly watched a couple of nights ago. The voice that spoke to Moses.

"What the hell?" he asked himself as he flung the sheets to the floor, knocking a glass of water over in the process. "What was that all about?" He was badly frightened and felt like crying. He flicked the light on, reached for the phone and dialed. Each reverberating ring made his heart sink deeper into a desperation that, by the fourth ring, had him sobbing.

The middle of the fifth ring was interrupted by a brief moment of silence and then a groggy voice.

"Hello." It was the familiar voice of his mother and he instantly felt better.

"Mom, you have to get over here right now."

"What is it, Carl?"

"Mom, I need you to come, I need you to...."

He was interrupted by her harsh voice. "Carl, now just relax and tell me what the problem is. Are you sick or something? Are you having nightmares again?"

"Yes..., yes that's it."

She let out a long sigh, "What's it Carl? Are you sick or are you having nightmares? I can't read your damn mind. You have to tell me what's the matter."

"I'm....I'm sorry, Mom," he said, finally calming down a bit. "It was another nightmare. I dreamed that someone shot me."

"How many times have I told you not to eat right before bedtime, Carl? You know that causes those bad dreams. You never listen to me. Why won't you listen to your mother, Carl?"

"I'm really sorry, Mom, and I do listen to you, but I was hungry and..."

"You were hungry. What kind of excuse is that? You do something you are not supposed to do and then you call me up in the middle of the night and bawl because you had a bad dream. Christ, Carl, you are twenty-eight years old. Don't you think it is time to grow up?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I promise."

"Yah right. This is the second time this week. I need to sleep, you know. Now get yourself some warm milk and get to sleep. Don't call me again tonight. I'll be over to pick you up at seven and we'll go have breakfast. You'll be okay, Carl. Believe me."

"O... okay, Mom, I love you and I'm sorry to wake you. I'll be all right." He hung up the receiver.

As he slowly crept to the kitchen area, he made a point to survey the entire apartment carefully. It was a very small studio with just enough room for a bed, a chair, and a table. A tiny refrigerator stood next to the ragged gas stove behind a bamboo partition. Carl could afford a much nicer home but preferred to live in the security of the small room. He visually inspected every corner and dark spot, and when he was convinced that all was clear, he walked to the refrigerator, got out a carton of milk, poured a glass and placed it in the microwave. He punched in one minute and waited, still somewhat uneasy about the nightmare. It seemed so real. He couldn't place the bar or any of the people in it, yet it seemed extremely familiar.

Even though he was expecting it, the intense tone of the microwave, telling him the minute was up, startled him. His heart once again beat fast. He glanced around the room again. He told himself it was okay, removed the milk, walked over to the chair and sat down.

"Mother's milk," he mumbled to himself and then took a small sip. It always seemed to help, always made him relax, always resulted in sleep. Mother was right. She always had been, from as far back as he could remember. She always had the answers, and Carl always listened, always did what she said. He had to. She was all he had.

"Damnit!" Carl suddenly yelled, jumping up, throwing the glass of milk at the wall. A thin trail of white liquid floated temporarily through the room, following the glass until it struck the bricks, where it exploded in a fury of white. He just stood there momentarily, watching the milk stream down the wall as the tears on his face did the same.

He was no longer frightened, but now angry. A fair trade, he thought. He paced the room several times trying to calm down, running his fingers through his sweat-drenched hair and mumbling to himself. When he finally felt somewhat relaxed, he sat back down in the chair, turned on the T.V. and V.C.R. The tape started playing immediately and it brought a smile to his face. It was Tonya Bartholomew, the WJDR weather girl. Her dark hair drifted lazily through the air as she turned to point to the map on the studio wall. Her eyes were a brilliant blue, her cheekbones high and her complexion flawless. Carl was in love with her. She was not like the others. He never really loved the others, just thought he did. She was special and he had something very special for her. Something extremely special.

Carl had watched the past two weeks' weather forecasts fantasizing about the beautiful Tonya and the good times they would have together. He was about to rewind for another viewing when he realized he was fully erect.

"Oh no, you will just have to wait, Baby. Saving it up for you, only you," Carl said as he flicked off the T.V.

He got up and walked back to the kitchen where he opened a drawer and removed a small ax. It was Carl's favorite ax. An under-sized version of the large axes used by lumberjacks, its blade sharpened to a razor's edge, gleaming in the dim light. He had other axes hidden in a suitcase, but this was definitely his favorite. Carl gave it a tiny kiss and set it on the table next to a photograph of Tonya Bartholomew. He then turned, grabbed a dirty towel off the counter, wrapped his hand, and pulled a lifesize Pillsbury Doughboy doll from the drawer. It was a plastic version of the fat little, giggling dwarf seen on the commercials. Carl had dozens of them in the drawer. He had bought them at the flea market from a little Mexican fellow. He had already given two away. Tonya was to receive the third. Being careful not to touch the doll with his fingers, he turned back to the table and gently set it next to the ax and photo.

Feeling completely at ease, Carl decided to lie back down and hope for sleep. He had a big day ahead of him and all the needed rest he could get. Mother always told him to get at least eight hours of sleep. Need your rest, he heard his mother's voice say as he shut off the light. He fell immediately into a deep sleep.

MONA AND MOUNT ST. HELENS

by
Marian Enyeart

When my daughter Sarah and I went to visit my old friend Mona soon after Mount St. Helens blew, she insisted on taking us up where we could see the devastation first hand. This was before the roads had been cleared for tourists, and the logging companies were working frantically to salvage the blown-down timber. We wondered if it was safe to venture into the Red Zone.

"Oh sure!" says Mona. "We've been up there lots of times."

Mona's house is a sort of Red Zone of it's own. Located in a marsh not far from the base of the mountain, the main entrance is through the garage and then through the bathroom. The living-room has a full-sized pool table in the middle. (The family seldom plays pool, but the table is handy for meals and as an extra bed.) Next to the kitchen table, glass patio doors open directly on the horse pasture. The horses sometimes nose up to the glass while people are eating. This startles visitors but children love it.

Mona's family consists of grown children, their spouses and kids, assorted in-laws and other extended family that come and go unannounced. Meals and beds spring up at odd times and places. Every one of these people seems to be in the midst of a crisis of some kind - legal, physical, romantic. Mona embraces them all, and tells elaborate versions of their problems. I always forget which one has Crohn's disease and which one is suing the county for back wages. Mona's husband Joe is a model of calm and patience, the only source of sanity, good sense, and steady income in this chaos. When Mona tripped on the hem of her dress, coming down the aisle at her wedding, and Joe married her anyway, we knew he was a keeper.

"Mikey!" she hollers at her 20-year-old son. "You take Sarah in your pickup and we'll drive Hank's." Who is Hank, I wonder?

"We can get a good view from Burnt Ridge!"

Then we are on our way up the White Pass highway, Mona driving one truck and Mike the other, honking and waving and yelling jibes as they alternately pass each other.

"Mikey has a broken heart," Mona comments. "That divorcee he was dating just dumped him. It's so sad - he's really upset!" I note that Mona's mop of black curls, now streaked with gray, is totally unmanageable, just like the rest of her.

Just then Mike's truck veers off onto a dirt road and Mona follows without any reduction in speed. I begin digging in the seat cushion for the safety belt, which I have not fastened up to this point.

"Hey, good idea!" says Mona. "Reach around me and fasten mine, too, will you? Don't tickle!" she shrieks as I try to complete this task. The road is getting narrower and rougher. We bounce from rock to mudhole to rock. Then I see up ahead a barricade and a large red-lettered sign.

"ROAD CLOSED BEYOND THIS POINT LOG TRUCKS ONLY" I read aloud as Mike's pickup, then Mona's, wheels right around the barricade without even slowing down.

"Ah--Ah--" I stammer, "it said road closed."

"Yeah. It's OK" says Mona, trying to see through the dust cloud left by Mike's truck. I notice that the road is now one primitive track, just two gouged ruts with jagged splinters of log and broken tree branches piled around. Also, we are climbing up very fast.

"Ah--" I try again. "What if we meet a loaded truck coming down?"

If you spend any time driving in the Pacific Northwest you learn quickly that loaded logging trucks always have the right-of-way, because they are heavy and roll very fast, and because they can't stop. Even if they are hogging the road, the wise driver just gets out of their way. There is no room to pass here.

"They're probably through for the day," says Mona, wrestling the steering wheel. "Besides, why do you think I let Mike go first?" she chortles.

"Look!" she hollers, pointing out over the valley. "You can see the crater now!"

I notice the outer edge of the road is soft and crumbly. The pickup tilts to the outside edge and I am looking out my window, straight down into the tops of the trees below. "JUST WATCH THE ROAD!" I shriek.

Then I see Mike's pickup has nearly stopped, where the road has sloughed away on the edge leaving less than one lane. Mike's brake lights come on and then he's out the door pointing at the crater and yelling back at his mother.

"Not here, Mikey!" she answers. "We can get a better view up higher! Just keep going!" Mike shrugs, gets back in his truck and roars past the washout, left wheels up on the sidehill. Mona does the same. Then Mike's truck is throwing a shower of dirt and sticks as he skids around a hairpin turn and comes back directly above us.

"Yeah!" yells Mona, as she cranks the wheel and floorboards the accelerator. "Gotta really gun it here - get up some momentum!" We roar around the tight corner and up the switchback. Now the hood of the truck is pointed at the sky.

"Now you can see the whole blowdown area!" I know she is pointing again out the side window, but my eyes are closed. I feel the roar and skidding wheels as we turn another switchback and climb to dizzying heights. I am braced against the seat back. I have forgotten how to breathe.

"Hum" she says then. I dare to look. The road seems to be ending in a sort of turn-around. A caterpillar tractor and a donkey engine are parked there, with cables snaking down the side of the mountain to the cutting area. Mike has swung his truck in a tight circle and has hopped out. Mona swings in a tight circle and noses the pickup into the uphill mountain-side. Now she is stomping on the brake and clutch pedals and grinding gears.

"Mikey!" she hollers out the window, "where is the reverse on this thing?" She mutters to me, "I don't drive this

clunker very often - never can find the darn reverse." She pumps pedals and grinds some more, then shrugs "Oh well," and shuts it off. I get shakily out on my side, and Mona starts around the back of the truck. Then she notes that the tailgate is hanging out in space and the rear wheels are barely secure on the soft road. "Guess it's just as well I didn't back her up," she laughs as she climbs up over the truck box.

Mike has helped Sarah out of her seat. I wonder if I look as pale and glassy-eyed as she does? Mike is adjusting a pair of binoculars for her.

"Now, just look at that!" says Mona, sweeping her arm over the panorama below. "See how that mud was headed right for our house?" She has been entertaining us with horror stories about how they were nearly swept away by the volcanic mud that rushed in a tide down the Toutle River. Since there are quite a few miles in between, this is a slight exaggeration.

But the view here is awesome. The blackened crater where the ice-cream-cone peak used to be, the acres of giant timber blown flat like spilled matchsticks, the river of mud, now cooled and solidified engulfing the village of Maple Flats, the peak of a smashed house poking up here and there. I could imagine the tidal wave of heat and ash that boiled over the spot where we now stood. Mike indicated an area of destruction on the northeast side. "There's what's left of Spirit Lake! Old Harry Truman is under there somewhere. Stubborn old coot."

"Poor old fella," croons Mona. "What an awful way to go."

"He had plenty of warning, Ma! He could have left any time he wanted to. They couldn't drag him away!"

"You just wait until you get old," she replies. "It's not easy to make a move."

"Well," shrugs Mikey, "he ain't movin' now."

We all stand in silence for a minute, staring at the spot. I am thinking of the old petrified corpses they had dug up from the city of Pompey around Mt. Vesuvius. Harry would probably be like that, if anyone ever dug him up.

Sarah remembered to bring her camera, so we get pictures from all angles, while our two guides retell the whole exciting tale, with gestures. They emphasize that the crater is still smoking, and could blow again at any time, then we would have a ring-side seat.

"Wouldn't that be great? You could watch yourself incinerate!" says Mike, gleefully.

"Nah. The cloud of poison vapor would smother you before it got that hot," says Mona. "You would just go to sleep in a warm fog." Either way, it would be wonderfully dramatic, they agree. Sarah and I look at each other. They are kidding, aren't they?

The sun is slipping low in the west. "I suppose we'd better get off this hill before dark," Mona says. "Mikey, I can't turn that thing around! There's no reverse!"

"Sure there is, Ma! Come on, get that bucket out of the way!" He opens the passenger door for Sarah. She gives me a long look, as if it might be for the last time.

We climb aboard, and I carefully secure the seat belt. Mona is pumping the pedals and jiggling the gearshift again, while talking to the truck. Then she turns the ignition key - and nothing happens. "Oh shoot!" she yells, then leans out the door. "Mikey!"

Mikey is gunning his engine and blasting the horn. "Move it, Ma!"

"It won't start!" yells Mona, and to the truck she mutters "You do this to me every time, you old crate of bolts! Just wait 'til I tell Hank!"

Mike is out studying the wheels. "We'll have to push it!" says Mona. "You're up against the bank! I'll have to roll it backwards," says Mike, bracing his feet against the bank and his shoulder to the grill.

"No! Wait!" I scream, scrambling out of my seatbelt. Sarah has bolted from the other truck and we stand gripping each other's arms, watching the back wheels of the truck inch perilously close to the edge.

"Stop!" we scream in unison, as Mike shoves and heaves, making the truck lurch dangerously.

"C'mon and push!" Mona gestures from inside the cab. Mike runs to his truck to get a shovel out of the back. "I just have to move a couple of rocks, then she'll go!"

Sarah and I get a purchase on the side of the truck, as if the two of us are going to save Mona from crashing down the mountainside to a fiery death. I am thinking, this is ridiculous - a typical Mona adventure - and I start laughing.

"Mother!" Sarah says through gritted teeth, "you're hysterical!"

"OK! It's going!" Mona yells, as Mike digs and pushes.

"It's going, all right, but which way?" I am convulsed by now. Maybe it is hysteria. But I manage to get the passenger door open and fall into the seat as Sarah and Mike push on the uphill side. I feel the truck moving and manage to gasp "Goodbye, cruel world!"

"Oh, shut up!" says Mona. "Let's go, you young turkeys! These grannies will beat you to the bottom!"

Mike grabs Sarah's arm and propels her back to his truck. Now we are jouncing and rolling faster as Mona pumps the pedals and works the gearshift. "Dumb truck" she mutters. "Turn the key on," I wheeze. "Oh yeah" she says as the truck bucks and lurches forward. She is still pumping the pedals and we are rolling faster.

"Hum" she mutters while I try to untangle the seat belt. "I don't think this thing has any brakes."

She laughs hysterically as we go careening down the mountain. At the first switchback the truck plunges over the side instead of going around the curve. My heart is in my throat. I know we are going to die.

"Here we come, Harry!" she cackles. When I open my eyes, I see we are on an alternate trail that goes straight down like a roller coaster.

"Shortcut!" yells Mona. "We'll see if that kid knows how to drive!"

When I look out the rear window, I see Mike's truck thundering after us. I can see Sarah's white knuckles gripping the dashboard. "Well, he learned from me," she says. I believe it.

"You've been out in the flatland too long!" she says, poking me in the ribs.

An hour later we squeal into their driveway, and I follow Mona into the house and collapse on the couch. Mike and Sarah are right behind us. Sarah gets no farther than the bathroom.

Joe is in the kitchen cleaning a fresh-caught salmon with the help of son-in-law Bruce.

"Brucie!" says Mona "You were supposed to have that here in time for dinner!"

"They didn't start biting until an hour ago," he pleads. "Besides, I think I wrecked my knee again. The left one."

So at 2:00 AM I am totally wiped out, having stuffed myself on baked King salmon and huckleberry cobbler. Sarah is sound asleep on the pool table along with some little kid. They have coats for pillows. A girl named Julie is in the kitchen loading the dishwasher and hollering that it doesn't work.

"We almost came to see you last year," Mona is saying, "but the truck engine blew up in Nevada." I point out that Nevada is no where near my house. "It isn't?" she says, looking puzzled. "I thought we were almost there. Well, we went to Las Vegas instead. Mom and Pop loved playing the slots. We had to rush Pop to the emergency room when he collapsed. They had to massage his heart."

I am too tired to ask anything. Since high school, my good friend and I have moved far apart and manage to get together only about every other year. Sometimes I think that is often enough.



Games to Play by Brad Alexenko

Hot, heavy and stagnant air filled his lungs with every breath. The light breeze that was blowing turned the desert into a combination convection oven and sandblaster. Hanging silently in the sky, the sun blazed a silent monolith. Daniel couldn't remember how long he had been walking on the parched sand anymore. Hours rolled into days like the occasional tumbleweed that blew across the desert's scorched sand. As Daniel staggered along he could feel the heat blister through the soles of his boots making miniature hot plates on which to walk, each step sizzling the tender, humid flesh of his feet. Sweat slowly trickled down his red, sunbaked brow, making muddy rivers in the dirt on his face. He raised a dry and cracking hand to wipe it away, gulping in discomfort as his hand traveled down his face and across his prickly stubble. His legs wobbled from dehydration and his inner thighs ached from being rubbed raw by the chaffing of his once new jeans.

"Damn it's hot," Daniel whispered.

How had he gotten himself into this mess? How had they all gotten themselves into this mess, for that fact, Daniel thought to himself. It seemed unfathomable that he had once known what it was like to be comfortable, with a little shade, and a glass ofwater. In all reality he knew that he had been in this desert for less than a week, maybe just a few days, but maybe alot more. The desert was hell, but at least he was away from the dying. The dying seemed more nightmarish than any desert. The desert seemed safe in it's quiet, aneseptic isolation, but he knew he was not alone. Death followed him into this wilderness, always knowing his whereabouts like a child who knows where mother hides the candy. Daniel could not escape it, but at least here he could not see it's handiwork.

It seemed like a long time ago, a very long time ago since the dying started, but it had only been a few short months since, what Daniel liked to call the gates of Hell, were opened. It had all started on the East coast, New York City to be exact, and after that it rapidly spread throughout the country. At first there were only a few deaths in the "Free Thinking" communities of New York City. Quickly, the dying spread and within a few days they were all but gone. Strangely enough nobody could find a reason for their deaths. Clergy and ministers said it was the scourge of God on those who practiced wickedness, but soon children and mothers started to die in other parts of the city. Clergy preached out that these people too were charlatans and evildoers. Still, nobody could find an answer. They just died, no violence, no signs, their hearts just stopped beating in their chests. All the while the ministers and clergy preached on that those who wanted to live must repent and change their lives, but soon clergy started to die also, and in a few short days there was nobody left to blame.

This had all happened so rapidly. Within a matter of two weeks New York City was a graveyard, and a week and a half later, the entire Eastern seaboard was extinct. Still, nobody could find an answer. Autopsies were done, and nothing was found. Specialists would come into a community to research and they would end up dead. Somebody thought it was a virus or a bacteria, but when they tried going into dead zones with anti-contaminant suits they too turned up dead. The country was in a state of panic. With no government, military or police, looters and criminals ran amok. They looted and robbed for a few days, but not for long, Death has a way of keeping the peace, especially if the ones causing the problem are dead. People not knowing what was to come committed suicide, but what they didn't know was that they were playing right into Death's hands. Many clinging to old beliefs cried out for God, but all they found was Death.

Daniel had seen enough of Death's handiwork to make him not want to be a part of it. Daniel was one of the lucky ones. He was still alive. When the wave of deaths surged across the Appalachian Mountains like a tidal wave, and people started to die around him, Daniel wasted no time in loading up his small, yellow cropduster and quickly leaving the Ohio farming community behind that he had called home for twenty-eight years. Flying west, Daniel could make about 800 miles before he had to set down and refuel. Yes, he had been lucky, always one step ahead of Death, but he knew it was right behind him. California had been his goal, he didn't know what he would do when he got there, but it at least gave him a purpose for which to strive.

That was only a few days ago.

He had stopped in lower Colorado for a short refueling, but when cars started to swerve off the nearby interstate and crash into one another, he once again felt that terrible sensation that Death was rushing towards him like a bear rushing through a stream to catch a swimming salmon. It was close, to close, so Daniel had taken back to the air. Heading south, he had flown into New Mexico airspace, hoping to outrun whatever it was that terrified him down to his soul. In the air he thought he was safe, and he felt especially safe in New Mexico. What better place to hide from Death than to go to a place where Death had already painted its picture a long time ago,

Daniel had been getting drowsy from the gentle bouncing and rocking of the airplane through the air pockets when the flash of his fuel warning light brought him back into the here and now. Circling lower, he had hoped to find an airstrip or maybe even a roadside gas station at which to fuel up. A glint of reflected light caught his attention and he had turned towards it. As he got closer, Daniel could see that the light was the reflection of the sun off the globe of an old fashioned filling pump that stood by a ratty gas station. Daniel put the plane into a shallow dive in order to do a fly-by to see if anybody was around. Cranking the stick to the right, the plane knife-edged along in order to give Daniel a better view of the scene below. The engine of the plane echoed off the ground and the propeller's wash kicked up a plume of dust as he flew. The grungy gas station attendant that sat on the front porch didn't stir. How could he? He was dead. Daniel snapped the plane back to it's left and pulled back hard on the stick commanding it to rise. The airplane zoomed over the station with a hol-

low roar as it's shadow danced and shrank on the uneven ground. Daniel's face was ashen, maybe it was the sudden gain in altitude, but more likely than not, it was because Death was down there, and Daniel was out of fuel.

Leveling off, Daniel stared straight ahead, his eyes getting cloudy from not blinking. A small tremble ran through his thumb and it dissipated when it hit his arm. What was he to do? He couldn't go back to the station. That would be foolish. Had he traveled this far to die in the middle of nowhere? thoughts raced through his mind in circles like the propeller that pulled his plane onward. Daniel sat transfixed as the drone of the engine filled his ears. He hadn't noticed that the altimeter was slowly winding down towards ground zero.

A jarring thud woke Daniel from his trance. The wheels of the airplane buckled as they hit the hard desert sand with the sound of an aluminum can being crushed. Realizing that he had struck the ground, Daniel pulled back on the stick in an attempt to grab the air. His attempt was in vain. The huge propeller sliced into the hard earth, ripping up dirty brown clouds as it spun. It twisted and writhed with the impact, sucking the airplane and Daniel into the ground. The airplane shuddered and whined as it slid across the desert sand, trying more to be a mole than a bird. The plane ground to a stop as a rain of tiny rocks and dirt fell on the closed canopy. Daniel sat perfectly still, collecting his thoughts as the plane hissed its final breath. Hitting the release lever, Daniel staggered from the twisted wreckage that use to be his beautiful, yellow prize. Tenderly he touched a lump on the back of his head and winced as he wiped away some blood. Turning his back on his half buried plane, Daniel slowly started out across the sand. He had tricked Death.

And he was still tricking Death with every step he took, except it was getting much harder now, and much hotter. Daniel smacked his lips together in an attempt to muster up some moisture, but they just cracked and started to bleed. How could he go on? It was getting harder and harder, hotter and hotter. It felt like his brain was boiling inside his head. He could no longer walk properly and his jeans showed it by the two worn spots on the knees from the countless times he had fallen down. Daniel staggered in the twisting sand and slowly sunk to his knees, to where it looked like he was kneeling to pray. He flinched when the hot sand bit into his flesh. It was hungry for moisture, any moisture at all, even blood. The desert swirled around him and he blinked his eyes slowly. He had to go on. He must. Death was right behind him, but Daniel's body didn't care. It had other plans. Daniel tried to move, putting forth a hand, but the blackness came swirling in and he collapsed in a heap. Prostrate, unconscious, under the licking sun.

When Daniel came to, a figure was standing over him with his back to the sun making a dark silhouette. Daniel raised a raw, leathered hand to shield his eyes from the light and squinted to see the figure better.

"Who are you?" Daniel croaked.

The figure didn't answer right away, but just stepped away from the sun so that Daniel could get a better view. What Daniel saw startled him. Standing before him was a fatherly, middle-aged man wearing a pith helmet and a khaki jumpsuit. On his back was a huge, bulging pack about to burst and in his hand he carried a walking stick.

"I am Death," the man replied in a smooth voice, "and I have been following you for days."

"Death?" Daniel questioned, "shouldn't you be carrying a sickle and be dressed in a black robe?"

"Nonsense," the man replied, "I may be Death, but I'm not stupid. Who in there right mind would wear black into the desert."

Daniel blinked and swallowed uncomfortably. "Do you have any water?"

"Why sure I do, I have everything, but if I gave you water, that wouldn't be fair now would it Dannyboy?" the man chided.

Daniel moved into a sitting position, his mind whirling. "What do you want from me?"

"Mind if I sit down?" the khaki stranger asked.

"Knock yourself out."

Removing his large pack, it flopped to the ground, letting out a distant groan. The man sat down, removed a red handkerchief and dabbed his brow. Folding the cloth neatly and placing it back in his pocket he looked into Daniel's eyes and said, "I've come for you Danny, like I came for everybody else, except you've been giving me a hard time. I was so busy collecting everybody else, that you almost slipped through. When your plane crashed I thought I had you for sure, but I didn't, and you dragged me into this nasty desert, naturally, I decided to play along. You put up a good fight Dannyboy, but I finally caught you. I always do."

Daniel was speechless, could it be possible that this khaki clad stranger was Death? I was funny, but he wasn't even afraid. Maybe it was because in some sick, twisted way this stranger reminded him of his uncle Charlie back in Dayton. Everybody there was dead when he had left the farm, even uncle Charlie. "Did you know my uncle Charlie?" Daniel asked.

"Why as a matter of fact I did. Nice fellow, extremely personable and he made a pretty good gin and tonic when I stopped in," the stranger said with a nod. Rubbing his chin, he continued. "We had a lovely time, until I told him I was Death, that is. Then all of a sudden he started sniveling and crying. He even begged for his life. Of course I couldn't give it to him, that wouldn't be fair," the stranger declared.

Daniel's head was beginning to hurt and his temples were throbbing, his mouth now a dried up hole in his face. Daniel croaked out, "why are you doing this, why are you taking everyone away?"

"Oh Danny, because I can," the stranger said with a chuckle. "You see Danny, I'll let you in on a little secret. Life is a game. And just like any game, you take turns. I kind of like to look at myself as the referee. I keep things fair, you know. It just so happens people have had the dice for the last thousand years, and well, you're just not playing the game right. You've started to destroy the game, not enjoy the game. I'm even scared to watch. It's time I take the dice away and let somebody else have a turn. I had to do the same thing with the dinosaurs, except they just weren't amounting to much. What can you do with a pea for a brain?"

Daniel stared straight ahead not believing what he had heard. This must be some sick dream. He chomped into his lip to

make sure, and was greeted with reality assuring pain.

"Well Danny, It's been nice talking, but I really must be going," the stranger said as he rose to his feet. Lifting his large pack off the ground, it sighed as he placed it on his shoulders. The man turned to go.

"Hey, what about me?," Daniel rasped out.

"Oh, nice meeting you," the stranger replied, "good-bye."

With that the stranger turned towards the desert and the miles of rolling emptiness. Over his shoulder Daniel's lifeless body lay on the sand where it would bloat in the sun and be pecked by the birds. In a few days nothing would remain except a pile of bleached bones to be scattered by the wind.

Death strode out into the wasteland, sweat running down his face. His bootprints drifted away with the blowing of the desert wind, not caring to follow. With every step he took the pack of souls on his back bounced with a rhythmic murmur. Time was wasting, and he had games to play.

Bittersweet

By

Michele Stockert

Rachel Carson sat alone at a table near the window. She had tuned out the world so well that she didn't hear her server's question. "Are you ready to order, Ma'am?" The bright lights of the restaurant and the sound of his voice flooded Rachel's senses as her eyes focused. "Excuse me, are you ready to order?" he asked again.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" Rachel silently chastised herself for apologizing. "Uh, no, not yet. I'm waiting for someone. Thanks." Her weak smile met his and he snapped away.

Rachel checked her watch. She needed a drink, something to loosen her lips and calm her nerves. She got her server's attention again as he brushed past. "Could I get a raspberry margarita please? No salt."

"Ok. And will you be putting that on a lunch tab?" He scribbled on his notepad.

"Yes, please."

She checked the door. "This is what you get for being so damn early all the time," she murmured to herself. Shreds of mauve paper napkin made a small heap on the glass covering the mauve tablecloth. She started on another one, folding it diagonally, then tearing off tiny bits from corner to corner. She contemplated what might happen if she took a match from the book in the clean ashtray and ignited the heap. Mauve flames?

Again, Rachel's mind fogged over and her ears tuned out the clankety clatter of dishes and discussion. She had given much thought to how today would go. Too much thought, her husband Josh had said. She had reason to be anxious, considering the length of time since she'd seen Lynelle and what had transpired in the last couple weeks. Lynelle's husband Michael had arranged this meeting of former best friends in an attempt to allow them to make peace, but Rachel doubted if they could ever reconcile now.

"Here's your drink." She blinked back as her server placed a large frosty glass in front of her on a new napkin. Mauve. Rachel wondered how anyone could decorate an entire restaurant in mauve. Such a putrid color. She got a glimpse of his name tag as he rushed off. MICHAEL it said in black lettering. Rachel sipped her drink and winced at the irony of it.

Again she glanced toward the door. She took a survey of the business suits and brief cases of the late lunch crowd and hoped she didn't have a grape Kool Aid stain somewhere on her sun dress. She took a swipe at her lips with a stump of inconspicuous lipstick, then shoved her canvass handbag out of sight with her feet. 1:14 p.m. by her watch now.

Then she felt it. That spark of electricity in the air. She knew that feeling and her ears tingled from it. With a hard swallow for courage, she twisted deliberately around toward the door.

There of course was Lynelle. She bounced to her toes and shot a hand up to wave when her eyes met Rachel's. God, she looks great, thought Rachel, wishing she hadn't skipped so many aerobics classes. She stood up as Lynelle timidly approached the table. Lynelle smiled the charm smile and opened her arms in a hug gesture, which Rachel accepted with relief until she sensed the limpness in Lynelle's arms. Token hug, Rachel said to herself.

"Hi hi hi!" hummed Lynelle into Rachel's ear.

"Hey, Lynelle." Rachel could smell aerosol hair spray mixed with sweet perfume. Their quick touch ended and Lynelle stepped back to look at Rachel.

"Oooh, don't you look adorable in that bright yellow!"

"Thanks. And you look fabulous, too," replied Rachel, feeling decidedly unadorable next to Lynelle in her silk navy skort outfit. Hardly had the tags cut out of it, thought Rachel. "Sit down, and we'll order," she said as they slipped into the roomy wicker chairs.

"Mmm, I could use a drink, how about you?"

"Yeah, I've got mine already. They have pretty good margaritas here. Try one of those." Their server appeared beside their table, pen in hand.

"I'll have a vodka martini, actually. Two olives, please," said Lynelle. She pierced Rachel's eyes with hers.

"Lo. How are you, Rachel? What's going on with you?" Her voice washed over Rachel like a wave of the past, sparking instant points of precious memory: a cramped dorm room, pizza for breakfast, and parties until dawn.

"Hmm. I'm married now, you know." Suddenly her life seemed dull and insignificant compared to the probable excitement of Lynelle's life in the big city out east.

"Yeah, Josh Carson, right? Marianne Mollenhoff told me a couple years ago. You remember Marianne,

don't you?"

"Do you still keep in touch with her?" said Rachel, wondering why Lynelle would keep in touch with Marianne in the first place.

"Mmm. Believe it or not, she worked in the same building I did. Small world, huh?" Lynelle sat back and smiled as their server brought her martini on a new mauve napkin, then sipped and sighed. She tossed her long golden hair over her shoulder and propped her elbows on the edge of the table. "Tell me more."

"Well, I have a two and a half year old son, R.J. It sounds corny, but he's the joy of my life, even though I could just strangle him sometimes. You know what they say about the terrible twos? Well it's true!" Rachel could feel the blood rush in her ears and flush her cheeks.

"You know, Rachel, I really am happy for you. It's great that you are getting on so well with your life and all." She sipped her martini. "Although I don't think I could ever have kids. Messy diapers and saggy breasts!" She snorted with disgust and her eyes met Rachel's inquiring expression. "Oh, but you look great, don't get me wrong. I just meant, well you know, kids would definitely ruin my modeling career." Yeah, like the Sears catalog would really be out if you weren't available, Rachel sneered to herself.

Their server returned and Lynelle opened her menu to scan for the low-cal, low-salt, low-fat section. "Ooh, this spinach salad sounds good. I'll have that, with vinegar and oil on the side, please." Rachel ordered her usual taco salad, with extra black olives.

There was an awkward kind of silence, each woman racing through possible topics of conversation. Finally Lynelle spoke. "Why don't we just skip all this small talk and get right down to what really is on our minds."

Rachel shifted her eyes for a moment down to her little mound of mauve napkin shreds. "Well, I have to admit I was a bit surprised when I heard from Michael. He was the last person I expected to hear from again, and the last person I expected to move back to Hudson."

She folded and started to shred another mauve napkin as she remembered her meeting with Michael. He had invited her over to his temporary apartment, and she was appalled when he started coming on to her, suggesting they pick up where they had left off eight years ago. He talked of his declining marriage and renewed thoughts and desires about Rachel. He ignored her protests, and she was forced to flee his wandering hands. How dare he imagine that she would immediately take him back after what he'd done to her!

"Yeah, he thought you and I should get together and settle our differences since we'll be living here now. I guess I thought that would be a good idea, too. Hudson is too small for Michael and I to live here without being on good terms with you." Lynelle traced the rim of her glass with the tip of her middle finger. "What do you think?"

Rachel thought for a moment. "I think that there were a lot of bad feelings, in fact I might have even hated you, Lynelle." Rachel sucked in a breath of surprise at her honesty and finished shredding the last napkin.

"But a lot of water has passed under the bridge in the last eight years, and like you said, with you and Michael living here, it would be easier if we did settle this." Rachel wondered how strong Lynelle thought her marriage was, and how strong she herself was. Could she stand up to Lynelle, once and for all?

Their server brought their meals now, refilling their waters. The two women ate in silence for awhile.

"You know, Rachel, as far as I'm concerned-and I think I speak for Michael too-this whole mess was a problem on your part. I would like to be friends again, and I never meant to end our friendship in the first place." She stabbed a spinach leaf and dipped it into her dressing.

"You still see things the way you used to, don't you, Lynelle?"

"You still hold an eight year grudge, don't you? EIGHT YEARS Rachel! How can you be so obsessed even now?"

Rachel could feel that sinking feeling in her stomach. The eight passing years had not dulled her hurt or softened her anger. The memories and emotions remained strong, and now Lynelle's voice was sounding less like waves of the past and more like tiny daggers stabbing and slashing at Rachel's ears.

Rachel forced herself to remain calm. "I guess it's a matter of honor with me, Lynelle, but maybe honor doesn't count anymore. You always had a habit of stealing everything of importance to me; my clothes, my car, my jewelry, my pride. Michael was just one in a long line of my things that you permanently borrowed."

"Permanently borrowed! You never owned him, and he willingly chose to date me! I didn't lure him away from you, and I would think that our successful marriage these past three years is proof that he feels comfortable with his decision." Lynelle's voice was strained as she tried to keep a conversational tone. "I think Michael is the one you need to talk to, not me."

Rachel chuckled inside as she thought about telling Lynelle how faithful Michael was prepared to be, but instead said, "A relationship is a two way street. You must have had something to do with it." Rachel's appetite was gone by now and she just shifted her taco salad around on the plate. "At the very least, you could have told me. You made me out to be the fool while everybody but me knew." Her voice cracked slightly. "That's what hurt the most, you know. The hurt from a relationship that ends is nothing compared to the hurt when a friendship ends."

Lynelle set her fork down and sat back in her chair, chewing on her lower lip. "That was a long time ago and I don't remember all the details very well, but I do remember keeping it a secret from you. What do you want me to do? We were just kids then, Rachel. Kids do things like that. Kids are mean and stupid."

"So are adults," said Rachel quietly. "I guess I thought we had a special friendship back then. I thought we looked out for each other and shared everything and-" Rachel paused, looking through Lynelle to another place and time. "Well it sounds silly now, but I thought we'd be friends forever."

"If you want me to apologize, I will. OK. I'm sorry, Rachel. I'm sorry for hurting you and for humiliating you."

Rachel sensed sarcasm and insincerity in Lynelle's voice. "Yeah, we're not nineteen anymore, are we? Maybe that was just a silly adolescent dream." She dug into her taco salad with a vengeance.

"Rachel, I want to put all this behind us. We don't need to be enemies. Let's call a truce. At least that way we don't have to ignore each other if we pass on the street!"

Rachel slowly finished chewing a spicy forkful of cornshell and tomato. She wiped the corners of her mouth on a mauve napkin and peered deeply into Lynelle's eyes. Even though Lynelle had won on the surface, Rachel knew she had the last laugh, because she could have Michael in the palm of her hand in a moment if she wanted. Suddenly she realized she had the ability to take away from Lynelle something that had belonged to her in the first place. Rachel savored the idea of shattering Lynelle's cozy little world, making her hurt the same way as when she had shattered Rachel's world.

"O.K. Truce." She didn't allow this passion of revenge to show itself in her voice, but it consumed her so much that she didn't care that an irrational act like this could ruin her own stable life as well. None of that mattered to Rachel now as she anticipated the possible look of horror on Lynelle's face when she found out.

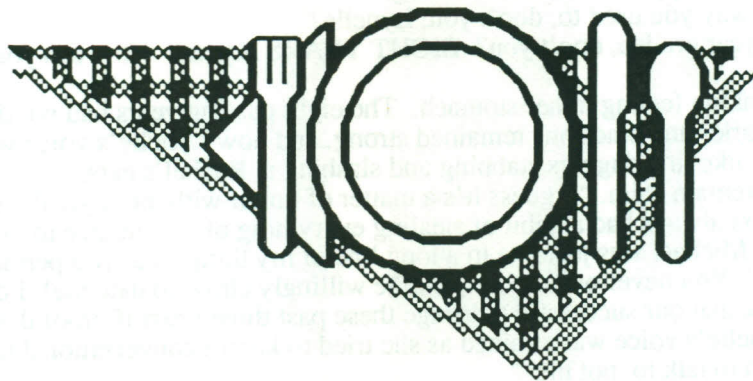
"Well, good. I'm glad to hear it," said Lynelle, sipping her martini and relaxing her shoulders a bit. With a sigh she picked up her fork again. "How would you like to go shopping with me tomorrow. I'm flying out Sunday to San Diego for a photo shoot and I need a pair of comfortable shoes. I hear it's beautiful down there this time of year, and I hope to have time for some sightseeing."

Rachel finished pushing her salad around and called for the check. She was sitting a little taller in her chair now, and felt headstrong and giddy with pleasure at this new turn of thought. "Well, maybe. I don't know if I can arrange for a sitter," said Rachel, knowing this truce wouldn't last long, and that there would never be a civil moment between them again.

"Why don't you give me your phone number, Rachel. I'll call you." Rachel scribbled her number on a mauve napkin. "Here's mine," said Lynelle as she handed Rachel her card. Rachel wanted to toss it into a pile of flaming mauve napkins and watch the raised blue lettering melt into a pool.

After a brief squabble, Rachel paid the bill, leaving a large tip. On the way out the door, Lynelle popped a mint into her mouth, saying, "I really do like the way they've decorated this place. It's so homey, don't you think?"

Rachel strode through the door. "Yes, I thought you'd like it," she said without looking back. Rachel knew that Lynelle wouldn't call her tomorrow, and that she wouldn't call Lynelle either. As they stepped out into the bright spring sunlight, Rachel couldn't help noticing how dull and dry Lynelle's bleached blonde hair looked in the sun and how her own natural brown straight hair shown with shiny brilliance.



Thy Kingdom Come

By

Chris Collins

The sun rose on another day of work at the mine as Sigmund drank the last of his coffee and swung in his coat in preparation for another day of hard work that probably wouldn't turn up enough gold to pay for the hired help. As he set his cup down, he felt splinters shower down and catch in his hair, just as a booming sound shook his ear drums

"Shit," Sigmund yelled as he ducked back into the cabin and grabbed his shotgun and pistol from the hook just above his head. "Damn claim jumpers again. I've had about enough of this. Let's finish this once and for all. Zack! Get your ass out here! Trouble!" He broke out the front window of the shack with the barrel of his shotgun while he shouted to Zack. He took a shot at one of the men riding up on his home. Zachary came out of his room and grabbed his own pistol off the table and moved up beside Sigmund as he reloaded.

"Those bastards again," Zachary spat as he glanced out the window, seeing that two of the riders were cornering the other as the other three jumped off their horses and fortified themselves behind the woodpile.

"Five, great," Zack breathed, taking a shot out the window before he realized that he hadn't loaded his gun.

"You're such an idiot, Zack. Why don't you just start throwing potatoes at 'em," Sigmund exclaimed as he shoved Zack over and fired three shots of his own, hitting two of the jumpers horses and one rock about ten feet left of the wood pile.

But before Zack could make a witty comeback, Manovich, the writer of this story, ripped the page from the typewriter and laughed.

"God, does this suck," Man said as he bunched the sheet up into a ball and chucked it into the overflowing trash can at the side of his typing table.

"How am I ever going to pay my bills if I can't even write a fucking cowboy story?" Man said as he looked around his cheap apartment, cringeing at the layer of "environmentally safe" pizza boxes and "caffeine free, biodegradable" pop cans which have slowly started taking over his floor since he moved into this run down hole two months ago.

Two months, two fucking months since he shoved nearly everything he owned into a backpack and moved to this shit hole in the middle of nowhere some people call Fort Dodge, Iowa. What the fuck was he doing here anyway? Why had he ever left Lincoln? Well, he knew why, but why had he ever thought that he could write?

He didn't need this, he didn't need all the thinking that came along with writing, he didn't want to think he wanted to forget, and that was the one thing that he just couldn't make himself do, no matter how hard he wanted to.

Man was a huge man who was twenty four, weighed 260 pounds and was all muscle. He had been the biggest and strongest defense lineman ever to play for the Nebraska Cornhuskers. He had made the honor roll. The Cornhuskers made it to a bowl game. He was to be picked in the second round of the 2030 NFL draft, he had lived a dream, a dream, adream, adream adream adream. His life had been a dream until it had happened.

It. How was he to live with himself? How could he live in this fucked up world that had come about from the signing of the new constitution back in 2010, after the "enlightenment" of the once free United States. He could remember the stories that his mother had told him about what it was like before the country had "seen the light." But that was gone now. Now the only thing that mattered was that he was an outcast, he was evil, he was the Anti-Christ. It was he and people like him who made hate in this "perfect" country. This country whose new constitution was the bible, this country whose new bill of rights was the ten commandments. This new country where everyone loved his neighbor just as long as he were just like himself. This country where nobody made mistakes, where everybody was either for or against. This country where good and evil are black and white.

God, it was times like this when he wanted her, wanted to lose himself in the warmth of her embrace, wanted to be with her. After all that had happened, he still couldn't stop himself from thinking of her and could only

hope that she still loved him, wherever she was.

He still couldn't believe it. She was dead. They had killed her. They had taken her and killed her. He could still see those eyes, those downcast eyes that cried as they lit the bonfire. God, why couldn't he forget? Forget that perfect face as it was engulfed by flames. He still could see her as she stood, tied to that stake, as they prayed for her soul and then burned her.

She was a witch, the embodiment of the devil, they had said. It was all her fault for what had happened. But was it all her fault? Was it all her fault that they had fallen in love? Was it all her fault that they had loved each other so much, needed each other so much that they had sex before marriage. He had wanted it just as much as she had, had needed her just as much as she had needed him, probably more. He loved her, he would have done anything for her, and it killed him that he couldn't do anything.

O God, the tears always came now. Whenever he thought of her, whenever he saw her up on that scaffold, whenever he remembered the crowd. How they had chanted, how they had wanted her to die, how they had worked themselves into a frenzy because they were doing the work of their lord, their king, their god. How he had just stood there taking it in, not saying, not doing anything; just standing there, watching. Watching her burn, hearing her screaming, smelling the reek of her burning flesh, feeling himself die with her, feeling his soul burn with her, feeling his heart burst with hers.

"Oh God," he cried as he looked out the window and saw a 'God is watching' billboard in big gold letters above a cross. How, how, how, how, how, how, how? How could they do it? How could they kill him? How could they watch her burn? How could they have let him go?

"It is always the woman," the old priest had said to him. "It was the woman in the garden and it is the woman now. They are evil. They are the betrayers. They are the ones who will give the apple of deceit and we are the ones who must refuse it. We are the ones who must uphold God's word. We are the ones who must be strong, because Clayton, we are the chosen, we have always been the chosen, and the chosen have always been men, Jesus, Peter, Paul. We are the ones who are made in His image, not them," the priest said as his eyes started bugging out and spittle started to fly from his lips. "They are made from us, from our rib for us, but never with us. We must be strong. The devil is clever. He knows where we are weak. He knows just what to tempt you with. Now you go home and think on what I said, and remember you are man and you are a part of God."

He went home. He thought about what the priest had said, and thought about how what the priest had said was total bullshit. It wasn't her fault, it was his. It was he who had loved her. It was he who had wanted her. It was he. So he ran. He packed his bag and ran. Now he was holed up in this pit, torturing himself.

Well, he couldn't go on. He couldn't go on without her, he came to realize, as he picked up his .22 rifle and placed the barrel to his head. Reaching out with his right hand, Clayton placed his finger on the trigger. As his left hand extended toward the billboard outside his window with the middle finger fully extended, he screamed, "Fuck you!"

With a flick of his right hand, he depressed the trigger. Click!

"Jesus, I can't even kill myself. I could just as well throw potatoes at myself," Man said as he threw the gun at the wall, knocking his Cornhusker football helmet off the shelf.

"Football, that's what I need," he whispered as he watched the helmet roll across the floor. He grabbed the "Heavenly Tribune" from the floor and opened it to the sports page, "Great, and there's even a high school game at three, between the Knights of God and the Fort Dodge Deacons."

Picking up his trenchcoat and making his way to the door, he grabbed up his helmet and placed it back on the shelf.

* * * *

"All rise for the 'Lords Prayer'," the loudspeaker blasted as the crowd rose and folded hands. All eyes were on the red, white and blue flag that hung over the center of the St. Michael dome, its stars changed to crosses.

"Our Lord, thou art in ...," the crowd shouted as Man cringed. He had forgotten about this, he had forgotten about the Lord's Prayer before the game, the football with the image of a dove on it, the half-time communion that is part of the game now.

"...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, ..." Oh God what was he thinking? Why did he come here? How can he stand here with folded hands alongside all of these hypocrites?

"...Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, ..." Deliver us from evil! Deliver us from Evil!! What the hell is going on? Don't these people see? When are they going to open their eyes? When are they going to realize that they killed her, that they were the ones who did it, they were the ones who watched, they were the ones who cheered, they were the ones!

"Amen!" the crowd screamed as the Fort Dodge Deacons' theme song started blasting out of the loud speaker, and they ran onto the field, stopping on the fifty yard line to have a team prayer.

"God, this is sick," Man mouthed as he looked around at the fans, with their crosses in hand. Man looked down and saw an officer shove two men apart who were standing too close. Another officer then grabbed one of the men and started beating him with his billy club.

"Kill that fucking homo!" the man beside Man started screaming as the other officer held the second man with his hands behind his back.

"How do you know that man was a homosexual?" Man had to shout because of the loudness of the frenzied crowd as blood started to fly off the billy club.

"Didn't you see them? Their hands touched, they were whispering to each other. They have to be gay, and know it's the infirmary for them. Thank God for the patience the government has for those freaks," the man says as he begins to squeeze the rosary clutched in his right hand, "I still don't know why they just don't kill them out right. It's against God's will to let freaks of nature like them live, I just thank God that the government has more patience with them than I do."

Fuck, I've got to get out of here, before I go crazy, Man thought as he starts to push his way through the crazy crowd.

As he finally made his way out of the dome, he saw the paddywagon pull up to take the two men to the infirmary where they would "confess" and change their way and see the light of God.

Man just closed his eyes and started walking, walking and walking, trying to forget. But as always, trying to forget only brought more memories. God, to forget, to stop remembering, to stop picturing her burning body. But how can you forget when everywhere you look you see things that remind you of that time? Billboards, people, Bible bookstores, immaculate streets, "Recycle: It's the law" signs, patrol cars with the motto "To serve, and protect" lettered on the side. Everything reminded him of the people who killed her, the people who turned his dream into a nightmare, the people who only filled him with disgust.

Starting to run, Man looked up in time to see the paddywagon pass him, looked up just in time to read the side of the truck which said, "Heterosexuality: It's God's will."

Man started to blindly follow, trying to center his mind on keeping up with the truck, keeping his eyes on the red taillights as they made their way through the streets, anything, anything but thinking, remembering, dying.

Finally he saw the truck pull into the fence-enclosed gates of The Infirmary, where all homosexuals are taken to undergo the "saving of their souls." The Infirmary, where they were beaten, put through shock treatments, castrated and then turned into unthinking workers. Farmers, bible printers, recycle plant workers, construction workers, anything where they could follow and have no need to think, anything where they could still be of some use to society. Society, the enforcer of rules, the savior of the world, the ultimate clique, the clique that found you evil if you didn't belong.

"This is wrong. They're not the evil ones. I'm not the evil one, you are. You are the one, you are it, you are wrong, you are the one, you are the killers. Not me, not them, but you," Man whispered as he continued to stare up at the sign of the infirmary.

"I denounce you, I loathe you, I hate you. You are the one that made me this way, you are the ones that kill," Man started to scream as tears started running down the sides of his face. "I denounce your god, I denounce your society, I'd rather go to hell then live in your heaven!" Man screamed as he felt the police's billy club smash into the back of his head.

Falling, falling into the blackness, crashing down onto the white pavement of the street as the officer kept beating him. Opening his eyes he saw the officer's boot. He saw the silver buckle as it was driven into his face. He can almost taste the officer's hate as he fell into the blanket of blackness. With the last breath he can muster Man whispered, "Go on, do it. Kill me, you righteous mother fucker!"

Flying, flying, flying through the dark. Whizzing past the stars that were all of his memories, finally coming to rest on the ones that he held most dear.

* * * *

It was a warm March day, one of those perfect days where it wasn't hot enough to make you sweat, but still warm enough so that you could leave the windows open when you sleep. And there she was, sitting across from him at the table, her voice music as she laughed at one of his jokes. There she was, just as he remembered her, perfectly lovely, all that he could ever want.

"Oh, Man, quit, quit. I feel like my side is going to explode if you don't stop. I think that that is what I like best about you. You can always make me laugh, no matter what happens. I think that is the one thing that will always be," Elizabeth said as she massaged her side.

Oh God, he could remember it like it was yesterday. Laughing with her as they ate in the "Last Supper Cafe," making jokes, laughing, basking in the warmth of each other's presence. Oh how he wished that it could be like that again, but he couldn't think of that now. Just remember, just enjoy.

"So what are we going to do tonight?" Elizabeth laughed as she took a sip of her wine.

"I don't know, we could go to a movie, or how about a play? I think that they are doing the book of Job at the Hymnal theater tonight," Man said as he reached out to take her hand.

"Oh I don't know. How about we just take a walk in the Garden Park. We haven't done that for so long. We haven't really been alone just to talk for a long time. How about we make it a moonlight picnic? I'll bring the food and you can bring the wine and hymnbook. We can just sit under the stars, eat, sing songs. It'll be great."

"All right, sounds like a date. What time should I pick you up?"

"Well, how about seven? That should give us plenty of time to get to the park before it's dark."

"All right," he said as he gave her a peck on the cheek and made his exit.

He could remember silently pulling up in his ozone safe electric car. He remembered seeing her coming out of the apartment, wearing that blue dress, which was legally below the knee. He was on fire just seeing her walk down the steps. God, he loved all five feet eleven inches of her, he loved her black hair that just went past her shoulders, her green eyes, her aerobically toned body. This was the woman that he would have done anything for. Striding down to his car, jumping the last step, swinging the picnic basket as she skipped down and opened the car door.

"Wow, we couldn't have picked a better night. This is going to be great," Elizabeth said as she put the basket into the back seat.

"Any night with you is a great night," he said with a slight sneer.

"Boy, aren't you the smooth one," she replied with that childlike laugh that he loved.

Whizzing away from the curb, he joined his laughing with hers as they made their way to the park.

Pulling up to the park, Man grabbed the basket, wine and hymn book and got out letting the door slide shut on its own.

"Well, where do you want to go?" he asked as he rounded the car and came up beside her, scanning the well lit, tree-filled park.

"Oh, I don't know. How about over there under the trees? It's sort of secluded," she said as she started walking toward them, putting her arms up. "Oh, wow, look at that moon, those stars. They could make you forget about almost anything."

"Yea, almost anything," he replied as he came up behind her, taking in the sight of her body and smell of her perfume.

Coming up under the trees, they both sat the legal foot apart for unmarried couples, and Elizabeth opened the basket and started unpacking the food as Man opened the bottle of wine.

Pouring the holy liquor, the only type of alcohol sold since the reformation, into the two wine glasses, Man smiled and said, "Gee, do you think that you brought enough food?" He looked at the mound of sandwiches Elizabeth was taking out of the basket.

"Hey, I didn't know how much a big football player like you would eat. Better safe than sorry," Elizabeth said with a wink.

"Well, I'm glad you did because I'm starved. Let's eat," Man said as he started to grab for a sandwich.

But, before he could lay his hand on one, Elizabeth grabbed it, "What are you trying to do, get us arrested? We haven't said grace yet!" she said with a look and a sly smile.

Man looked up into her lovely green eyes and felt a shock go through his body, and before he knew it, he found himself reaching over the food and giving Elizabeth a kiss. A kiss that surprised her, but without a second thought she returned.

As their lips parted Man reached up with his suntanned hand and slowly let his fingers run down the side of Elizabeth's perfectly white face. He remembered opening his eyes and being accosted by the beauty that was just a few inches away. Oh God, he wanted her. He wanted to hold her, touch her, feel her silky white skin. The thought of it started his blood to boil.

"I think that you're within a foot there, guy. What if a cop would walk by." She glanced into his eyes which expressed the love that he had for her.

"Damn the law, Elizabeth. I love you, and how can that be against the law?" he asked as he moved in closer to her for another kiss.

She gave in willingly, meeting his passion and letting him know that she felt the same way. Man felt her hand slowly down his side, softly feeling each of his ribs as it moved down and up under his shirt.

Oh man, it was too much. His heart felt like it was going to explode it was beating so fast. It was like all the love he felt for her had entered it and was making it expand to the breaking point. He then lifted her up and brought her down on top of him, moving his one hand up until it felt the soft roundness of her breast pressed to his chest. He felt his other hand as it started to unzip the back of her dress. He could feel each zipper clasp coming undone as he slowly pulled it down her back. With each little opening of the zipper he could feel his blood temperature rising. And Elizabeth's hands taking off his shirt hadn't really helped any either.

Man opened his eyes as Elizabeth slowly broke away from him and sat up, shrugging her shoulders and letting the upper part of her dress fall away from her body. Man felt the inside of her thighs straddled around his waist. He could feel the warmth coming from between her legs that were pressed against his crotch, and it had driven him insane. The sight of her bare shoulders, her perfectly thin stomach, her perfect breasts as she reached behind her back and undid the clasp of her bra, let it slide down her arms and flicked it away with a twist of her perfect wrist. God he couldn't stand it. His heart was pounding so fast that he was surprised he wasn't dead.

It had been ecstasy when she leaned back down on top of him and started kissing him again as she wiggled

out of the rest of her dress, and let it fall aside as they rolled over onto the grass. Man had felt the press of her nipples against his chest, he had felt himself reaching down to unbutton his pants, but most of all he had felt the love that they shared, building up and surrounding them in a light of its own.

Wrong? Wrong? How could it have been wrong? It had been perfect, it had been what life was all about, two people sharing each other. Two people basking in the glow of the love that they had for each other. It was right, it was pure goodness, and how could that be wrong? Man remembered himself thinking as he moved himself out of his pants, kicking them away and rolling over.

It had been perfect, it had been magic, it had been he and she, their souls meeting in the glow of each other's love, forgetting the world, forgetting everyone else, the only thing that had mattered had been her and that she loved him just as much as he did her.

But just as Man came to this conclusion, he felt Elizabeth being pulled away from him. Opening his eyes he remembered her being thrown aside by an unknown hand, a hand with a tattoo of a cross on it. A hand that had been connected to a face that Man couldn't make out because of the light that shined into his face.

"Well, what have we here? A little harlot seducing one of God's chosen, huh?" Man heard as he glanced over just in time to see the cop back hand Elizabeth across the face. Man flinched as he witnessed the blow, felt his heart break as he saw the blood fly from Elizabeth's mouth.

Man jumped up and shoved the unprepared officer into a tree. With the officer's billy club he smashed the lower back of the grinning officer who had hit Elizabeth. Her felt the drool as it flew from his mouth. He screamed at them to leave her alone. Suddenly a billy club smashed into the back of his head.

The last thing that he remembered was her bruised face, the tears running down the sides of her cheeks as an officer pulled her head back by her hair. And then everything was black.

* * * *

No, he couldn't do it. He couldn't open his eyes, he wouldn't open his eyes, because he knew what he would see. Through the one way glass, he would see her beaten body tied to the chair. He would hear the bug-eyed priest's voice, as he preached that she was evil. He would feel the breaking of his heart. He would feel the pain. But wait, it wasn't his heart that was hurting; it was his face.

Crack! Man heard as the fist smashed into his head, causing it to once again explode.

"Come on, Blasphemer, open your eyes. We know you're awake," the cop said as he rubbed the fist that had just hit Man for the third time. "And if you don't open your eyes I'm just going to have to hit you again."

Man cracked his eyelids open to a blinding light that seemed to make his head explode once again. Glancing up at the shadow standing before him he saw the outline of a man in front of a spot light aimed at his face.

Before Man had a chance to tell the shape before him just where it could go, he heard a door open behind him.

"Well, Mr. Manovich, what are we going to do with you?" Man heard as he saw another form move in front of him. "It looks like you had a clean record previously, but we went to your apartment and it looks like you could be in some serious trouble. We found many recyclable products that you have failed to dispose of properly. You are aware of the Greenpeace Act which was put into effect two years ago?"

"Never heard of it," Man replied as he leaned back against the chair, adjusting his hands, handcuffed behind his back. "Why don't you enlighten me."

"Well, according to the Greenpeace Act of 2028, 'Each citizen of the United States under God is responsible for the disposal of any container which they are in possession of. Failure to do so is in full violation of the law, and the offender will be punished to the full extent of the law'," the man said as he spun a chair around and sat down in front of Man, looking at a file. "But my friend, that, it seems, is the least of your troubles. It says here that when you were apprehended, you were in the act of shouting blasphemous statements, which is in violation of the second Commandment, one of the biggest offenses against the state. Are you aware just how much trouble you are in?"

"No," Man said as he leaned closer toward the inquisitor, "but I'm sure you'll tell me, you God damn, son of a bi-."

But before the words were out of his mouth Man felt that same fist slamming into the side of his head, knocking him onto the floor, where he lay spitting blood.

"Enough," Man heard the inquisitor say as a boot slammed into the iron muscles of his stomach. "Now, Mr. Manovich, you know that we are only trying to help you, but if you continue like you have been, we will be forced to punish you to the full extent of the law, and in matters of blasphemy, that is crucifixion."

"Go to hell," Man breathed as he spat blood and saliva toward the shape the sound was coming from. "I know, and I don't really give a damn."

"Well, Mr. Manovich, I've tried my best, but if that's how it's going to have to be, then I guess I'll be seeing you in court," the man said as he wiped the spittle from his face and stands up.

"Well," the inquisitor said as he turned toward the other officer in the room, "it looks like my talents can't get through to him. I guess it's up to you. Maybe yours can save this lost lamb."

The next thing Man heard is the laughter of the officer as the inquisitor walked out.

* * * *

Man came to with the smell of straw overtaking his senses. Attempting to open his eyes Man realized only his right one would open because the left was swollen shut. Through his right he could see the light shining through the three bars in the door of his cell. Man let out a groan as he tried to get himself upright. "Fuck, it feels like I just got done playing a game against the L.A. Crusaders, without a helmet."

Finally getting himself up he realized that his hands were still cuffed behind his back, something that he had failed to notice because it seemed he had lost feeling in both arms.

"Real nice," Man laughed as he glanced down at the bed of rodent infested straw that he had been laying on. "Looks like I got Mr. Ed's cell."

God, he could remember that fiasco, back in 2018 when the law had cracked down on Nickelodeon for showing old Mr. Ed reruns. He could remember him and his mom laughing at the trial which was broadcasted on television. He could remember how they had sat there and laughed at the prosecution as they played the Mr. Ed theme song backwards, saying that the jumble of sounds was a tribute to Satan. He could remember Nickelodeon being taken off the air and the owners of the station thrown in jail.

Just then a shadow passed in front of the cell door and Man heard a key being turned in the lock. He made out the shapes of two guards as they entered the cell.

"Come on buddy, it's time for your trial," one of the guards said as he came up to Man and roughly lifted him up by his left armpit, "and we don't want to keep the judge waiting."

"Wow, that was quick," Man grunted as the guards lifted him up and started leading him out the door, kicking a rat out of the way. "I didn't even get time to know my cellmates," Man laughed.

"Yea, the court process really got speeded up when the ruling of 2016 was put into effect, giving only men the right to a trial," the guard said with a sneer. "Without women everything seems to run a lot smoother"

Yea, fuck off, Man thought as he was led down the hall to what was surely his death sentence.

Walking into the well lit court room Man found himself staring at the huge cross taking up the wall behind the judge's desk, and picturing himself hanging from it. With a smile Man slowly moved his eyes down from the cross and let them rest on the judge. He couldn't help but chuckle at the black robe and the patch of whiteness showing through the black collar. Wincing, Man realized that the judge was actually the "honorable" Judge Clint Baker. One of the toughest judges in the land, he almost never let the criminals put before him live.

The two guards deposited Man into a chair behind a large oak desk. Tearing his eyes from the judge, Man glanced over to look at the figure seated beside him, realizing that it is the inquisitor who talked to him before he was placed in his cell. The man turned to look at him and gave Man a smile.

"Now, if you just cooperate I think I can get you out of this. Just follow my lead," he says with a wink. "I have a plan."

Responding with a grunt Man looked away just as the judge slammed his mallet down on the pad, creating a crack that reverberated through the room.

"Your honor," Man's lawyer said as he stood up, straightening his black tie with his right hand, "my client has decided to plead guilty, with an explanation."

"Is that so, Mr. Halland?" The judge said as he paged through a folder that held the reports filed by Man's arresting officers. "You do know that the laws are very explicit when it comes to blasphemy, and that that is one thing that I will not tolerate in my court. Now, what is this excuse."

"Well, your honor," Halland said as he made his way around the table and paced the room. "I have talked extensively with my client over this case, and I have also looked into my client's background, coming up with a few facts that you may find relevant in this case."

The smile slowly started to slide off Man's face as he began to realize just what Halland was doing.

"My client is just another victim of the evil which has been termed women. He was clearly seduced by the devil, in his most irresistible form. As you can see, from page two of my client's file, he was clearly touched by the devil's finger, striking him to the heart. As we can all attest, the devil is tricky and is not easy to ignore, let alone forget. And that, your honor, is where my client finds himself now, making an attempt at tearing himself away from this blackness, which had clearly touched his soul," Halland stated, bringing his arms up to add to the performance. "If you would just talk to my client you would see that this is the case. He is just a lost lamb that only needs a push in the right direction and he will turn to the path of goodness. All that he needs is a shepherd and, with the goodness that I know is in your heart, you can be that shepherd." Halland made his way back to the desk, giving a shocked Man a wink of triumph.

"A very convincing speech, Mr. Halland, and I'm sure that your assumption is the correct one. Now, Mr. Manovich, if you could just stand up and give me your assurance that what Mr. Halland said is true, I'm sure that the state can find it in their heart to forgive you. We understand your pain and we will help you through it." The judge looked to Man with a smile.

Man couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was actually going to get off from this too. He couldn't move. He couldn't think. All he could do was just sit there, staring at the smiling judge, wondering how all

this could happen. Here he was, a respectable citizen, whose only goal in life was to die with the worst sin under his belt, and he couldn't even get that right. How was he ever going to be able to see her again if these bastards kept forgiving him. Is there no justice?

"Mr. Man," the judge said, signaling to the guards who stood beside him. Man's train of thought was broken by the hands which grabbed him under the arms and lifted him up. Standing on his own feet, Man took in the situation better, looking up at the judge. He was hit by a blast of divine providence which told him exactly what to do.

"Well, your honor," Man said, as his handcuffs were unlocked, "there is some truth to what Mr. Halland said. But I feel that if the truth needs to really come out, then I need to elaborate on the story."

Making his way around the table, Man started massaging his arms in an attempt at getting some feeling back into them.

"Yes, I was seduced, but it was not by a woman. It was by love, it was by desire and it was by my own will." Man said as he made his way up to the judge's desk. "You and the law say that what we did was wrong. But by my own moral standing, what I did was right, and if by doing, this I will be damned to hell, then so be it. And if that be the case then I'd much rather be damned to hell then go to your heaven, or live in your hell on earth, because your hell can't be any worse than what I am living now."

Man saw the look on the judge's face slowly turn to shock as he moved up to him, placing his hands on the front of his desk. Man could see the look of terror in the judge's eyes as he lept up onto the judge's desk and wrapped his just warming fingers around the judge's throat. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the two guards leaping up from their chairs and running towards him.

Squeezing with all of his might Man realized that it wouldn't be enough. He knew that he couldn't kill the judge before the guards got to him. Letting go of the judge's throat, Man shoved him backwards, reaching down and grabbing the mallet lying on the table. Man turned and swung just in time to meet the first guard in the side of the head, dropping him. But before Man corrected himself from the first swing he felt the billy club from the second guard slam into his right knee, knocking him from the top of the desk.

Falling to the floor, Man came up in a roll. Crouching down he prepared himself for the guard who followed him. Man blocked the swing of the guard with the mallet and punched with his right hand, slamming it into the chest of the guard, knocking the wind out of him and driving him to his knees.

Man kicked the guard in the head as he reached down to pick up the guard's discarded billy club. Looking up toward the judge, Man was shocked to see the end of a pistol being pointed at him from the hand of the judge.

"Now, Mr. Manovich, if you could just drop the weapons and retake your seat, we can get on with this trial," the judge said as he massaged his neck with his left hand, gesturing over to Man's seat with the barrel of the pistol.

"Yes, your honor," Man said as a smile broke back onto his face, and a small laugh jumped out of his mouth. "Excuse my outburst. I don't know what came over me."

Making his way over to his seat Man gave the shocked Halland a pat on the back. "We got this case in the bag," he whispered as he took his seat, giving the statue like lawyer a wink.

"Well now, Mr. Manovich, it looks like you are one lost lamb who has willingly given himself up to the wolf. You are to be crucified tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. You will be made to carry the wooden cross on your back the length of the town and then be nailed up and left until dead, and then burned," the judge said as he banged the desk with the handle of his pistol, all the while smiling.

"Thank you," Man stated as he grabbed Halland's limp hand, shaking it vigorously, as a group of guards burst into the court room. "You were a great lawyer. I'll recommend your services to all my friends."

* * * *

Coming to, Man found himself back in his cell with his hands cuffed behind his back. Looking around he realized that it was only about seven hours until he would be able to see his Elizabeth.

Finally, Man thought with a laugh, finally all this would be over. Finally I won't need to miss her, finally everything would be right. Standing up Man began to move around the four-by-four cell, looking at the dark brick walls illuminated by the light shining through the bars of his window.

"Hello, Mr. Manovich, we've brought you your last meal. Hope you like vegetables," the guard said as another person entered the cell, wearing a white coat and a hair net, carrying in his outstretched hands a silver covered tray. Man was just able to pick up the number tattooed on the man's forehead which distinguished him as a "reformed" gay.

Pulling the lid off of the tray, the man set the plate filled with greens down on the floor, about two feet away from Man and backed out through the door, all the while keeping his eyes downcast.

"Now, if you would be kind enough to turn around so that I can take those handcuffs off, we can be about our business without any trouble," the guard said as he selected a key from his ring, while the other guard eyed Man with a sneer and thumped the billy club in his open palm.

Giving the guards a bow, Man spun around as the guard stepped forward and unlocked the handcuffs, caus-

ing Man's arms to fall limply to his sides.

Man turned back around in time to see the guards back out of the cell, locking the door and heading back down the hall where they would sit and watch the nightly gospel hour on channel six.

Man fell on the funny tasting food ravenously, finishing and going over to the straw bed to get one last dreamless sleep before it was time for him to be reunited with Elizabeth.

* * * *

God, it felt like he had been walking down the black obsidian walled hallway forever. His legs felt like rubber and it was getting increasingly hotter and it seemed like the red glow up ahead was getting brighter.

"Shit, I need a break before I drop dead," Man said as he stopped and placed his hand on the side of the wall to get some of his weight off his aching feet.

But as his hand got closer to the wall, Man realized that it seemed like the heat was coming from the wall itself. Licking his finger, Man placed it up against the wall and watched as the spit turned to steam and a sharp pain shot through his finger before he had a chance to pull it back.

"Well, so much for that idea," Man said as he started to walk again, the intense heat edging its way up into his feet through his shoes.

Continuing down the hall Man came to the conclusion that the light was getting brighter at the end of the tunnel and that this hall was bound to lead him someplace.

"Fuck man, that light is bright," Man said as he picked up his pace to keep the increasing heat from burning the bottoms of his feet. Getting up a ways Man realized that the hallway was making a turn and that his destination was finally at hand.

"Fire and brimstone, man, fire and fucking brimstone," Man whispered as he rounded the corner and trotted into hell, literally.

Rounding the corner Man came to a halt, ignoring the pain shooting up his legs from his feet. Laid out before him was a landscape that seemed to go on forever back into the red tinged sky, creating an eerily strange and horrifyingly beautiful scene.

Huge jagged stalagmites blasted up out of the ground, rising into the sky roughly eighty feet, as a lake of molten lava wove its way through them and created the misty heat filled air and red tinge that seems to pervade the sky.

Squinting his eyes, Man was surprised to realize that there were small boats making their way along the river with the help of figures who pushed them along with huge poles.

"Hey, pal. Welcome to the party," Man heard from up above his head. "Glad you could make it."

Swinging his gaze toward the sound of the voice, Man was shocked to realize that the thing speaking to him was a blackened skeleton chained to one of the rock stalagmites.

"Holy shit!" Man exclaimed as he took a step backwards. "What the fuck happened to you?"

But before the skeleton could reply, both of them were drawn to the cloud of black smoke that has formed about thirty feet from their position. Squinting, Man could make out two figures in the center of the cloud as the smoke dissipated and the smell of brimstone invaded Man's senses.

"Well, Mr. Manovich, it's about time you showed up," a voice boomed, knocking Man to his knees and causing him to snap his hands to his ears. "We've been waiting for you."

Looking up, Man was shocked to realize that he was looking into the face of Alice Cooper, one of the first rock stars to have been hanged after the reformation. But it wasn't seeing him that caused Man's mouth to go completely dry, it was the other person just now visible through the black cloud.

"Hello, Clayton, I've been waiting for you. What took you so long anyway?" said the figure that Man dimly recognized through the layers of make-up and skimpy lingerie, as Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth?" Man mumbled as he slowly made his way back to his feet and took a step forward.

"Yes, Man," the voice boomed as Alice smiled and wrapped his arm around her, giving Man a wink. "She has really missed you, and you took so long in getting here that I've had to help her pass the time."

Man shifted his gaze to Elizabeth and was just able to make out the tear that ran down her face before the laughter boomed through his body, causing him to once again be knocked backwards like a toy.

He just lay there with his eyes closed in an attempt to stall the tears that he could feel welling up behind his closed eyelids. They finally broke through when he heard the soft whisper in his ear, "I'm sorry."

"You fucking bastard," Man shouted as he got back on his feet and ran toward Alice, feeling his hands clench into fists. "You're fucking dead, you piece of shit."

Man could feel the tears washing down his face as he made his way toward the smiling figure, but just as he got within about five feet Alice raised his right hand palm outward, stopping Man in his tracks.

"My, you are a energetic one aren't you?" the long haired figure smiled as he reached over and pulled Elizabeth closer, grabbing her hair and forcing her lips to his, running his other hand along her side, letting it rest on her breast.

"No!" Man tried to shout but his paralysed body couldn't respond. The scene slowly faded to mist.

Snapping his eyes open Man realized that he could move. Setting himself up, he began to feel the layers of sweat that seemed to coat his trembling body. Looking around the dimly lit room, Man realized that he was lying on the bed of straw in his cell. He can see the empty plate lying overturned on the floor just a few feet away from him.

"Fuck," Man mumbled as he ran his hand through his dirty hair to get some of the straw out, but only managing to make his pounding head to hurt even worse.

"God, it was just a dream," he said as tried to wipe away the tears that had started. "Just a fucking dream."

"Not really, Mr. Manovich," Man heard from the door as a key was turned in the lock and a priest walked into the cell flanked by two other guards.

"You have just experienced the effect of a drug that we call redemption," the priest said as he showed Man two white pills, popping one in his own mouth. "This should take care of the headache you are experiencing. It's just an extra strength aspirin."

Silently Man reached out and took the pill from the priest and popped it into his own mouth, slowly letting his eyes move up to the priest's face as the pain in his head started to dissipate.

"Redemption was created three years ago for lost lambs like yourself," the priest said as he smiled down at Man. "It is used to duplicate hell, the place that you will end up, Mr. Manovich, if you don't confess to your sins."

"So it wasn't real," Man said, sitting up and causing the two guards to take a step closer.

"No, it wasn't real, but rest assured that it was a close facsimile. We truly are a forgiving society, Mr. Manovich. One which can even find it in its heart to forgive you," the priest said as he dropped to one knee bringing his face level with Man's. "I am ready to hear your confession now, the first step on the road to recovery."

"So it was you who were responsible for what I just went through."

"No, Clayton, it was your sins that caused you to go there, but that can all be erased now if you will just take my hand and give your troubled soul over to me and God," the priest said as he reached out to take Man's hand.

"I just have one thing to say." Man brought himself to his feet causing the priest to also stand up and the guards to come in and flank him on either side. "Fire and brimstone, man, fire and fucking brimstone!"

"That is a shame," the priest said as the guards took Man by the arms and led him out of the cell.

* * * *

The cross felt like a million pounds as Man carried it strapped to his back through the people-lined street. Looking up, he could see the hill where he would be crucified about 400 yards ahead of him.

The cheering of the crowd was deafening as he trudged the last way up the hill and the guards started untying the 300 pound wooden cross from his back. It took all the strength that Man had left to get himself to straighten his warped back as six guards placed the cross onto the ground next to the preset cement hole.

Man could hear the crowd become silent as the priest to his left raised his arms and started to lead them in a prayer for his soul. He could hear the priest talking but couldn't really make out the words because of the silence that seemed to control his mind. All that he could see was the devil kissing Elizabeth, and it seemed to have a strange calming effect, because it was only a matter of minutes until he would finally know the truth.

Man realized that the priest had finished his prayer when the guards came up to him and started leading him toward the cross. Man could see the crowd as he was turned around. He could see their stone faces as all their eyes came to rest on him. He could see that even the concession vendors had stopped selling their wares and were looking up at him.

Shaking off the guards, Man laid himself down on the cross letting his arms rest on the outer parts of the cross, palms up. All the while he kept his eyes focused on the sky where the black speck circled.

Man could feel the spike as it was placed on the center of the palm of his right hand.

"God bless you, son," the priest said as he lifted the hammer above his head, letting it fall and push the spike through Man's open hand.

The pain was like fire as it shot up Man's arm and entered his brain like a freight train causing his eyes to water and mouth to go dry. Two more swings and the spike was firmly stuck in the wood.

Man didn't even realize that the guard and the priest had crossed over to his left side until he felt the spike push through the palm of his left hand. The pain shot through both of his arms and collided in his skull.

Man couldn't really feel the pain from his feet as the spike was driven through. It was just another coal added to the already blazing bonfire going on in his brain.

As the cross was set into the hole Man was starting to cope with the pain and was actually able to open his watering eyes. Man could see the crowd cheering and toasting him as they slowly started to make their way back to their own lives.

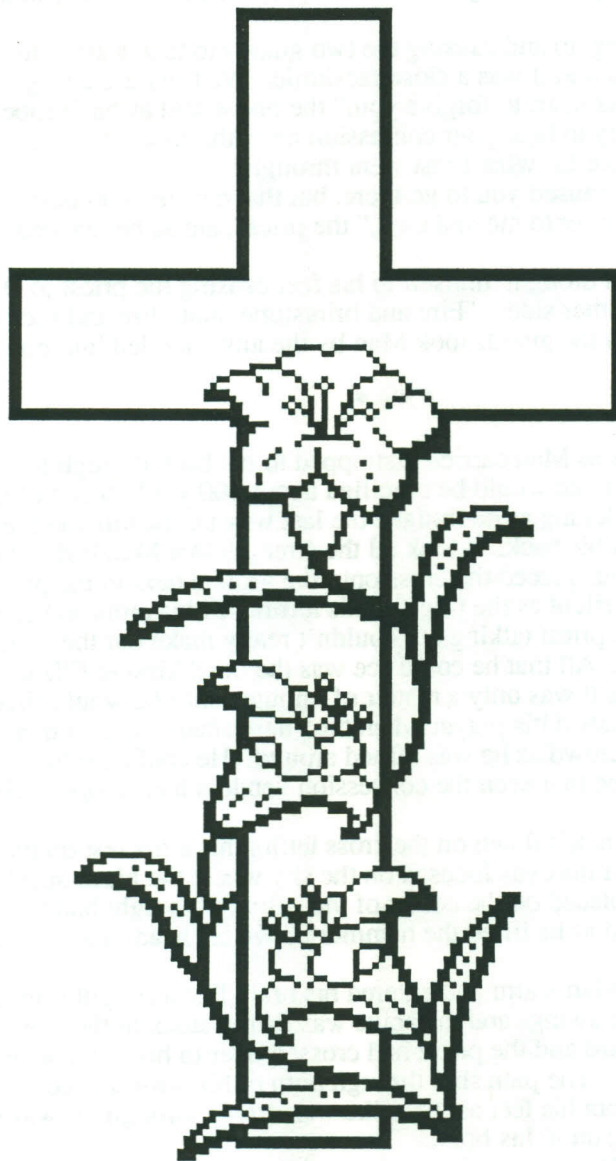
He must have blacked out because the next thing he knew was that it was dark and he was alone up on the hill. That was when the hallucinations started.

It seemed like the earth was spinning and he was the axis. The lights from the town seemed to whip around him like little fireflies, causing his stomach to churn.

It all came to a crashing halt as Man felt his body heave up the emptiness that was centered in his abdomen. It seemed like the darkness was congealing into the shapes of four black figures who their way out of the larger darkness and came closer to him.

"Don't worry, it's almost over," Man heard the blackness say as it and the other figures started taking him down.

That was when the world turned to blackness.



All on Account of Skeeter

By

Candace Smith

Everyone was real shocked by the news. It was hard to believe Skeeter Sheppard actually done it.

It was all over the papers. Momma said she even heard it on national news probably because of the way he done it that's what she said.

Daddy says it will be one of those stories that people recollect 50 years from now. Lots of different stories are going around. Like Daddy, Momma, Grandpa and Tom sitting around the table asking themselves why. I was listening to 'em yesterday. I was sitting in Daddy's chair while they were in the kitchen talking about it. They thought I was reading, but I wasn't.

"What possesses a man to do something like that? It's just plain sick," Momma said.

Grandpa shrugged his shoulders.

"Everyone's saying he'll get the chair. For sure life in prison," Tom said.

"That's just what he deserves," Momma said.

"How was Mrs. Sheppard yesterday?" asked Tom.

"For an old woman she's got a lot of fight in her. She was rantin' in ravin', saying she'd shoot us all if we didn't get off her land. Funny thing was when Joe and Eddy got her in the car she cried like a baby. The folks at the home 'll have a real time with her," Daddy said.

"The whole thing is just heartbreaking," Momma said shaking her head.

All on account of Skeeter.

"So what was he doing when they found him?" Tom asked.

"Working on Bauer's tractor," Grandpa said, puffing his cigar. "Four cars went out there. Sheriff Swanson said he didn't put up a fight, didn't deny anything. He just kept right on working like they weren't even there. I heard the blood was still on his hands."

Skeeter was good at that, working on trucks, cars, and tractors. All the neighbors brought their machinery that needed fixing. He'd do it real cheap and Daddy said it be good enough to last a few more months. The last time I saw Skeeter he was working on Mr. Bauer's tractor. I went up to the hills with Grandpa. Grandpa's truck needed fixing. I've always seen Skeeter in two places and one was his workshop. Momma calls it a sad excuse for a shed. Actually she called everything on the Sheppard place sad looking. It wasn't like our place, cut and colored. Everytime I was up there I had to remind myself that people lived there. Hunters always thought it was abandoned, by its looks. Daddy said he couldn't blame 'em. But Sheppards kept their place neat, everything in piles.

Skeeter walked towards us now and the closer he got, the more he stared at me real funny like. I don't know how to describe it except it gave me the gooses. Even thinking about it now gives me 'em. Skeeter looked as old as Grandpa except skinnier. He smiled now and showed his rotting teeth. I stood real close to Grandpa. Grandpa must of known Skeeter gave me the gooses, because he squeezed my hand and whispered, "It's ok. He's harmless."

Then Grandpa and Skeeter talked. Daddy says Skeeter's a man of few words, but Grandpa and him always seem to talk awhile. Mrs. Sheppard came out of their house which Momma called a shack. She had a cookie for me and questions for Grandpa. Momma says she always full of questions. Skeeter scared me and so did his mother. But she was a different kind of scary. She was just plain ugly. Warts and all. I didn't mind her as much, cause she had cookies. Mrs. Sheppard was yelling at Skeeter now. She does that a lot and laughs at him, too. Everytime I see them she's yelling.

Skeeter never says anything though. Just looks at her real funny. This time Mrs. Sheppard was threatening to kill Zeke if he didn't stay out of her chicken coop.

Zeke was Skeeter's dog, old and blind. He always laid in the shade by the junk pile. Grandpa says Skeeter calls it his storage supply. I'd always feed Zeke half my cookie. He'd sniff it out in the grass and snatch it right up. Mrs. Sheppard is always yelling at me not to get too close to 'im or he'll bite. Skeeter's the only one who can get near 'im. I think that dog's the only friend Skeeter's got. Daddy says poor Zeke should have been put out of his misery a long time ago. He says Mrs. Sheppard hates that dog. Pooooor Zeke.

Daddy was gonna go up to the Sheppard's and take care of Zeke after they took Mrs. Sheppard away. Daddy said it was better to get rid of Zeke and that he was in a lot of misery anyway. Besides no one wanted anything that had claim to Skeeter. When Daddy went up looking for Zeke he found his body under the junk pile. Daddy said Skeeter must of thought he should a been the one to end his misery.

"Heard he's going to plead insanity," Tom said.

"What else is he but insane? I would of been insane a long time ago living up there with that woman," Momma said bunting her chin toward the hills.

Momma didn't much care for Mrs. Sheppard. Said all she was was a gossip. She didn't think much of Skeeter either. Called 'em hillbillies. Then Daddy would say "Hillbillies! They live one and a half miles away. What'd you call us?"

You could say the Sheppards were a little behind everyone else. Grandpa told me they got no running water or electricity. He said it's because they got no money and really don't care if they get new stuff. They'll just keep doing things the way they've been doing 'em. Grandpa says Mrs. Sheppard would never leave the farm, and she wouldn't let Skeeter either.

"Ya know, I should a known something was going to happen with him always standing outside that shop, looking," Momma said, folding her arms.

Grandpa shook his head. "Susan, you didn't know anything more than anyone else. Who knows what set him off, or what sets anyone else off, for that matter."

Skeeter was always standing outside of the beauty shop. Grandpa says he went through a ritual every Saturday when they'd go to town. And I saw it, too. It started with dropping Mrs. Sheppard off at Leo's Foods. Momma and I were leaving the store and seen Mrs. Sheppard getting out of the truck. She was yelling at Skeeter again. Told him he better not be late again and that he was a fool wasting all his time at the junk yards. When Skeeter didn't say anything and nodded, I heard Mrs. Sheppard say some name under her breath and shake her head.

Then Momma and I walked over to the beauty shop. There Skeeter was, sitting on a bench across the street, looking through the big glass windows. This is the second place I've always seen him. He was a real scary sight. I don't think he ever took a bath. His hair was greasy black and he had what Momma called a five o'clock shadow. Looking at him, I wondered if at birth God pulled his nose out and pushed in his eyes in by the way his face was arranged. He wore the same faded blue overalls and orange long john shirt he always wore. Momma shhhd me when I laughed at the big hole in Skeeter's overalls. I'd seen the hole before, and I couldn't help but laugh. The hole showed Skeeter's hip and made known he wasn't wearing any underwear. Everytime I've seen Skeeter he's never been wearing underwear, and he never sewed the hole. It would a been a surprise if he'd ever been wearing underwear. It use ta shock me, but now I'm used to it. I think everyone else must be, too, cuz they walk by Skeeter like he's not even there.

Momma said he'll sit there until Mrs. Sheppard is done with her shopping. Momma went to get her hair cut that day. Miz Lindsey, she owned the shop. She was real pretty. About Momma's age. The women in the shop laughed at Skeeter. They said he's here every other Saturday for the whole afternoon. Miz Lindsey said ever since she opened up the shop, like clock work. One of the women who was getting her hair played with asked, "What does he do?" Miz Lindsey said he sits and watches. Miz Rita, one of the beauticians, calls him a freak, but Miz Lindsey says he's harmless. They were joking about giving him a haircut and a shave.

Then Miz Lindsey did something everyone was surprised by. She got up from behind the desk and headed for the door. Miz Rita told her they were only joking. But Miz Lindsey said what could it hurt.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked. She crossed the street, and I could see her lips moving as she stood in front of Skeeter. At first he had a surprised look on his face. Then he grinned and looked at her real funny like.

Miz Lindsey came back in and sat at her desk. She said it was strange. He didn't say anything. She took that as a no. Miz Rita told her to stay away from him, but Miz Lindsey said, "He's probably just shy."

At the end of the day Skeeter drove by the cafe in his white truck. It looked almost like the one Daddy had in the junk pile. Tom calls it a rusted piece of shit. Skeeter must really like that truck cause I've never seen him drive anything else. Whenever he'd drive by, people in the cafe would laugh at the sight of him and say, "There goes old Skeeter." He'd be crouched over the seat, neck stuck out like a chicken, like he was driving in a race. It was hard to tell what he was looking at though because of the welding goggles. It seemed like everyone was always laughing at Skeeter. Of course, not while he was there. Momma said that was impolite. But I think Skeeter heard the laughter. They never called him Skeeter to his face. His real name was Charles. Grandpa said his daddy nicknamed him Skeeter and only his daddy called him Skeeter. The name Charles didn't seem to fit Skeeter's looks and when I said the name, Charles, it sounded nice, but when I said it again, this time with Skeeter's face in mind, I got the gooses. People thought Skeeter was stupid cause he got no schooling and he never talked. Some said retarded. But he didn't have the look. Others said he was slow. Grandpa said he was smart. He'd always say, "Don't kid yourself. Those wheels are turning." Grandpa said Skeeter was a self taught mechanic. I was real surprised to find out Skeeter read all the time. I felt sorry for Skeeter having to leave school after his daddy died. Grandpa said he promised his daddy he'd never leave his mother or the farm.

After Miz Lindsey talked to Skeeter, people started seeing more of him. I guess that's when the trouble started. Momma said he wouldn't leave Miz Lindsey alone after that. He'd sit outside of the shop until evening. Then he showed up at the shop every Saturday. Pretty soon it was every Friday and Saturday. Then Skeeter started following Miz Lindsey home. She told Momma she marched across that street and told Skeeter that if he didn't stop following her she was gonna get the the police and her husband after him. Said he just stared and grinned at her.

Momma said that must've not fazed Skeeter, cause when Miz Lindsey opened the shop in the morning, he was already sitting across the street, waiting and watching.

Right before it happened, Miz Lindsey told Momma that she had finally had it with Skeeter. She walked across the street after closing and said she told Skeeter to leave her alone. That he was a fool for coming around here and to go back into the hills with his mother and never come back cause she and no one else could stand the sight of him. She told Momma he didn't say anything, nodded his head and stared at her, but this time he didn't have that grin on his face. Said she hoped she'd finally be rid of him.

"I heard that shop was just a mess. What'd they say he used?" Tom asked. "Paper said possibly wrench and fists. It's hard to say. She was so bad off her family couldn't hardly identify her," Daddy said.

"Strange that there were only blows to her head. What 'd I hear? 23?" Grandpa said.

"Ya. Nobody heard any screams or noises that night. But Mr. Pickney saw Skeeter's truck drive by his cafe," Tom said.

"Can you imagine opening the shop and seeing her? Poor Rita," Momma said.

"Poor Lindsey," Daddy said.

Nobody knows exactly how or why it happened. Everyone's got their own ideas as to why he done it. I heard Mrs. Cocoran, Mr. Zeller, and another man say maybe he was so retarded he didn't know what he was doing. Mr. Hanes said it must be schizo-something or multiple personalities. Daddy says obsession, Momma says plain insanity, Tom says impulse killing, and Grandpa says rejection. I say maybe it was a little of everything.

The Sheriff of Cow----

By

Josh Frederick

They had me and The Deputy surrounded. We were outnumbered five to one by a group of the biggest baddest outlaws to ever climb into the saddle. Billy the Kid and his gang were off to the right and the James Brothers had us cut off to the left. The air was filled with foul smell of gunpowder and the bullets rained down upon our small hiding place looking for some crack to leak through. I knew if we didn't get out of there soon, one of those dastardly bullets would strike true.

"Oww! I'm gonna tell ma you hit me with a rock," screamed The Deputy in pain.

"Shut up. You were just hit by a bullet, you idiot." The Deputy was still too young to have learned how to take a bullet like a man. "Besides you can't leave now. We're outnumbered ten to one." Falling to my infallible logic and unable to break free from my half-nelson, she decided to stay and help fight.

Suddenly a rejuvenated battle cry came thundering over the hill.

"Bobby. Karen. Time to come and eat lunch."

Hearing their death call, all three hundred cow rustlers and murderous varmints ran for the hills as fast as they could fearing for their miserable lives. It was the call of the cavalry coming to save us from the forces of evil.

I slowly picked up the injured Deputy and removed the gag from her mouth. We carefully trudged back to the old farmhouse through the mud, scum and various animal excretions that lay like land mines throughout the entire corral.

"What in the world have you two been up to? Look at you.

You're filthy. Have you been playing in the corral again, Bobby Gene?"

Obviously she didn't care that The Deputy and I had just saved her and the entire town of Welchville from a band of a thousand marauding bandits.

"Yeah, we were, Ma. And he hit me with a rock!" cried the backstabbing Deputy. And to think I had just saved her life by performing emergency surgery to remove that bullet.

"It wasn't a rock! She was shot by a marauding bandit," but my pleas fell upon deaf ears.

"Never mind. Just take your sister upstairs and wash up. And Bobby, you're going to have to have a little talk with your grandfather after lunch.

Suddenly the room was awash with Italian violin music. I knew instantly that I was in deep trouble. The Grandfather was the one person in the whole town that every man feared, including me. It was said he once killed a man simply by kissing him on the cheek, although I still maintain that it was the fifteen cloves of garlic he had had for supper. And even though I had saved his granddaughter's life, he was going to be mad that I was playing in the corral.

As I dragged The Deputy down the stairs and into the kitchen, I could tell right away that this was going to be one of those memorable meals. Since it was a small farm, there was very little room to branch out as far as crops. And when the crop was harvested, that's what we had to eat. We had the corn. It was wonderful though, to see the wide variety of creations Ma could come up with for the corn. We often ate of such delicacies as corn on the cob, corn niblets, mashed corn and gravy, cornish game corn, cornbread, and of course that delectable delight corn hash. Admittedly we did get a break from this feast of plenty when Ma would save up enough to buy a can of Spam, but these grand occasions were few and far between.

As me and The Deputy moseyed on up to the table, the violin music once again cut sharply through the air. We quickly sat down and filled our plates, for we knew that once he arrived, the hash would not remain on the stove for long. Not that The Grandfather had a tendency to overeat. He was just a rather robust man with a healthy appetite.

A cold chill ran through me as he sat down and glared at me over his mountain of hash. It was then that I realized just how bad a spot I was in. The Deputy, who was sitting right next to me, had just spilled her ice water.

"Bobby, help your sister clean that mess up," he growled with a voice that made me immediately jump to the task at hand. "Heard you were in the corral again. How many times have I told you to stay out of there?"

"But Grandfather, I swear we were run in there by a thousand marauding bandits. It was the only place we could hide," I pleaded desperately, hoping that he would understand and take pity on my soul.

"Thousand marauding bandits, ha? Well, next time, either tell those bandits that you can't be chased into the corral, or you'll be the one who will be doin' time. Understand?" From the look in his eye and the finality in his voice I knew he was making me an offer I couldn't refuse.

Trying to avoid that awful glare, my eyes raced around the room. Ma was over in the corner making hot corn pie for desert, all the uncles were out in the living room finishing lunch and telling dirty jokes, and finally my eyes came to rest on a sight that brought tears of joy and stopped my eyes in their tracks. Hanging on the wall was a brand new lasso. It was the one thing I had wanted ever since I was a little kid, which was right before I fought off ten thousand marauding bandits.

"Grandfather, you bought a new rope? Can I use it? Please, please, please," I begged, positive of what the answer would be.

"If you touch that rope, your face won't be the only thing that gets tanned this year." Obviously he was just waiting for a better time to present me with this spectacular gift and was upset that I had ruined his surprise.

"If you kids are done eating, go outside and play. The pie'll be done in a little while and you can come in and have

some then," Ma called from over in the corner. "And, Bobby, make sure to keep an eye on your sister." I quickly grabbed The Deputy and headed out the door.

We had no more than reached the last step, when we were immediately ambushed. The million marauding bandits had been waiting outside all the while we sat inside peacefully eating our lunch. We raced back inside and up the stairs to our room so we could get a better view of the street below. the situation was hopeless. They had taken the entire town hostage and were demanding that I come out for a gunfight. My generous offer of sending The Deputy in my place was unceremoniously rejected. It was my head they wanted and they were going to have it.

Our only hope was to sneak out and somehow catch the yellow bellied leader of the gang, Sam Bovine. He was a bull of a man, about four months old and two hundred pounds. He was infamous for chewing up people as if they were cud and spitting them out like jerky stuff. He was a born killer and I was going to have to take him alive.

Hurriedly we ran down the stairs. No one was around, but there was a knife holding a note against the wall.

"If you wants to sees your relatives again, gives yourself up by sundown."

As The Deputy read me the last word, I realized what I needed to do. In order to take Sam alive, I was going to have to use the new rope and use it to drag him back to the house. Then I could use him as hostage to bargain for my family.

I rushed to the kitchen and found the rope where it had been hanging earlier. Even though I had been warned not to go near the rope I knew The Grandfather would understand the necessity of what I was going to do.

The Deputy and I quietly snuck out the back door. (Marauding bandits are notoriously stupid and never have someone watching the back door.) We camouflaged ourselves and crawled through the grass and weeds down to the corral where Sam was holed up.

When we reached our goal, we could not believe our good fortune. For some reason Sam was right out in the middle of the corral. This was going to be much easier than we could have hoped for. All we had to do now would be to rope him up and drag him home.

"Here, hold this end of the rope while I sneak up and rope Sam," I whispered to The Deputy. "You'll have to hold on tight or else he'll get away."

I slipped into the corral, making sure not to make a sound that would alert my quarry. He was standing in the corner quietly contemplating his pile of oats. Obviously he wanted to stay regular. After testing the knot in my lasso, I hurled it towards the dastardly villain. It arched through the air and landed true, right over Sam's head. I instantly tightened the rope upon his neck and pulled hard to make sure he didn't try to flee. For an instant I looked into his eyes and saw nothing but pure fear.

Sam, unaware that he was now hopelessly ensnared by the long arm of the law, began to struggle. He jumped up and started to run.

Suddenly, my arms jerked from my body. For an instant, there was a hellish feeling as if my stomach had entered my shoes and left Ma's corn knoepple there, and then I found myself gliding through the very same mud, gunk, and animal excretions which I had so painfully avoided earlier in the day. It was getting in my hair, covering my eyes, and getting in my mouth. The whole mess tasted like ----.

But I knew if I let go of that rope I would never see my family again. I tried to scream to The Deputy for help, but the cries were continuously buried under piles of----. Then once again, a staunch cry of salvation came rolling over the hills.

"Holy old bald headed Jesus H. Christ. What in the Sam Hell are you doin', Bobby? Let go of the damn rope." It was The Grandfather, who in the commotion, must have escaped from Sam's cronies. I quickly relinquished my grasp on the rope. Bruised and battered, I climbed up out of the muck and went over to the fence.

"Why'd you let go of the rope?" I shakily demanded of The Deputy.

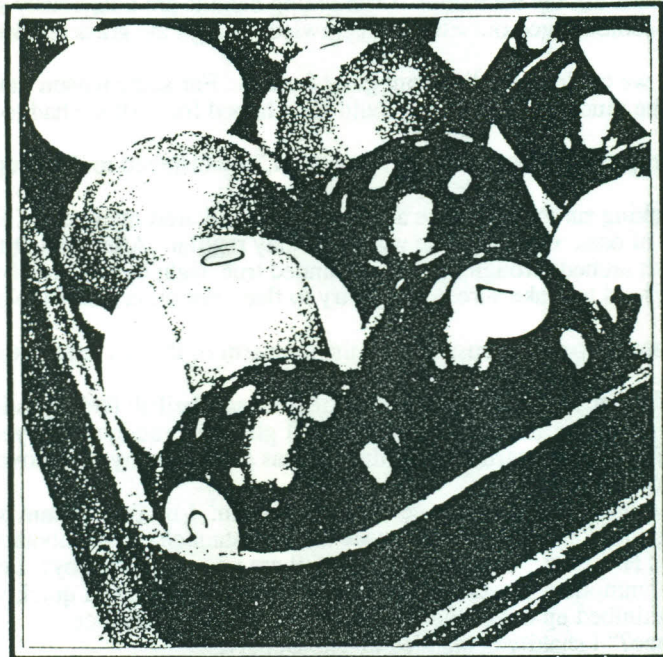
"What! Do you think I'm stupid?" Was her meager defense.

"Leave her out of it," The Grandfather broke in on my inquisition. "Both of you get your butts back up to the house. I'll deal with you after I get this mess cleaned up. Noticing the throbbing vein which enveloped half of his head, I decided not to argue.

Me and the Deputy slowly climbed the hill back up to the house. Ignoring the astonished gasps and giggles, we sauntered upstairs to get cleaned up. As we washed up, my mind rifled through my options. I had lost the respect of the townspeople so I could no longer be sheriff. Since the Grandfather would most certainly try to punish me, I also knew I had to get out of town or wake up the next morning with a side of beef in my bed. As these thoughts passed through my head, my plan of action became clear.

I went into my room to pack. Grabbing my stuff, I said goodbye to my room and my teddy bear for at least a couple of days. As I passed by The Deputy, I removed my badge and handed it to her. Then slowly and quietly I slipped out the back door. My life was definitely going to change. In some ways for the better and in some ways for the worse. But really, it couldn't be all that bad being the leader of ten million marauding bandits, could it?

The Boys of Kashmere



Royce Barton

I knew it was time to quit drinking when my face went numb but something inside stopped me from doing so. Staring aimlessly into the white porcelain sink below me, my buzz was at its peak but I was still a full pint shy of spewing. A yellow-green halo from the bank of fluorescent lights overhead silhouetted my head's outline across the basin's water speckled surface. I reached into my right hand coat pocket and pulled out what was left of a pint of rye. I removed the cap, sniffing it like a connoisseur would a fine wine. It smelled pungent and tasted the same. Replacing the cap, I tucked what little remained of the bottle into a safe haven under some used paper towels in the waste paper basket.

"Sid, did ya fall in or what?" I said as I repositioned myself on the edge of the sink, my legs swinging to and fro.

"Fuck off, I'm reading! The graffiti in here is great. Some dumb bastard scribbled 'Christians don't write on walls.' "

"Is there any 'for a good time' phone numbers written in there?"

"No, but here's something kind of interesting, 'I ate the last mango in Paris, Was in the last tour in Saigon...' "

I could hear Sid, but wasn't listening. I leaped from my porcelain perch and pasted myself into the bathroom corner in a squatting position next to the condom machine. From my new viewpoint, I could see Sid's jeans crumpled up just below his knees; his feet were tapping to the beat of the Country Western tune that made its way into the lav via the air duct.

"Dylan, give Jimbo a jingle and see if he wants to stop up here and shoot some pool."

Lifting my body to the upright position seemed to be an almost impossible task and used up nearly every ounce of energy my inebriated body possessed. The alcohol had taken its effect. I stumbled my way down the corridor to the orange pay phone that dangled from the wall, supported by the telephone line and one lonely bolt.

off to the left and a handful of cowboys gathered around it in a horseshoe shape. They whooped and hollered at a bull rider on the screen.

"Reckin just about everyone over there has a Copenhagen buzz right abouts now, don't ya think Sid?"

"Well I'll tell ya, one thing's fer sure. If ya looks at them there fellas just the wrong way they're libel to come over here and sandblast us," Sid replied.

Sid had his tongue pushing out his lower lip like he was sporting a wad of tobacco. He was walking kind of bowlegged and had his thumb tucked into the waist of his pants like those cowboys you might see in the Sunday afternoon movies. He made me laugh. That was another thing about hanging out with Sid and Jimbo, we always had a way of making each other laugh.

Just about the time I busted a gut, about half of the goaties (that's what we call cowboys) turned and looked in our direction. I couldn't help but wonder what they were thinking. I had the funniest feeling that one of them was going to turn to another and say, "Looks like there's a few new kids in town."

Sid and I just kept on walking and headed towards the jukebox that sat unproductively quiet at the moment. The jukebox was free so Sid thought it would be in our best interest to make a few selections with the hope that the goaties might not be able to hear the television.

"Let's see how abouts a little Madonna followed by a little of that good ol' hippie music," he said scanning the choices with his finger. "Oh, here we go. You wanted the best. You got the best, the hottest band this jukebox has to offer, Kiss," Sid said as he made the choices and smiled with every selection.

"Oh no, they're not worthy of such fine recording artists," I suggested.

The first selection started off with a skip. "Like a virgin touched for the very first time, first time, first time."

"What can you expect for nothin'?" Sid said as we made our way to the counter to fetch ourselves a couple of pool cues.

A larger than life individual sat on a stool that was dwarfed by his density. Sid always called this gentleman the "Fat-fuck," but never to his face. He wasn't that bad of a guy, except he wanted everyone to believe that he had been laid by a different girl everyday for the last three years straight. If he had ever purchased a belt to keep the crack of his buttocks from slapping you in the face when he turned around, his stories may have been more convincing. Wearing his pants like one of those plumbers you see in a comedy skit was his trademark. I think that may have been what sparked his nickname but I have never asked Sid. I think his real name was Theodore, though. Most other people just called him Ted.

"What can I get you two fellas?" Ted said.

"How abouts a couple dews and two cues," I said.

"No problem, I'll get the Mountain Dews. You two can step around and grab the cues," he said as he reached into the refrigerator that sat just an arm's length away from him. He wouldn't have wanted to have to get up. Sid and I made our way around the counter to a rack that held cues of many various lengths, weights and degrees of straightness; most of them were standard bar sticks but Sid had his own personal favorite. It was a personal stick, twenty ounces of solid ebony with red, yellow and orange flames from the freshly chalked blue tip right down to the worn out butt.

A student from yesteryear might have abandoned it for something a little less gaudy. I thought it was ugly. Sid really liked it, a lot; I think he honestly thought it had some magical power or some shit. Jimbo and I always kidded him about it probably being the wood of a tree from some enchanted forest. Maybe it was, cause Sid couldn't shoot worth a damn without it.

"Pay the man and let's get this show on the road," Sid said.

Sid was always making me foot the bill even though his family had enough money to purchase a large chunk of North Dakota and have more money left over than I'll ever see in a lifetime.

You see not only did his deceased grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Greenly own the largest newspaper in the tri-state area but they had sent Sid's father off to one of those private boy's institutions out East followed by four years at Georgetown for a righteous education. It was there that he met Sid's mother, Rebecca White, the daughter of a steel mill owner in Pittsburgh, Pa.. Sid the III would soon illegitimately followed along with a big wedding in the backyard of some mansion in upper-state Pennsylvania. Sid's father was well on his way as a U.S. ambassador. Sid grew, and after attending and being expelled from some of the finest private schools mother earth had to offer, opportunity knocked.

Sid's grandparents died on the same day, his grandmother died of cancer, his grandfather of a heart attack brought on by the loss of his beloved Ella leaving Sid with a chance to cut his parental ties by moving into their vacated house and attending Kashmere Community College in the heart of the Dakotas. I had heard the story a dozen times and every time it changed slightly. I think Sid resented the fact that he came from a rich family. He was always begging, borrowing or stealing to tarnish his rich boy reputation.

Sid and I sauntered our way over to the pool table. We passed by a goatie chick in a leather mini skirt, a yellow cut-off "Slippery when wet" t-shirt, red cowboy boots and a homemade unicorn tattoo on her right arm.

"Hi, guys" she said.

"Hello," we said.

"She's all of eighteen," Sid said after striding out of the girls hearing range.

"But built like a nineteen year old," I replied.

We laughed all the way to the billiard table that awaited our presence but ten feet away. Sid placed the balls in the triangle like a professional, solids, stripes, solids... He rolled the triangle back and forth on the table until it was positioned just right. I lined the cue ball up and with a CRACK the game was under way. No balls went down but the three ball teetered on the left side pocket.

"Open table, I guess I could have just as well let the rodeo queen break for me."

"Three in the side," Sid said as he slammed the ball into the pocket with all of the authority of a Las Vegas pool shark. "Just like shooting ducks."

"Why don't we just play cowboy pool; close our eyes, yell SHIT, hit the cue ball as hard as we can and hope something goes down," I said.

About this time I felt a stout tap on my left shoulder. My first intuition was that Jimbo had arrived and managed to sneak up on me using the skills he had harnessed as a weekend warrior in the North Dakota National Guard. I was wrong. When I turned I found myself face to chest with a goatie in a green and white John Deere hat.

"We can't hear the fuckin' T.V., longhair," he said.

"Have you seen your audiologist lately? It sounds to me like you may be suffering from an ear infucktion," I responded.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Sid placing "Excaliber," his trusty cue on the table top and picking up the eight ball.

"You're dead," said the goatie with a laugh.

"Oh, it's like my grandfather used to say, laughing leads to crying," I said stabbing him with the butt of the pool stick-just above the abdomen. He collapsed on all four like the animal that he truly was.

"Fourth down and forty, I'll punt," I said, kicking him in the side of the ribcage.

I turned to Sid and knew something special would soon follow. "I think you should have gone for the field goal. Eight ball in the side pocket," he said as he threw the ball at the crowd of cowboys that were running our way. It hit one square in the forehead.

"Two down, three to go. Which one do you want?" I asked.

"Which one do you want?" he returned.

"Look this is no time for a Chip and Dale routine. I'll take the big one you can have the two smaller ones," I replied.

"Thanks a lot. It's not like were splitting a pizza," Sid said.

About this time the Fatfuck had managed get off his lazy ass and wonder out onto the field of battle. He tried to get in the middle of things but was lying face down after being struck by a chair intended for Sid.

Out of nowhere came a familiar voice. "It's all for one and one for all." It was Jimbo, the English major with a literary quote that seemed more than suitable for the situation. He rushed towards us like a raging bull. His eyes were green as Paul Newman's were blue. The pair of jade orbs had swept many young woman off their feet, but now they seemed to be filled with anger.

Sid and I were getting pummeled by the three goaties that remained while the fallen two were slowly regaining their sense of direction and heading our way. The Fatfuck was still down with no sign of recovery. Jimbo picked up the ebony cue and wielded it like a foil. He was quite proficient with it, being the captain of the college fencing team and all. He twirled it with the dexterity of a band leader and the authority of a Bruce Lee's adversary in a classic martial arts film. The room's subdued light made it hard to focus on the cue, making it that much more deadly. He approached the cowboy trio that remained standing and swung, connecting with the left temple of the goatie on the right. The blood exited the slash in the skin just above his eye.

"It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Captain Concussion," Jimbo said.

"Thanks Jimbo, I thought we were goners," I responded.

Crack!

Blackness prevailed, the absence of light... It's all really blurry from here on out. I recall watching the rest of the ordeal from a worm's eye view. I tried to get up and help but there was nothing I could do. I was like a kid looking through the pane glass window at the candy store with no money to spend, while my two best friends were busy inside biting off way more than they could chew. Jimbo seemed to be doing all right with pool cue in hand, but Sid was being tossed around from one goatie to the next like a hard piece of manure at the state fair's annual cowchip throwing contest. Odds were in the cowboy's favor but Jimbo's fencing was really paying off. Ten gallon hats of various sizes, shapes and colors littered the cool floor that my face rested on.

The Fatfuck was back on his feet and heading for the phone. I guess that Jimbo and Sid must have figured the time had come to vacate the premises before the authorities arrived.

It wouldn't have been the first time that the trio had run into the Kashmere police force that consisted of a sheriff, a half-dozen deputies and a handful of fat-bottomed, lesbian, feminist meter-maids who would rather write up the person who parked too close to a fire hydrant, than call for back-up and arrest the guy ripping off your car stereo.

Anyway, from what I remember and from what's been told to me since, they rushed over to me about the time I managed to press myself into the crawling position and helped me to my feet. With one under each of my arms for support, we scurried towards the nearest exit as fast as the load of my weight and our intoxication would allow us to go.

The cowboys seemed to be doing the same and it seemed that though the brawl was over, instead of being enemies we had united with just one purpose in mind, to get the fuck out of there before the cops arrived.

It must have looked like the running of the bulls in Madrid with the Fatfuck chasing after us yelling, "You kids get back here!" I don't know why he called us kids because he was just a kid himself. He must have been running the sixty in about seven-two flat. That's seven minutes and two seconds. He was so far behind us that we could of stopped, continued fighting, given him a head start and still have gotten outside before him; but we didn't.

Once outside, the overhead mercury vapor lights pelted us and the pavement with starbursts of light. A breeze rolled off of the river, somewhat relieving the pain from my freshly attained head wounds; combined with just the right amount of alcohol, I knew it would be morning before I felt the final results of the sandblasting my face had taken from some unknown cowboys.

We got into Jimbo's black Ford Bronco, his doberman Lucifer sat in the back seat looking in both directions frantically as if she knew something had gone wrong inside. I climbed over the front seat and into the back.

Her moist coarse tongue swept abrasively over my brow lapping at the crimson blood that refused to clot.

"Luci's kinda hungry, we'd better stop and grab some chow," I said.

"Well, where should we go?" They replied in harmony responding to my statement.

That meant they must have been kinda hungry too. For a college town, Kashmere was lacking any reputable dining establishments. There were places here and there, but Jim was kind of picky because he was on this "five meal a day diet" to sustain his ideal weight. I don't know why he spent the kind of money he did on his body. Why fix something that's not broke? He had always been in great shape and didn't need some nutritionist to tell him so. I remember the summer

of our junior year when he came back from basic training one lean, mean, fighting machine. That's for sure. I never saw anyone kick as many asses in one school year as Jim did when we were seniors.

"Earth to Dylan, come in Dylan, over," Sid said.

"So where are we going, Dyl?" Jim questioned.

"How about the Greasy Spoon, at this time of night, they'll serve Luci,".

"Oh, fuck my diet, hashbrowns and gravy here I come," Jim yelled as he accelerated down the flat, back stretch of the gravel road at the base of the hill on which the college sat.

Lucifer was done licking now and sat her head down on my lap. I massaged her neck while she scratched her belly contently.

She fell deep to sleep.

Coyote Ugly

By

Jim Miller

Roy hurried, if dragging one leg and hopping on the other could be called hurrying. He could hear the wheels of Cecelia's car crushing the frozen scoria rock. Half-way across the driveway was as far as he made it before Cec's car turned the corner into their drive. Cec angrily threw the door open, flashing Roy the standard "you idiot" look, "What do you think you're doing, Roy?" Cec shouted as she watched him limp across the driveway of their country home.

"What's it look like, Cec? I'm going huntin'. Jesus, there's only three days of season left. The bucks are rutting. Running crazed. I won't even get out of the truck. I'm lightin' out."

"Oh, that's great. You can't walk, you can't work, you can barely drive, but you can hunt?!! Christ, Roy, what are you thinking? At least take the boy. Josh could help if you get in trouble. What if you get stuck?" Cec slammed her door. The metal collision cut the cold November air.

"I gotta do this, Cec. You just don't understand," Roy cringed as he awkwardly climbed into the vehicle, pulling his swollen left knee into a flexed position and setting his foot on the clutch.

He reached over and shut the door, wincing as the pain shot across his back, Yeah, she's right. They're all right. I'm a cripple. Why don't I just admit it? Roy thought. He glanced down at the old pump rifle and self-doubt turned to resolve. Fuck it, fuck them, I'm not dead, not yet! He started the old truck up, letting it roll backward, ignoring Cec's glare. Roy gauged his turn onto the road by the garbage can rack. Damn good thing I've done that a thousand times, Roy thought, If I'd had to turn my head I'd a been screwed. Habit, that's all. Some things I can still do by habit. I'll be all right.

Roy followed the scoria road out to the highway. As he drove along he half sang, half hummed the words to Simon and Garfunkel's song "Cecelia." The wheels of the old truck sent knife-like shards of brittle scoria slicing into the drifts which lined the road. Jesus, what if I get a flat? I'm about as worthless as tits on a boar, Roy thought as he watched a piece of scoria fly ditchward.

As he approached the turnoff to the highway he noticed one of the local power company trucks in the ditch. Better see what they're up to. If we lost our lights, Cec and the kids would need me to get the furnace lit manually. Shit, Cec'd be bowling anyway. That's become an all night affair. Better check.

Reaching down, he pulled the lever on the four wheel transfer case into 4 high. As the truck left the road Roy gave her the goose and burst through the thicker snow plow left ridge, bouncing across the ditch bottom, pulling alongside the REC truck. Roy's friend's and co-workers Tom and Jeff Rolfsrud glanced back from their work. Seeing it was Roy, they finished pulling the elbow connector off the white phase and then put it on a parking stand. Completing this, they walked over toward Roy. As Tom put the eight foot insulated stick into its bin in the line truck, Jeff walked over, pulling the heavy rubber gloves off. Blowing into his hands, Jeff asked, "Headin' to Willesville, Roy? Doctor's appointment?"

"Naw, just seeing if I could still drive," Roy answered as he partially covered the rifle, "Carsons lost their lights again, huh?"

By then Tom had joined his brother, "Yeah, must be those splices by Skarud's again. The locating truck can't be here for a couple hours. Not much we can do till then."

Roy stared into the switching cabinet. A thought struck him. "Only white phase is out, right?"

"Yeah," Jeff said, furrowing his eyebrows.

"If you'd go up to that cabinet by that water well take-off pole and park the white cable there, you could throw that two-way feed in over by Denny's and everyone would be back on," Roy directed, all the while wondering to himself why they hadn't thought of it. Somebody should have known. Realizing Tom and Jeff had no idea what he was talking about, Roy asked, "Did you guys get a hold of Jerry?"

"We couldn't. He must be in the bar, or fishing. We tried everyone. No one with a home radio is around. I hate this underground cable. Is that the old cabinet with the weird front, Roy?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah, right. The one where we changed the broken anchor this summer, you know, Tom."

"OK, gotcha. We don't have to mess with anything else then, right?"

"No, that'd be it. The locator wouldn't need to come until tomorrow, either. Kinda cold to be splicing underground cable anyway. Oh, yeah, you guys be aware that white phase'll still be hot up there. Those motors at the pumping station will be putting backfeed on the line. Use your gloves and stick. See ya!" Roy rolled the window up and pulled away.

As he turned onto the highway he saw the line truck cross behind him in the mirror. This place is goin' to hell. No one with a radio on for us. That's wrong! For them, you can't do those things anymore Roy, you worthless shithead. Oh, screw it. Go huntin'. If things get worse at the rate they've been going, in a week it'll take a forklift just to get me out of bed.

Each bump in the frozen black asphalt sent darts of pain through the hard tires into Roy's body. He struggled getting the cap off the bottle of anti-inflammatories as he clutched a Diet Coke between his legs. He threw two of the pills into his mouth, and attempted to wash them down, spilling the coke on his chin. As the pop ran down his neck, Roy's face tightened. Damn! I can't even tip my head to drink. And what the hell's it matter if I drink diet pop for anyway? Bein' thin don't mean squat when you're in a frickin' wheel chair. Roy tossed the can to the floor. Angry splashes hit the sidewalk as it quickly froze on bare cold metal.

Where to go? Roy wondered. Highway #1. Nobody'll have been in there, I'll bet. With destination decided, Roy opened his jacket, letting the warmth of the truck heater drift in. Roy knew it would be a minimum of an hour on the asphalt before he got to what he considered prime habitat. As he crossed the flat snow covered landscape, the thoughts flowed in: what would he do for work? Would he ever physically be able to do any of the things he'd taken for granted? The hunting, fishing, running, swimming, basketball with his son, bike rides with his daughter? What about Cec? Could their already shaky relationship withstand this? Would he ever make love with her again?

Roy wondered, was it the town? Rudville never has had shit going for it. Poor farmland, poor business location, poor everything really. Except for the oil boom this place has always sucked. Boomtown. Roy knew he shouldn't have been surprised. But like a million others he'd held too long to the hope of things getting better, prices going up.

They weren't, though. He knew that. And so did everyone else.

When a whole town worries about tomorrow, a knife like division occurs. Between those who still have it, and those who've lost it. And they want company for their misery. With Main Street dominated by bars, and no other entertainment, company is easy to find. And Roy was often some of the best company Rudville had ever had.

Little goddamn wonder Cec stays out if I'm in, he thought. There's a lot more to this than payback. She should stay away from me. All I ever do is bitch about my job, this town, this whole frickin' life. Goddamn, why didn't I get while the gettin was good? Christ, I've really mucked this thing up. Suddenly, too late, Roy saw the first antelope jump onto the road. Her feet whirled beneath her as Roy slammed the brake down, sliding on the black, icy road. Sliding sideways, the truck passed several does, narrowly missing them, their eyes huge.

The herd, perhaps fifty head, had piled up, and rather than stay in any sort of line as they approached the highway, they strung themselves along the road side; fear kept them from crossing. Once the lead doe had decided to make a break, a mass exodus began. And Roy slid through them. Out of control. Roy flung the wheel about, desperately seeking some control. His left leg, stiffened with inactivity, made it impossible for him to reach the clutch. The truck slowed as it plowed through the snow of the road's shoulder. Groups of antelope jumped clear as it began to crab-hop, then again slide. Caught in high gear, the truck lurched across the highway, coming to rest pointed downhill to the ditch bottom.

Roy's hands gripped the wheel, white knuckled. Shifting himself cautiously, Roy tried various movements, wincing with each muscular contraction. As he tilted his head back, the antelope stood facing him. Loose snow drifted across between them as they stood staring blankly. As one, the antelope spun, churning up a mini-snow blanket. Ghost like apparitions. Suddenly gone.

Roy lifted his leg onto the clutch pedal, and painfully pushed it down. As he turned his head to check for traffic, there, in the middle of the ditch, blown clear of snow, lay an antelope buck. At first Roy felt he'd killed it, but quickly realized it had been dead for some time. The animal had been partially eaten, its rear end and guts a hollow cavity, coyote bait. Roy glanced at the antelope's head, twisted impossibly. The sockets were deep, empty of eyes. Shuddering, Roy rammed the truck back onto the road. "Christ," he winced to himself. Sure a lot of hollow shit around here. All the friends now gone. All the professionalism at work, gone. And me, a laborer without a body. Hollow within hollow within hollow. Shit, it's like if I put a pin in just the right place, all of this would just collapse, wither and die. And we'd all be better for it. Just start the whole shitaree over.

Mad now, his careless driving having almost caused him or the antelope harm, Roy slowed some. He had only a short way to go before farmland and treeless prairie gave way to the rugged terrain of the Badlands. Like the flick of a light switch. That's how Roy described to himself this change of terrain. One minute you're riding along in the real world, the next you're in the caverns of the crazies. Where the hell did that come from? "Caverns of the Crazies. Getting pretty bizarre, Roy."

Roy glanced quickly up and down the facing slope of the Little Missouri as it snaked its way eastward, becoming darker until finally the green cedar pockets blended together, becoming one mass of distant black. He marveled as the earth dropped away from him. Deep cedar filled canyons paralleled the road, both twisting, helter-skelter. Roy could see stretches of the Little Missouri from here. Winding through the canyon, the river divided the country like a serrated edge knife. Even though early afternoon, the sky was winter pink, the sun hung low, and threatened to disappear at any moment. This is good, Roy thought, so many different views, each butte a world of its own, each minute, just the way the sun hits changes everything. Not like home, not flat and boring and dead, not one monotonous burnt dusty brown-yellow. And no wind, no tumble weeds running constantly past, no garbage blown into fences, no snow sandblasting you every time you step out. Sure is easy to tell you drop into the Badlands, easy to tell this place is carved. Yep, its like Mother Nature tired of the sameness of the prairie so She created the Badlands.

Roy turned off the highway onto a well - graveled road. As he putted up the trail, a diesel tanker lumbered over the hill, its Jake brake shattering the quiet of the truck. Looking up, Roy realized the driver was his neighbor, Norman Kostenko. Waving, Norm slowed only enough to make the corner at the highway, "In a hurry, that's Norm." Roy thought aloud. Another example of dreams gone awry, Norm had been drawn to the area in pursuit of the huge salaries experienced rig hands could pull down. Like a hundred others, he'd thought he was doing the right thing when he'd purchased the home across from Roy's. But now, with no rigs in the area, Norm felt lucky just to have this job hauling crude. "Poor son of a bitch, I haven't seen him home for a week."

Norm hadn't been. To make ends meet he needed to get lots of hours. And that meant double and sometimes triple shifts. His house payments alone, based on the inflated market of boom days, sucked up salary like a Hoover. He oughta head back to the farm, thought Roy, at least there he's broke around people who love him."

Arriving at the well site at road-end, Roy pulled his clutch leg into position, letting his leg straighten back out and depressed the clutch. Locking the truck into the 4 low position and putting the transmission into third gear, Roy headed onto the trail called #1. How the hell they ever named this trail is beyond me, Roy wondered as he was jostled side to side, the wheels of the truck slipping into the long worn ruts. That's better. Damn near be able to let my hands loose.

Roy bobbed along, letting the truck idle in its low gear range in a tank-like crawl. "Like some frickin' snow tortoise, that's what you are," Roy said as he patted the dash of his old truck. "Not too pretty to look at, but you sure have been good to me, haven't you? Jesus, talkin' to the truck again. Bad enough you have a running dialogue in your head. To say nothing of the stories, fantasies really. Christ Roy, Walter Mitty ain't got a thing on you. Ha!" Roy finished.

A movement caught Roy's eye. All he'd seen was a flash. Gassing the truck to the next high knoll, Roy timed his ascent and killed the truck motor. Reaching over, he grabbed the rifle in one hand, the door handle in the other, "Oh shit, oh dear, I'd just hate for a big boy to step out about right...now!" Roy said sarcastically. The first deer to appear was a doe, then another and another. Like waifs, they gathered on the facing hillside. Ignoring Roy, the does looked back into the trees. Several minutes passed. The does statuesque. He saw more movement at the tree line and yet another doe emerged. Her sides heaving, tongue hanging out, she trotted toward her companions. Close behind came the buck. Heavy neck, heavier gait, everything just plain heavier. Except for the thing Roy most wanted. Crap, spindly racked bastard. Doesn't even know I'm here. Oh, well. Good place to start. Roy thought as he threw the keys under the seat and pushed the door open. At the sound, the does snapped their heads up looking at him for a second until an older, bigger doe bee-lined over the ridge. Single file, like a planned pack string, the does went up and over, each deer glancing constantly back except the buck. "His nose is so tight on her ass, they'd be an eight legged critter if that estrus doe slammed on the brakes." laughed Roy, as he pulled his Carhart jacket collar tight and donned leather gloves and wool hat. Swinging his legs out, Roy slid off the seat, wincing as he hit the ground.

"Oh, man, that hurts." Roy's first ten steps were hell. The cold hit him. Hit him hard. Wow, this ain't good. Maybe I'll just make this ridgeline and watch for a minute or two, Roy thought as he pushed upward. Each step through the foot deep snow brought more perspiration, until by the top of the ridge, his forehead, beard and mustache were ice-encrusted. Hunkering on the lee side of a large sentinel - like outcropping, Roy let the warmth of the sun bathe him. But it wasn't enough. Ain't gonna last long here, that's certain. Good place though, Roy mused hopefully.

A flock of magpies swooped down a distant hillside, their white feathered parts highlighted against the dark cedars. Seems like every time I see magpies a coyote turns up, Roy thought. They're both kinda magic. Now you see 'em, now you don't. Before Roy had finished his thoughts a yelp and a howl sounded from a distant ridge. As if on command a dozen more coyotes joined in. Or were there really just a couple? Roy always thought there were more than the tracks showed. They must be ventriloquists. Or magic.

Roy's practiced eye quickly picked up the departing group of does and the small buck. Already almost a mile way, they moved with purpose. Wonder where the hell they think they're going? Shifting his attention Roy quickly glassed the more obvious spots, concentrating only on hillside tops the wind blew over, toward him. "That's where the big boys always are, where they can watch you coming downwind or smell you trying to sneak from behind. Oh, oh there you are!"

A round form, not deer like, but out of place, appeared as a black dot in the crystal white snow. A mile away, Roy knew he'd have to get closer just to determine sex. Gotta be a buck, probably big too - alone like that. Biding his time till dark. That's what a big buck does. No standing around in broad day light, acting like some goofy love struck kid. Yep, cookie to a cat turd, he's a big one. Roy scanned the area, between him and the deer lay a series of ridges. On a snowless day, to a healthy man, it was a huge effort to get there by dark. To Roy, impossible. But he could see, if he stayed on the ridge tops, he'd be able to get within a quarter mile. A long shot, but his only chance. The only thing wrong with the plan was the deer could see him the entire way, "You old bastard, you'll wait until I'm just about there, won't you? To hell with it, I gotta try."

Raising himself by flipping to his stomach and crabbing his hands to his feet, Roy got into an upright stance. As he glanced down at his rifle, a bone, or rather a bone-end, protruded from the undercut of the large rock. Roy stood staring, then shuddered. "Time to get moving. Kinda chilly anyway."

Roy moved off, shuffling downhill. Goddamn legs are worse. Maybe they'll loosen up some as I go, he hoped. But they didn't. In fact they grew worse, Roy's knees swelled with fluid. One quarter mile was all it took for Roy to realize he couldn't go on. Standing on a narrow ledge, Roy tried to determine if the deer was a buck. By then the buck, if it was one, lay in shadow. The cedar pockets now jet black, the snow of the hillside facing Roy gray. Sun's sinking quick. I'd better get going. Maybe I shoulda shot that little bugger, Roy considered, as he hurried along.

As Roy turned to leave, a coyote streaked across the divide Roy stood on. Without thought, the rifle came up, swinging to the next place the coyote would be exposed. As the gray blur entered the scope Roy instinctively swung the barrel past, snapping the trigger as daylight appeared between crosshair and coyote.

BOOM! So loud! So violent! So, so, so gone! "Jesus, did I shoot? Why? Weird. So goddamned loud. Where's the noise? Where's the coyote?" Roy shuffled quickly to where he thought he'd shot at the coyote. Glancing quickly around, Roy re-encapsulated the shot. The swing was good. The trigger pull hadn't been jerked. Damn coyote should be here somewhere. A tear drop shaped spot of blood stained the pure clean snow. Thought so. Why'd I do that? They ain't worth squat and I have no business dragging his carcass out of here anyway. Asshole, Roy!

A cedar obscured the hillside the coyote had been running toward. Roy moved around it, paying more attention to the hill, as each step gave more exposure, than to his closeness to cliff edge. More movement! Roy stepped clear of the cedar; now the coyote could be seen, dragging itself down the canyon wall, crashing into sage brush, spinning and yelping, leaving a blood-stained wake. The coyote was not in view long enough for another shot. Roy had to get just a few steps closer to the edge. Oblivious to the pain, Roy stepped quickly to the edge. An innocent move, even if he'd have been thinking Roy would never have seen what the snow hid. As he threw the rifle to his shoulder, the shale ledge collapsed. Legs buckled beneath him, Roy slid knees forward, lying on his back, feet at his sides. As Roy desperately dug his hands in, the rifle slid behind him. There was no stopping Roy's slide. The bentonite clay slick under the new snow. As he slid down his side of the narrow canyon, the coyote slid down the opposite side. Roy screamed. Tendons ripped. Coyote yipped. Paralyzed. Spine smashed.

And so they came to rest at canyon bottom. Coyote and Man. Separated only by a small sage brush gully. Ten yards at most.

Each struggled initially. Coyote trying to pull himself around, blocked by brush and crushed bone. Roy vainly attempting to somehow get his legs straightened out. But the struggle didn't last long.

Roy and coyote sat staring at each other. "We're both screwed, you know," Roy said.

The coyote blinked.

More staring, as pain induced nausea swept over man and beast, "Hurt bad? You're bleeding good. Won't be long. Maybe I can help," Roy spoke softly.

The coyote blinked and lowered itself from his sitting position.

Roy reached behind him, as he lay on his back, feeling the stock of the old rifle. Slowly, carefully, so as not to lose it in the gully, Roy slid the rifle toward him. Finally a firm grip and Roy clutched the stock and barrel, swinging it over his head, "I'll just be a second. Gotta make sure the barrel's clean. This dying business is frightening, isn't it?"

The coyote lay his head on his front paws.

Glancing around, Roy could see the slide trail they'd left, "Long way up with no legs."

The coyote raised his head. Blood dripped from his mouth.

"Strange life, huh? You and me in the caverns of the crazies."

The coyote whined, struggling to hold his head up. Unsuccessful.

BOOM! So loud! So violent! So, So gone!

The coyote blinked.

And crimson stain filled canyon walls.

Tastes Like Chicken

By

Troy E. Riveland

The almost full moon gave the surrounding hills and fields and the gravel road a white glow. My shadow, dark and blue, was my only companion. The gravel crackled quietly under my heels as I strolled along.

The chirp and croak of many frogs filled the warm summer night. I even saw one hopping its frog hop down the middle of the road. It stopped once, raised its hind leg and shook it. It did the same with its other leg and continued its course down the road. It was a curious looking spectacle, this frog and its seemingly purposeful journey down the road so I followed closely behind.

The frogsong had been growing in volume and it now drowned out all other sound. I stopped walking and concernedly looked for some cause of the amphibian uproar.

That's when I felt something bump into my ankle.

"Waah!" I blurted as my body jerked involuntarily of surprise and fright.

I turned around and assumed the Karate Kid Crane Stance, ready to disassemble my would be attacker.

Something at my feet caught my eye. It was a frog. Apparently unmoved by my manly display, it hopped through my legs and down the road. I turned and watched its froggy butt bounce away.

"That little smart ass," I muttered to myself.

I ran after it to extract a little punishment.

"Dance amphibian!" I choked as I tried to step on the jumping target.

My inability to connect with the frog angered me. I swung my leg mightily, missed, and fell on my ass.

Humbled, I stared after my hapless would be victim. I stood up and dusted off and then continued after the two journeyfrogs.

It wasn't long before we were joined by several more frogs all equally intent on some destination down the road. My hopping companions became more and more a curiosity as the migration continued.

As I followed along their numbers increased and so did their pace. I began to jog along to keep up with the marathon of funny green creatures. I heard a dull snapping as my foot happened upon one of the slower ones.

Their numbers increased to such an extent that the road ceased to exist and a wavy sea of amphibians took its place. Running in their midst I began to laugh as frogs tumbled over one another, bounced off my legs, crunched under my feet, and still they continued their frenzied convoy. Their pace was such that I had to run as fast as I could to keep up.

Then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. I skidded to a halt mashing several more of the frogs in the process. Along with their hopping, so did their chirping stop. All I could hear was the beating of my heart and the heavy of my breathing.

I looked at the road around me. About a quarter mile in either direction the road was choked with frogs. They all faced one direction. A million bulgy eyes seemed to be focusing on a boggy piece of land by the road.

I squinted at the watery slough looking for some reason for the gathering of the frogregation. All I could perceive was mud and weeds. A watery rotten egg smell drifted to me from it and I crinkled my nose in disgust.

The frogs about me remained perfectly still and silent as they stared toward the bog.

That's when the ground began to make noises. A mucky, sucking, watery, slurpy sound came from in front of me. And then for a moment I thought I felt the ground shake. I looked down at my feet only to see a mass of green bodies and shiny eyes.

I looked back to the mire in front of me and something did not seem right. The muddy ground began to bulge not even fifty feet away. Clumps of ground and weeds plopped to the ground as some object began to force itself to the surface. My jaw fell open as I watched the spectacle.

Whatever was coming out, it was big and nothing was going to stop it. It continued to grow out of the earth tearing its way to freedom. The main body of the thing was maybe forty feet in width and eighty feet tall with two small extremities hanging from the side. Then the body separated into two large columns and it stopped growing. Mud and earth slid from the monstrosity and fell with a plunk.

I began to realize that what I was looking at was the granddaddy biggest frog in the world. My jaw dropped further as I craned my neck and looked at the head of the monster.

Two glossy football sized eyes blinked open. The mouth opened up and then closed slowly. It was a big mouth. The kind of mouth you could fit a love seat and two teenagers into. It opened again and from it came a deep guttural moise, sounding like anyone's uncle burping up beer. It lasted about five seconds. It was loud and unnatural and it shook both my body and mind.

I felt a light frog spittal mist settle upon my upturned face. I wiped the moisture from my cheeks and watched as the colossus began to sink into the ground. Within a minute it had returned to its home in the muck. The earth was ripped and scarred in its wake.

The frogitude stirred to life and began to leave the scene. I stood and watched their departure. Soon the only evidence of their gathering was the few squashed frog carcasses courtesy of me.

I meandered my way back to my house pondering the night's events as they weren't your normal night's events. I de-

cided the only proper course of action was to sleep on it.

I dreamt of frogs.

The next morning over breakfast I decided to go to town and discuss the happening with the town elders.

Stepping outside into the morning sun, I scanned my yard for any possible visitors. The only green was that of the grass. I stepped into my truck and started off to town.

Passing the scene of last night's event, I viewed the torn and muddy bog. It had not disappeared overnight.

I turned onto the highway. All was well. The cows ate the grass and wind whistled into my window. I began to doubt myself, although I could not recall consuming any alcohol or mind altering drugs that might explain the possibility of a hallucination.

The road sign I had seen a thousand times told me it was only ten more miles to Sweet Filbert.

It was over the next hill when I saw another frog. It, like its brother the night before, journeyed down the middle of the road.

I felt a rush up my spine as I passed it. My body tightened as I approached the next rise.

The road appeared clear as I topped the hill. Realizing that I was holding my breath I released it. My heart jumped about in my chest thumping in anger at my anxiety.

What would frogs be doing in Sweet Filbert anyway? The bingo parlor had recently been decorated in what I was told was a rather crazy shade of mauve, but I doubt that that could hold any interest for anyone with webbed feet.

It was maybe three miles later when I saw a few more. They moved mindlessly down the road intent on what lay ahead.

The few became a few more. And the few more became many as I neared Sweet Filbert. About a mile outside of town the road and the countryside were no more. The sea of amphibians was again at high tide.

Then I saw something that really surprised me. They had taken out the power lines. The power pole lay dead by the road, its cables snapped and now bleeding electricity. The swarm had concentrated on the pole and they piled three feet deep on top of it, a mass of legs and bodies. They looked like ants feeding on a discarded weiner. Any frog that was happened upon by the spitting cables was instantly sent reeling through the air, fried and dead.

I had slowed my truck down to a crawl since maintaining control was difficult over this new road condition!

I passed the sign proclaiming my arrival at Sweet Filbert, Population: 203. I thought that perhaps the number might be a little off today.

I drove down the frog infested Main Street and parked in front of Rick's Gas Station and Country Store as the lettering on the window announced. Two wrinkled faces peered out at me. One of them moved from the window and reappeared at the front door. It opened a crack and a voice yelled to me.

"Hey Jim! You're going to have to run for it! I'll open the door for you! Move fast, they almost took off Art's leg."

I looked from my door to the station door. It was, in my estimation, thirty feet of frog hell.

"Don't think about it. Just move fast!" The voice yelled.

Obviously that was my problem. I was thinking about it. Not having read the book of frog etiquette, I did not know how to react in this situation.

Giving it no more thought, I ran.

I burst through the front door and intelligently stated, "I made it."

That's when Art decided to attack me. He was a small, white haired man coming at me with his cane raised above his head.

I only had time to raise my hands above my head. I felt a painful blow on my shin and I fell over.

"Die, you little bastard!" I heard Art yodel as his cane came down on my leg again. I looked down and saw the reason for his actions. Hanging from my pants, mouth first was a frog.

On the third try, Art was successful in bludgeoning the creature. An eyeball popped from its head and landed on my arm. Gagging, I wiped it off, as an old man beat a frog to death between my legs. When he finished, there was a sticky mass of blood and frogskin on the floor.

Rick helped me to my feet and set me down at a table by the front window. He was your typical greasy gas station guy with hands that always seem dirty and a smile that was always ready.

"Well, this sure ain't something you see every day," He said. "I wonder what riled their feathers. You know, I never really trusted frogs in the first place and I'm plumb out of frog repellent wouldn't you know."

He talked fast and in short bursts. It was something you had to get used to. He and Art, still breathing heavy from the kill, joined me at the table.

Our view was of the street and three houses across it. The street swelled with amphibians. They moved about only a little and an occasional one would hop through the air like a fish jumping from the water.

The house to the left belonged to Edith Snodgrass. She lived alone with her dog. Her home was bright blue. It looked as if a giant smurf had peed on it. The house in the middle was Mayor Joe's. The house and the hedges around it were military neat, although it looked like some unruly froggrass had sprouted in the yard. To the left was the residence of Mort Smoot. Mort was rarely home due to his profession. He was a traveling vacuum cleaner salesman. It was rumored that Mort had made a fortune selling vacuums and most of the available women in town considered him a good catch.

We sat by the window and stared at the scene before us. An occasional dull thump could be heard as a frog threw its body against the window and fell back to the ground.

The *Sweet Filbert Times*, usually the topic of conversation, sat unopened on the table. It proclaimed that Pearl Mitty had won the bake contest and she didn't know what to do with the fifty dollars of prize money. A dilemma no doubt.

I picked it up and paged through. "Waste disposal talks to continue." "The Rodmans were expecting guests this weekend." "Nadine's Beauty Shop promises to frog your hair for free with any perm." "Bill Schmidt plans to visit his daughter in Oregon."

"Hold your corn. I think we got a bingo," said Rick as he stood up and stared out the window. "It's Edith, I think she's taking that damn dog for a walk."

I looked to her door. She stood still as the frogs began to converge on her. Her dog Roscoe, a ridiculous puff of black

fur, was jumping about her feet.

The dog was the first to go. It quickly dissolved beneath the first wave of amphibians. Edith bent over reaching for her lost companion and fell to the ground. The frogs moved in and Edith was no more. By the time the mass of green bodies had diluted, all that remained was Roscoe's pink dog collar and a ball of tangled white hair.

"I never knew Edith wore a wig," said Art as he pressed his face to the window. "I guess the moral of the story is to look out your window before you take your dog for a walk."

The impromptu feeding frenzy excited the frogs and they hopped about haphazardly.

"Looky over there. It's Joe," Rick stated pointing to Joe's house.

We could see his face floating in a window. His mouth was contorted as he yelled a silent yell to us. His fists were beating on the window.

The frogs took this as some sort of signal and they began to swarm to his house. They climbed over one another and threw themselves at the walls. More and more of them piled up against the side of the house.

Joe's home slowly began to disappear as the frogs mounted up around it. The last we saw of him was his fist beating the window before it was swallowed by the sea of green.

And they would not stop. Soon the top of the house was gone and in its place was a squirming hill of frogs. It grew to a height of maybe sixty feet before it toppled over, an avalanche of amphibians.

The pile began to fall apart and I strained my eyes for a glimpse of Joe's house.

It was gone. They had eaten it like a hungry man eats a doughnut.

That's when the frogs left Sweet Filbert. Their mission, if there was one, had been accomplished. They left the town through Main Street. Within five minutes they were gone.

We stood in the street and looked at the carnage around us. Frog bodies lay randomly about, some of them kicking their last kick. Two trails of crimson and green led up to the tires of my truck.

"Well, that's something you don't see everyday," said Rick as he stomped a wiggling frog. "What about this mess? What do we do about that?"

"Haven't you ever eaten frog legs?" questioned Art.

Burning Clean

By

Judith Swartz

Snakes. My greatest fear. I watch the video, scrunched up in the velvet armchair as Indiana Jones pours gas on the asps in the tomb and sets them afire. The movie is taking me back to Richie's snakes in Oregon. His pets, he called them. Mom let him keep them in an old tin washtub with a piece of old screen over them. They got out one day, and for nights afterward, I shriveled myself under the covers, afraid they might be clustered at the foot of my bed. My mind knew they were only garter snakes, incapable of doing me any harm, but my fears kept me the victim Richie needed for his devilment. I am now getting close to 40 years old and I'm once again curled up in the fetal position. Raiders. Snakes. Fire.

It's 1950 all over again. I am twelve. I have survived Richie for six years, but his days are numbered. Know why? He's a monster. He did it again. Went through my dresser drawers and found my diary, the little black one Mom gave me for my eleventh birthday. Brought it into the living room and read about how Jimmy Watson kissed me at the Halloween party. Read it right in front of a room full of relatives who were here for Easter. I hate him. His big brown eyes that Mom thinks are so beautiful look at everybody in the room, specially me, as he reads in his fakey girl voice -- about my secret, magic first kiss. I wanted to die. Actually I wanted him to die. The relatives tittered and said things like someday he'll make an actor. Mom smiled and thought it was really kinda funny and hoped I'd understand. I hated her too for awhile. Him and his big brown Eddie Cantor eyes! I'd like to poke'em out! That'd slow 'im down some.

You see, he's really too smart for his own good. He read before he started school, walked at nine months, ran at ten months. "Such a bright child." I heard it so often it made me want to puke. He's the only boy, the middle button, so Mom says he needs special understanding. His father isn't here, so life is more difficult for him. Not as difficult as he deserves, I used to say under my breath.

I didn't know how much of this demon child I could stand, so I started dreaming up ways to get rid of him. Send him to live with Aunt Margaret in Tacoma. She loves everybody. "Oh, for Pete's sake, he's your brother, your own flesh and blood. You'd miss him. And you know that," Mom brushed off my suggestion. But when I said we should adopt him out, after he destroyed my Betty doll's body, just to get the squeaker out of it to use for a mouth organ, she gave me a lecture on families and told me to tell my evil thoughts in Confession the next time I went. I knew right then and there no matter how hard the nuns worked with me, I'd never be a saint, not as long as Richie was my brother. Being burned at the stake or shot full of arrows was a breeze, compared to living with the most obnoxious brat in the world. I knew, too, I'd never forgive him for wetting on me all the times we had to sleep together during the winter months, when my upstairs bedroom was too cold. He just laughed like a hyena every time it happened.

Just think of how peaceful life would be without him. No more diary readings, no more wrestling matches where I got pinned -- and bitten, to add to the insult. No more running to get him from play to supper. He'd always run away from me and when I finally caught him and held him handlocked, he'd sink to his knees and crawl home that way, making me look like a bully. To make matters worse, I overheard his teacher telling Mom this spring those tests he took say he's some sort of genius level. I get good grades, but I have to study hard, specially in math. Course that's easy as pie for Superbrat Richie. Come to think of it, I even hate his brains!

He thinks he's so smart. Really, he's a sneak. One afternoon last summer he disappeared. Mom called and called. She even sent me out to look for him. I stayed gone long enough for her to think I'd searched the neighborhood. We all came up empty handed. I was beginning to feel pretty good about my prospects. Life without the brat, the killer kid. Sweet and smooth as strawberry ice cream. Mom was wringing her hands again, then wrapping her arms around herself. "Where can that boy be? Does he know how much he worries us?"

Speak for yourself, Mom, I thought to myself. I, Frances Elizabeth O'Connor, hope he never shows up. You can afford to care about a monster like that. He's got a rap sheet only a mother could forgive. I imagined life without Richie and smiled big. In the middle of my happy daydream, I thought I heard a snicker, an all too familiar snicker. It got louder and louder till we all heard that fake laugh that sounded like a gagging dog. Pooperman had scrunched his boney body up in the grape arbor next door just to get everybody running around like dummies to find him. Mom ran to his rescue. By the time she got over Finlay's fence, he leaped like a cockroach onto the ground below. In seconds, Mom had him wrapped up in her freckled arms and was kissing his sweaty forehead. I stood in our yard and glared him dead. Great Grandma O'Donovan coulda put a curse on him, if she was still alive. I'd heard lots about that woman's fits. Once she beat a dog to death, just cause he barked too much. Think of what she could do to Beastie Brown Eyes, if she ever got going! Him and his stupid blue bathrobe, the only Superman costume his crude mind could dream up. He'd stand on a kitchen chair and leap into the air, yelling, "I'm Superman! I'm Superman!" And I'd yell over his voice, "Pooperman! Pooperman!" And the chase was on. He'd sometimes trap me at one of the parlor doors and start kicking my shins in. If Grandma O'Donovan was here, I'd have her nail his feet to the floor.

I wouldn't really, but it's fun to think of him hurting as much as I've hurt after a fight with him. But, you know, funny thing, there was one time when I did get a little scared for him. I had some ugly pictures in my head about how he might look after being run over by a Studebaker at Third and Taylor. That was the time he disappeared after church one Sunday and was gone for hours and hours. That time I actually did go on the hunt for him, mostly because Mom was so worried about him and I didn't much like it when I saw her eyes look hurt and teary. We never did find him. Instead a policeman

brought him home near eleven o'clock that night. All he had on was his Sunday shirt and J.C. Penney jockey shorts. No shoes, no socks, no cords. Lots of goosebumps. Turned out he and his buddy Louie had spent the day at the Willamette River chasing minnows and crabs and losing their clothes. I almost felt kinda sorry for him, especially after the policeman left. Mom hugged him. And then she surprised the heck out of me, but for sure, Richie, when she whipped his butt. I think that's the only time I've ever seen him cry. Probly because he didn't see it coming. The surprise musta got to him.

But the next day he was back to his ornery self, chasing me with his stupid snakes, trying to stuff 'em down the back of my dress. Yucky things. I hated them as much as I hated Richie.

Now, remember, I told you a while back that Mom wouldn't consider shipping him off to Tacoma, even for the summer. So it appeared I'd have to start my own plans to get him any way I could. I thought about putting an ad in the paper, offering him up for adoption to some childless couple. But I had to abandon that when I counted the coins in my jewelry box. I could save up to buy an ad, but till then I'd have to find some way to put the "Devil" in his place.

My chance came sooner than I expected. Our next door neighbor girl, Barbie Finlay, used to come over and talk with Mom a lot, cause her and her mom weren't getting along too well. My mom was always being kind and good to somebody, and I really loved her for that. But in my brother's case, love musta blinded her common sense. Love somebody as hateful and obnoxious as Richie? Impossible!

Well, anyway, Barbie was crying on Mom's shoulder about how tough her biology class at Girls Poly (short for Polytechnic--I was thinking I'd go there, too, cause there were bound to be more boys like Richie and I sure as heck didn't want to spend high school with 'em). But back to Barbie's problem. The worst part of it was having to cut up critters. Like snakes. If she could just practice doing it, so she could pull it off for real in class. Like snakes? LIKE SNAKES! I had it. If this wasn't luck, I don't know what you'd call it.

When Barbie left for home, I found some dumb excuse to go out front, too. I just sorta tagged along as she climbed over the rail of the front porch and slid herself into her mom's flower patch. "Um, Barbie, I got an idea, that might help out with your biology course."

"Yeah, like what?" "Well, I think I can get you a snake to practice on. My brother's got bunches of 'em"

"Maybe it'd work. I hate like hell to touch those slimey things, but I gotta get used to it or I'll flunk that damn course."

You could tell right away that Barbie was a public school kid. I'd have to watch out for that language if I went to Girls Poly. But Barbie was really wrong about the snakes. They weren't slimey at all. I knew that from feeling them next to my skin. Thanks to Richie, I knew that for sure. But back to Barbie -- and her problem and my great idea.

"You bring your tools and I'll get the snake. How about tomorrow night after supper?" In the meantime I had a selling job to do. Convince Richie how important a contribution to science he'd make by letting Barbie practice on one of his creatures. Convince him we'd sew the snake back up and it'd be just fine. He was only seven, but he was smart. But he was curious, too, about how things looked on the inside. The windup tractor he got for Christmas last year was in a hundred and seventy-three and a half pieces by evening -- just cause he wanted to see what made it run. The same thing happened to my bedroom clock a few months ago. I finally had to throw out the whole pile of springs and screws.

Now when I saw him out by his snake tub, I called him to the back porch and talked fast--talked snakes. I made the loan of a snake to Barbie sound like adventure, a great scientific experiment--and he bought it! Hot dog! He bought it!

The next night came and we set up our lab on Barbie's back porch. She had all the stuff, and she said she knew just what to do. I sure hoped she wasn't gonna faint, like she said she did in the lab at school. She was really tryin' to be brave. First she dropped the snake into a jar of rubbing alcohol till it fell asleep. Then she hooked the limp thing out of the jar and laid it out straight on the cardboard on its back. She started to slit it open near the hole on its belly with her razor blade and pin back the skin and stuff. When she got to the swollen part, she found a long bulge about the size of a fat green bean. "Oh, my god!" Barbie squealed. "It's a she and she's pregnant!"

Richie's big brown eyes got even bigger. Any second now, I'd see tears and then he'd scream and probably attack Barbie. He was moving in even closer to get a good look at the snake and her babies. I just knew he'd be scared for them.

"Wow! Do I know how to pick 'em or what? Lemme look!" He shoved me to the side and watched while Barbie sliced the long, gooey sack out of the snake. He grabbed it with the eyebrow tweezers to study it up close and then started taking it apart. Teeny, tiny baby snakes wriggled out every which direction. "Geez, there's zillions of 'em. I can have snakes forever."

"Richie, I only count twelve," I said, trying to throw a wet blanket on his excitement. "And besides that, what are you gonna feed 'em?" Richie was having entirely too much fun for my satisfaction. He was supposed to be having a nervous breakdown or at least a tantrum, and here he was on Cloud Nine.

"Their mom'll feed 'em," he said. I was just about to tell him that Momma Snake had by now gone to Snake Heaven. You see, the best part of this whole scheme was that at least the first of Richie's snakes was going to die. I couldn't think of a better toy of his to destroy than those slithery things. But the darn snake just multiplied and Richie was in heaven himself. He just took off for home and ran back in seconds -- with a pint jar to put the snakelets in to take 'em home and show 'em to Mom.

Barbie plopped down into a wicker chair. It creaked. She sighed. "Well, I did it and I didn't die. Just maybe I'll pass that damn course." At least somebody got something out of it.

Richie was on a high till the babies started dying, one by one, the whole dozen. Then he went out to hunt for more pregnant snakes. It was spring and he found them, including a momma with already born babies. He and his snakes were taking over my world. He'd just ruined my latest plan to rub him out. I had to find a way to get him. He deserved it for that bite in my butt he gave me the day we crawled through the knee hole of the desk, playing train. It stung and it bled and I had to sit crooked for a long time afterwards. I could still feel it and knowing he got spanked for it didn't help any, cause he just wouldn't cry. I wanted to see him caught off guard, like I was the day I had to scoop up the mountain of eight jigsaw puzzles he dumped on the dining room table. He needed paying back for the day he taunted me into chasing him and then dodged me, so I ran smack into the dining room door and got my first black eye. Back to the drawing board. This time I had to think really hard.

I managed to come up with ideas like answering the ad in the Oregonian from a California couple looking for an older

child to adopt. But I was afraid Mom would know right away that I did it since I'd already suggested the adoption idea. I even thought about volunteering myself to go stay with Aunt Margaret for the summer, just to get away from Richie, but there was too much other good stuff I'd miss with Jenny. I spent days thinking about this. I even did a novena (that's nine days of special prayers, in case you're an uncatholic) for an idea. Then it hit me on one of those clear days I was staring out my bedroom window at Mt. Hood, my mountain, the one I shaped all my ice cream cones into. If Mom wants Richie to do something, she tells him to do the opposite. I think she calls it reverse psychology. It just might work. I'd have to do the opposite of what he expected me to do. Surprise him. That sounds easier than it really was. Remember, Richie was a clever, clever kid. I needed all my wits for this one. I needed a plan that would give me some power. All day I thought about it. That night I even dreamed about it - and of course, there were the dream snakes everywhere, too, including the foot of my bed. No wonder I slept curled up in a ball. Oh, yuck, snakes did that in winter, too, I just remembered. You know, one thing I could do this fall would be to pour rubbing alcohol over his whole tub of snakes some night and in the morning he'd find 'em all dead. But for sure, he'd know I did it and then he'd just beat up on me or worse. No, I needed something that would be forever or almost. Back to that stuff about the reverse psychology.

The next morning after Cheerios and strawberries, I asked Richie to show me his snakes. He squiggled up his forehead and pointed his finger straight at me. "YOU want to see my SNAKES? Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I'm curious to see how many, how big. You know, just see them."

"Well, if you really mean it."

Mom shot a sideways warning glance at me and started to raise her pointing finger at me.

"Yeah, I really mean it."

Mom had the most suspicious look on her face. I tried to pretend I didn't see it, as Richie and I pushed ourselves away from the oilclothed kitchen table, took our bowls to the sink, poured the leftover milk in Middy's catdish and marched out to the backyard to the snake tub and Richie's pets. We stood and looked through the screen for a few minutes and I asked what their names were. Dunaway, after the park where he found it; Sleeky, Snakey, Slither and on and on with no imagination till he came to one that didn't have a name yet. Actually it made no sense at all to me, because I couldn't see how he could tell one from the other. They all looked alike, with their grey and black and white stripes. But I decided it would be the no name one.

I took a very deep breath, so deep I almost choked. I knew Mom was watching from the kitchen window, prepared for war to break out any minute. I planted my sandals firmly on the brown clay, said a prayer to St. Jude (the patron saint of hopeless cases) and asked in my bravest ever voice, "Could I hold it?" Not ever, even when Barbie was cutting that momma snake open, did I ever see Richie's brown eyes look so big.

"YOU want to HOLD it? YOU?" He started to laugh that gagging dog laugh again, but stopped when I said with a serious look on my face, "Yes, I do. I mean it." This called for the most self-control in the world. The years with the nuns had helped after all. He backed away from me, pointing and frowning. "No, not you, Franny. Girls don't touch snakes."

"Well, I want to, and if you aren't going to get it out for me, I'll have to do it myself." I don't know where the words and all the false courage were coming from, but I was actually doing it. I was beginning to reel him in. To this day, I don't know where I ever, ever got the nerve to do it. Maybe the survival instinct is so strong we do whatever we have to to make it.

He returned to the tub, lifted the screen and picked up "no name" just back of the jaws and let it wrap the rest of its body around his wrist. The next moment was mine. "Show me how to hold it." Mind over matter, teeth locked tight, I reached out my right hand and slowly wrapped my fingers around the sleek, scaley neck. Almost there, girl. Don't faint. It was now wrapping itself around MY wrist. I could feel its cool body. Its belly was smooth like leather. I took it in my left hand and let it coil around my lower arm. It was probably a foot or more long and it flicked its forked tongue at the air a time or two. As I let it wind itself from one hand to the other, I felt the tightness in my own body. My brother was silent. I wasn't as afraid as when I started. After what I thought was time enough for such a brave deed, I turned to Richie and suggested we name the snake Einstein.

Richie's mouth hung open for a long time. When he finally realized I was serious, he pulled his chin in to his chest and said, "Einstein's a great name. He's probly the smartest snake in the whole bunch anyways, aren't ya, Einstein?"

I put Einstein back in his tub and he slithered quickly under a rock. I wondered if I'd remember which one he was the next time. I guessed I'd probably leave this identification junk to Richie. "Thanks, Richie. I'll be back to see Einstein later."

I left him there next to his snake cage, as quiet as I'd ever seen him in his whole seven years. His head tilted to one side and he had a puzzled frown on his face.

I kept up the act as long as Richie had snakes around. Actually I did get used to them. From that day on, the day we named Einstein, Richie never put snakes down the back of my dress again. In fact, he sort of let up on me. The fights got fewer and fewer. I quit calling him Pooperman, and one day I overheard him telling his friend Tony, who was trying to get something going, "No use chasin' Franny with snakes anymore. She'd just turn around and take 'em away from us and play with 'em herself."

Wherever the courage came from all those years ago, I have no idea. But it worked, at least for awhile. That is, until today, years removed from Einstein and the tin tub of serpents. Suddenly now in 1985 I sit watching the asps in the fire. I'm all scrunched up again. The fear is real. Mind over matter. Einstein. Millions of Einsteins. I can handle it. Get a grip on yourself, Frances. It's only a movie. No, snakes are snakes. Garters, asps, who cares! Burn, babies, burn! Richie can't help you now!

Friedhof

By

Michele Williams

I have never seen heaven nor spoken with God, yet certain am I of the spot.
Emily Dickinson

Her brilliant green eyes blazed like a jewel that is perched in a setting of pitch burned ashes. Although her eyes spoke a million blades of summer grass, she, herself said nothing.

The house was still. Megan, her tiny body perched on the foot of her bed, breathed steadily. Her dark chestnut curls tumbled and twirled in sleepy disheveled chaos. Dreams had again disrupted her young mind's rest and so, once more she sat at the foot of her bed figuring the vision's meanings and finally wishing them away.

How, she wondered, did she dream dreams about a man she had never met? Megan had dreamt these dreams for a few months now. While her grandmother, mother, and sister slept on through the night, Megan tossed and turned, figured and wished.

The man, Megan's father, had died just two months after she had been born. She had always wondered about the man who had made her conception reality. To her that was all he really was: the man who had created her. In her mind, he was as mysterious as God himself. She knew what he looked like, but beyond that he was just a figment of her imagination, more so lately than ever before.

As Megan had gotten older she began to ask a few questions about her father. The questions were answered, but that was all. No deep discussions, no stories to tell, just "Yes honey," "No, Honey," and "Well, Dear, he was a nice man." End of discussion.

But, now Megan had started dreaming about her father, and the urge to know became greater than the need to wet a parched desert throat. At night, following the dreams, was the time when that need was so full that her whole body seemed to swell. The unanswered questions surged through her like water through a flooded river bed. The white waters of energy surged up reaching for answers to the questions only to tumble back to the river unanswered.

All of this was going on in her mind, yet only her eyes showed the energy that burned from her heart.

Yesterday had been the last day of school, summer break had begun, and Megan, promoted to 6th grader, now had more time to ponder her nightly visions.

In tonight's dream her father was at a park. It was summer. He was pushing a little girl on the swings. The girl's dark hair flew back as she swung high and away from the father, and fluttered back into her face as she fell back to the father's push. Her feet pointed stiffly aiming at the sun. Her smile was broad showing two missing front teeth.

A thought drifted into the dream. It seemed to be set against the background, barely noticeable, falling from the sky like a breathless rain, pittering and sinking into the soil. The voice of the thought was warm with a mixture of sadness and gentle remembrance. It said, "I miss you, Daddy."

At that point, Megan woke, confused....feeling like an invader of privacy. That thought had not been hers. If it had not been hers, whose was it? Thoughts like that had never drifted into these dreams before, so subtly, yet there. But that was not what had startled her so. The voice of the thought....she recognized it. She sat still at the foot of her bed, rapidly thinking, shifting through voices she knew.

Megan sat as she had for the last 15 minutes, retracing the bits and pieces of the dream, trying to catch the voice. "I miss you, Daddy."

Megan twitched. "Karen," she whispered. The little girl on the swing was Megan's older sister Karen.

Megan was still again, her eyes wild and brilliant. She had dreamt her sister's dream. Slowly, Megan stood and went to her door. She opened it quietly and slipped down the hall to Karen's room. Carefully opening the door, she stepped into the room. Karen was curled up in a ball with her back to Megan. Megan sat on the floor beside Karen's bed with her legs crossed. She stared at the back of Karen's head and waited. She thought of the dream she'd had tonight, but couldn't remember it. All that remained of the dream was "I miss you, Daddy." Megan concentrated on those words, repeating them in her mind. Again her small body became relaxed; this time her eyes drifted shut.

Behind her lids she saw a shoe box, then another, and another. There were about a dozen shoe boxes stacked neatly in rows. On the ends each was labeled. One was labeled SCHOOL, another labeled BEACH, and another labeled DADDY.

Megan focused hard on the box labeled DADDY. The lid began to lift off by itself. Megan was amazed. She had wished and imagined the lid coming off and it did. As the lid opened, pictures and papers fluttered out. They curled and floated through the air, drifting to the floor in a snow of paper. Megan followed the clutter, her focus getting closer to a picture that rested on the top of the pile.

When Megan realized the picture was of a girl being pushed in a swing by a man, her eyes flew open. The boxes were gone. She was in Karen's room, and Karen was still asleep. Megan slowly rose and left Karen's room.

When the door clicked shut, Karen rolled over and looked through the darkness at the door. She lay there, silently thinking, until she fell asleep again.

The next morning Megan awoke late. Karen and her mother had already left for work, so she was alone with her grandmother.

The grandmother moved weakly about the kitchen, fixing herself a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Grandmother," Megan said, her eyes twinkling like morning dew on the tips of spring grass. Her grandmother was one of her favorite people. She was the one person who had the time to speak to her for longer than a few minutes.

"Hello, Sweetheart. Up late this morning, aren't you?" asked the grandmother.

"No more school," Megan said as she began to shake Rice Crispies into a bowl. Between pouring Crispies and pouring milk she took the grandmother's mug of coffee to the table and helped her to a chair. When Megan's breakfast was fixed she sat across from the grandmother. Megan took a few bites of her cereal, then looked carefully at the grandmother.

"Grandmother," she began cautiously, "was my daddy a good man?"

The grandmother nodded as she took a sip of her coffee. "A good man, yes."

"What was he like?"

The grandmother looked at Megan a moment, her eyes watery and red rimmed. She sighed, a sigh that shook her entire fragile frame. "He was nice, considerate, and harmless. He loved your mother dearly and you and your sister, too."

Megan wasn't satisfied. She wanted to know more. "Tell me more, Grandmother. Please, I'd like to know."

Megan's grandmother frowned.

"What won't you tell me?" Megan spoke again.

"He was a good man, Megan. He loved many people dearly. He was a lovable man...he was wonderful...he deserved so much more, Honey....please believe that," the grandmother said softly yet urgently.

Megan bit her bottom lip until it turned white and began to burn. Then she just sucked on it. What was Megan supposed to think if nobody told her anything about her father. Instead of pursuing it any further, Megan decided to wait until the grandmother took her nap. She would wait until then to see if should could dream the grandmother's dreams.

The grandmother lay down about 2 o'clock in her bedroom. When Megan was sure the grandmother was asleep, Megan slipped into the grandmother's room. Again she sat on the floor like an Indian and slowly began to relax. Her arms and legs went limp first, then her neck, the muscles in her face drooped, and finally her eye lids softly drifted over her sunny green eyes. Her breathing was gentle and deep.

Behind her eyes Megan saw a movie projector with a screen set up before it. White light was flashing on the screen. Every few seconds a picture flashed on the screen, but not long enough for Megan to tell what it was. Each time a picture came on the screen it was a few seconds longer until finally Megan began to see what the image was.

The first thing Megan could catch before the screen went white was a boy. He was about twelve years old. Next she could see he was holding something. Finally the picture stayed up on the screen long enough for Megan to take it all in. The boy was holding a baseball card. The expression on his face was confusion.

Another picture flashed on the screen. This time there were two different boys. They were standing behind a bush, hunkered over, giggling, holding three or four baseball cards.

A voice floated into the dream.... "He was so gullible...." The voice drifted off. Megan opened her eyes and left the room.

That night Megan stayed awake until well past midnight. Her mother's dreams were the next dreams she wanted to see. She lay in bed staring at the ceiling and listening to the wind whistle around the corners of the house. The house itself creaked and whined in response. A storm was coming on.

Just as lightning began to flicker and cast shaky shadows about the house, Megan tiptoed down the hall to her mother's room. Thunder rolled and Megan wondered if her mother might wake up. But, she wanted to know...she had to know.

The door to her mother's room was open. Lightning flashed through the living room through the doorway to the hall. It flashed twice, then faded. Megan could see her mother well enough from the door, so sat in its frame. When she was relaxed, which now only took seconds, she focused on her mother's face, the only part of her mother's body that could be seen from around the corner of the dresser by the door.

Megan's eyes fell shut. At first she only saw darkness. Then she saw a small rectangular light coming toward her. It was bright and clean. She could feel a cool breeze barely brushing her cheeks.

As the light came closer, it enveloped Megan's entire line of vision. She tried blinking it away, until her eyes adjusted, but soon there were many lights, dimmed and focused on other things away from Megan. Megan noticed that the rectangular light had been a doorway leading to a hall. The lights hung above pictures hanging on the wall. Megan looked at each picture as she passed. Megan recognized a few of the portraits. There was her mother as a little girl, her Aunt Ruth, the grandmother when she was just a mother....so many pictures.

The next picture was on the right. Her mother stood in a beautiful white lacey gown. Her father was in a black tux. They both looked elegant...but the picture was faded.

Megan moved on. The next picture was of her father holding Karen. The baby was screaming and her father looked very bewildered. The next picture was dark and hazy. Megan's mother was pregnant, standing in a kitchen crying. Her father stood in the background, again confused and bewildered. Then the picture started to move, like a film. Leaving the kitchen the picture went outside and stopped at a FOR SALE sign with a big red SOLD sign across it.

Megan didn't understand this. She only remembered living in the house they were in now and didn't remember anyone

else saying anything about another house.

There was another picture of an auction and then one of her father's funeral. There were many people at the funeral; very few were of people Megan knew. After a few moments of looking at the picture the people began to move and Megan began to hear voices. "The poor man never knew what he was getting into." "Well, at least he won't make anymore mistakes." "He was so nice and lovable." "He deserved so much more." "His family deserves so much more."

Megan didn't want to hear anymore. She opened her eyes and the pictures were gone. Her mother was still asleep, and all Megan could hear was the pitter patter of rain.

The next day Megan woke early and rode her bike to the grave yard where her father was buried. The sun sparkled on the dewy grass and reflected off the puddles of rain water. The sky was blue and there were only a scattered few white puffy clouds.

Peddling faster Megan became more tense. She was hoping that her father would be able to speak to her like the grandmother in *I Ought to be in Pictures* did to her granddaughter.

Finally Megan came over the hill and down below the grave yard spread out before her. She rode her bike through the paths until she came to her father's grave. She dumped her bike in a bush, and cautiously walked up to the grave. She sat in the wet grass ignoring the fact that her pants were becoming soaked and mud was seeping through.

She stared at the lettering in the gray granite. PETER WELLING. Megan relaxed slower than usual. Finally, though, her eyes closed. She saw nothing, just pitch blackness. She waited. It was so quiet and peaceful. She could feel the sun warming her back. But she still concentrated on the words PETER WELLING. She repeated the name over and over until it began to sound like an echo. When the echo faded another sound began to reverberate through her mind. It was a whisper. The whisper began to take the shape of words.

"I.....love yooooou.....Megan," the whisper said. Megan's heart raced as she tried to stay relaxed. She managed and the whispers continued. "I'll see you in heaven," it said, then disappeared. Megan tried to hear it again, but it was gone. When she opened her eyes it was sprinkling. The drops were cool and tender as they landed on her arms and face. Megan sat there unmoving, thinking of the whisper. "I'll see you in heaven....." Megan smiled, bowed her head, and whispered, "Yes, I'll see you in heaven."



I Remember Her Shoes

By Marcie Gallagher

Kathy stood in front of the cooler with its doors open. The cool air was escaping into the warm flower shop as she tried to decide between yellow or peach.

"The peach," she said to herself as she took it out of the cooler.

"Why would I buy a yellow rose, I hate yellow."

Kathy bought the rose and decided to get the visit over with. She would be leaving town tomorrow to start a new job and she had one more place to go before her conscious would let her go. She hadn't been there in at least ten years.

Kathy went out to her car, she hadn't been to that cemetery in quite a while, but the direction there was something that she would never forget.

As she came up to the top of the last hill before her turn, Kathy eased on the brake and slowed down for the turn which made its way between two pillars of stone. The car slowly made its way through the dark paved paths. Stopping alongside the curving road, Kathy rolled down her window and proceeded to finish her cigarette. The paper made a slight hiss as she sucked the life out of it with each drag. She let the smoke fill her chest, heaviness overwhelmed her and closing her eyes, tilted her head back to rest. Kathy turned off the idling car and sat motionless as though in a trance but nothing filled her mind. The dead silence came in and overcame Kathy until a bird's chirp broke the hold it had on her. It was sunny and green but granite and marble shot out from the ground in rows. The sea of gray had many different shapes and sizes yet they all seemed to have their own glittering beauty.

Kathy grabbed the rose which lay on the passenger seat of the car. She took it with her as she got out of the driver's seat and leaned against the door to latch it.

"The third cottonwood on the crest of the hill marks the spot," Kathy thought. As she walked towards the tree, her efforts felt mechanical. She couldn't hear her footsteps but felt each strand of grass collapse under the weight of her body. The cottonwood grew larger with the distance closing in until it loomed over her as she stood in its cool, comforting shade.

Now the hunks of marble have now been replaced by small blocks of concrete laid into the ground. Some of these markers display full names while others only offer the name baby in front of the surname. Kathy glances past these to find the right one. Her sister's marker has a full name, not just baby. Tears well up in Kathy's eyes as she kneels down to lay the peach rose across her marker.

"Well Christie, they say time is a healer but I haven't felt the benefits. Sixteen years and inside I'm still as ugly as the thorns on your rose." Kathy swallowed hard as she remembered.

"I remember her shoes. They were white sandals she wore throughout that summer when her feet would swell so badly that she couldn't wear anything else. I was three when she wore them and didn't understand why. But then when I was three I didn't understand much. Now I know that she was pregnant with you. I understand now why we didn't get to know you and why you weren't brought home, why we wouldn't get to see your first tooth or your first steps. You know my first memory is mom's sandals. When your sisters and I were watching cartoons grandpa came in and told us the news. I can't remember what he said, but they all started to cry so I did too. Somehow I knew something had gone wrong.

I remember being held by aunt Faye at your funeral and asking her if I could see you. But as she held me under this tree she told me that you were in heaven with Jesus and not really in the ground. You were probably watching us, wishing we weren't so sad since you were happy where you were. I remember hearing that you had blonde hair and blue eyes, just like me. I'll never forget that. It's one of the only things I know about you, and ever will know about you. Grandma put away all of the baby things before mom came home from the hospital and from then on nothing was really ever mentioned. Maybe if everyone wouldn't have shut up like a clam I could deal with my feelings better. Maybe I would be able to deal with this whole thing better instead of pretending that it never happened or that it never bothered me. But all I know is my baby sister was an overdue baby born still. Something could have been done and should have been done but the doctors didn't induce labor even when mom was a month overdue. She remembers feeling the void when you died inside of her. We all still feel a void. You would be sixteen today. You'd have your license and would be in high school. What would you think of me? Would you still look like me? I wish I could see what you would look like now, but I guess that's a wasted dream."

The bulb of the rose is perfect and as it lays on the marker it taunts Kathy. The word that echoes through her head is why. It is the question that will never go away. She reaches for the thorns and her mouth is filled with sour saliva. Sickness surges through Kathy and she fights to suppress it. She reaches for the rose and places her thumb on the stem and runs her forefinger against a single thorn. The waves build inside of her but as the hint of a prick is felt, she becomes subdued.

Still holding the rose, her knee is hit. As Kathy looks down the tears in her eyes run over and down her face. One tear drops and mixes with the drop of blood from her finger.

"God I miss you."

Perspective by Clint Fleckenstein

Cliff Daring awoke to a sunbeam blasting through his window and into his face. The shock of the potent morning sunlight hitting his still dreary eyes sliced through his sluggish brain like the sound of shattering glass. The cheery sun, shining through the window, stared him down in a second, as if it were trying to physically haul his groggy body out of bed. He saved it the trouble.

Sitting up in the pastel silk covers, Cliff searched the cold wooden floor with his bare feet, finding his slippers. Grabbing the ears of the bunnies with his toes, he hauled them up to the warmth of the bed to install them on his feet.

Staggering down the steep wooden steps into the kitchen, Cliff grabbed a recycled cardboard box of Rainforest Crunch, no milk necessary, and poured himself a tall glass of organically grown citrus drink from the energy-saving refrigerator. Digging under the scattered pile of National Geographic, Greenpeace, PETA, and Audubon literature on the kitchen table, he located the television remote. Several clicks without result indicated that the batteries had expired, ready to be taken to the local recycling center. Just as well, Cliff thought, walking over to the television and turning it on by hand.

"This is the Politically Correct Channel," the talking head on the screen stated. "Stay tuned for the conclusion of our Walden Pond special. At the top of the hour, new terminological updates, recycling tips, New Age News, and fashion advice. Be the most correct on your block with the new environmentally conscious Earthtone fashions!" Cliff could hardly wait. He rushed upstairs, his robe trailing through the air behind him, to grab his Plax, toothbrush, and biodegradable baking soda toothpaste. As he bolted downstairs he remembered that his lucky crystal, fabled to bring huge pectoral muscles to the wearer, was on his nightstand. Another sprint to the bedroom to grab his crystal, and he was ready.

Once back in the kitchen, Cliff slapped his U2 Achtung Baby into the CD player and stripped to his boxers. Pulling his non-plastic, environmentally safe exercise mat from the closet, Cliff sat down the minimum safe distance of six feet from the television for a quick round of health-conscious exercise. His wiry, non-artificially-tanned body tweaked in all possible directions as he followed his daily Yoga routine. Finally, a few minutes of Tai Chi Chih, and the daily update was on.

The non-tan, makeup free face of the female gendered anchorperson filled the screen with important news. "For those of you in the Minneapolis area, there will be a protest demonstration in front of the Hormel Chili plant today at 2:00 pm Central Time. Help us stop the senseless killing of our fellow earth creatures by throwing yourselves by the dozens in front of the shipping trucks. We will stop the delivery of this murderous product regardless of consequence! Terminology Update is next, following this word from Psychics-R-Us." Cliff grabbed his File-O-Facts (the kind without the leather cover) from the counter, utilizing the commercial tie to jot a quick memo on the recycled paper so he would not forget.

"And now for the new terminology. This supplements any terms you have been using to stamp out discrimination and segregation in our society." Cliff watched the list go by on his screen, dutifully copying each entry into the list of his own:

Meter Maid-	Parking Enforcement Adjudicator
Post Man-	Post Person
Mail Man-	Person Person
Old Person-	Gerontologically Advanced
Bald-	Camb-free
Convict-	Socially separated
Blind-	visually challenged
Woman-	vaginal American
	Person of Gender
African-American-	Person of Color
Dead Person-	Person of Odor
	metabolically challenged
White-	Pigmentally challenged
Tall/short-	Altitudinally advantaged/disadvantaged

Making a note of each of the entries, Cliff put away the File-O-Facts and started brushing while watching the rest of his morning update.

"And now, for the list of misconceptions. These are common mistakes in society which we must take upon ourselves to stamp out. Cows like giving us their milk. Mules diving into tanks of water is entertainment. Jell-O is not made from horses' hooves. Greenpeace is a militant organization. Vegetarians are hypocrites. The world will survive with or without human intervention. All lesbians are large and hairy. Breaking into animal testing laboratories is a crime. It is not the right of human beings to take the task of saving Earth into their own hands. Pot should be illegal. Granola is squirrel food. Volkswagens are funny looking. And finally, pounding spikes into trees in logging areas is dangerous. Just remember to mark them well. We'll have more for you tomorrow at this time." Cliff could hardly wait.

Rinsing with a correctly small amount of softened water, Cliff then dashed upstairs to shower. He whistled John Lennon's "Imagine" as he scrubbed himself with soap and shampoo which were not tested on animals.

Cliff dressed quickly, anxious to get to his 9:45 with his therapist. He believed that in order to be truly politically correct, as well as to be fashionable, one must have a therapist. And his would be waiting for him in twenty minutes.

Cliff stepped out into the open air, locking the door of his brownstone behind him. He had his iridium UV-protectant polarized sight-enhancing sunglasses with, which not only protected his eyes; they also allowed him to spot people and objects which needed to be corrected, as well as other politically incorrect behavior. Another of Cliff's beliefs was the duty of every politically correct person to enlighten everyone else as to their offensive and discriminatory ways.

He grabbed his energy-conserving bicycle and headed down the sidewalk towards the med district. The wastefulness and pollutiveness of taxi cabs, combined with a nasty encounter with a linguistically challenged driver of foreign nationality, had convinced Cliff that perhaps self-propulsion was the best mode of travel. Strapping on his styrofoam helmet, Cliff hoped that no one he knew would see. While protective headgear is a must when operating any two wheeled vehicle, styrofoam will be around after all of God's little creatures are extinct, and Cliff wanted no part of such a legacy. Safety, however, came first.

Stopping at a busy intersection, Cliff made a disapproving noise deep in his throat as he watched all of the pollution-mobiles screaming by at excessive speeds, their drivers cooped up like little sardines. Certainly he'd never be in such a situation! As he prepared to cross, Cliff heard a voice behind him.

"Say, that's a really nice bike. Would you like me to take you for a ride?" Cliff's head whipped around, only to see a scantily clad, sexually gratuitous person of gender. Her leopard skin tights made his skin crawl. Cliff was so flustered by her tackiness that he fled, pumping the pedals with all of his might. Hopefully that wouldn't happen again! He longed for a day when everyone was politically correct. Such encounters would be decidedly more pleasant.

Cliff spotted two residentially disadvantaged people lying on the benches in his favorite park. Cliff stopped to provide assistance, his heart filled with pity. "Excuse me. I'd like to help out. Would you each like five dollars with which to buy a good hot meal?"

One of the poor things looked up, his face darkening. "Look, you sissy, you don't have to feel pity for us. Keep your money, get back on your thousand dollar bike, and go make a difference in somebody else's life. Can't you leave anyone alone? Cripes." With that, the unenlightened soul pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. So it goes, Cliff figured. Not all people are aware of what a good world this could be.

Pulling up beside the small brick office, Cliff locked his bike frame to the light post in front of the foyer. He was relieved to find a person of gender and color working at the front desk; one must practice affirmative action in order to be politically correct. "Cliff Daring, 9:45." "Okay, Cameron will be right with you." It was nice to have a therapist who used his first name. Cliff took a seat and grabbed a Vegetarian Times from the magazine table in front of him.

As his mind wandered from his magazine, Cliff spied a plaque on the wall ahead of him which read: "In order to forge a cosmic accord of unprecedented unity and harmony, the Politically Correct Movement demands that all people, regardless of prior social preconditioning, must accept the incipient world order that will offer unlimited bliss and contentment. Damnit."

-Prof. Dr. Skippy "Tiang-Min" Whitmore
Berkeley, CA, 1965

"Cliff Daring, come on in," his therapist called. Cliff set down his magazine, remembering the page number of the tofu taco salad recipe, and followed Cameron back to the office. Once inside he reclined in the huge non-leather couch, sitting opposite his therapist.

"What's up with Cliff today?"

"Well, I'm kinda lost with the Politically Correct thing lately, and I need some questions answered."

"Well, that's what I'm here for. What kind of questions?"

"Well, I'm a quote-unquote white male. How can I possibly be politically correct, after what my ancestors did to the

slaves? "

"That's easy. You can be politically correct. You just have to feel really, really guilty. See, you're not entirely forgiven for the crimes of thousands of white men before you, but you're almost on a probation of sorts. In fact, in any sort of conflict, the white person is always wrong. That way, we'll eventually make up for the horrors perpetrated by our forefathers. Does that clear it up at all?"

"Like glass, I guess. One other thing. I really like steak, but am forced by my beliefs to be a vegetarian. Yet I see certain animals being killed regardless of PC beliefs. How can this be?"

"That, too, is easy. It's not acceptable to kill a bunny. A cute little bunny. It is, however, acceptable to kill things that are not cute, like cockroaches and rats. The amount of guilt you should feel for hurting one of nature's little creatures is directly proportional to its cuteness. Easy enough?"

"I suppose so. I've got all the non-offensive terms right here in my File-O-Facts, but somehow the concepts escape me. We have new words for people who are black, Indian, oriental, etc. So we don't judge people on their race, right?"

"Right. We judge them on where their ancestors are from. See, if they (and thus you) are from Africa or Asia, you should be recognized as such. Unless they're white South Africans, for example. They don't count. People with non-white skin from just about anywhere do though. In fact, they even qualify for special treatment. In fact, possibly even a scholarship or two. It's a great deal. But don't bother if you're German, English, or Russian. Those nationalities don't count."

"Uh....okay. Let me work on this for a while, okay? I'll be back in when I figure this out."

"Sounds good. My secretary, er...receptionist will schedule your next appointment. Until then, carry this card with you...it will help you sort things out." He proffered a little white card made from recycled paper, which Cliff gratefully took. It read:

"The Politically Correct belief is essentially a recognition that people are diversely equal. We rejoice in this equality by treating people differently based on their equal individuality. Hop aboard the bandwagon...be PC. Or you're an intolerant, racist, sexist, insensitive
PIG.

And Cliff was off into the world again on his bicycle, happy to possess an understanding of the way things should be. His body bobbed up and down as he pumped the pedals, bolstered with newfound confidence. He headed out of town to join the protest against the murder of our fellow creatures, the cows, by the Hormel Chili plant.

In order to pass the time, Cliff tagged people with correct terms as he whizzed by. He saw people of color, people of gender, people of nationality, and even some people of stupor, drinking liquor from bottles wrapped in paper bags as they sat near waste disposal units. Cliff had this PC thing knocked.

Cliff spotted about thirty people with signs standing in front of the huge chain link gate. He rejoicingly pumped the pedals harder, confidence instilled in his heart. As he got closer, however, the happy feeling in his heart vanished in an instant; the signs were not as he expected. His eyes, protected from harmful cancer-causing UV rays, were instead assaulted by messages like "PLANT KILLERS GO HOME!", painted in large green letters on the signs of the picketers. How could this be?

Screeching to a stop, Cliff could do no more than gape. "What's going on? Isn't there a protest against the slaughtering?"

A long-haired youth in a Lard t-shirt stepped forward. "There's a protest, alright, but not against slaughtering cows. You veggie boneheads seem to think you're so noble, but you kill plants every day of your lives! You ever think of that?"

Once again, Cliff could do no more than gape. His mind was racing, trying to figure out a correct solution. But there was none. Instead, he could only endure the horrible truth the youth injected into his oblivious mind.

"All you guys are the same. Save the seals, save the dolphins, save the owls, save all the cute critters. Yet every day you slaughter plants, living plants, just as anyone else would slaughter an animal. Plants are alive too! You're such hypocrites, every one of you. We're here to protest that hypocrisy. The rest of your group left a long time ago. Guess they couldn't handle the truth!" His last comment evoked a cheer from the rest of the group. With that, a dejected Cliff turned around and pedalled away, to the delight of the pro-plant protestors.

Just when he thought he had a grip on it all, some guy in a rock t-shirt had ruined it all for him. It was impossible to be perfectly politically correct, now that he realized he was a plant killer! Dazed, he meandered back towards his apartment to brood. But first, maybe just once, he'd stop at the corner bistro for a nice, juicy steak.

Geneses

'Games to play'

By

Brad Alexenko

When thinking up a story, I kind of like to think that it came instantly when I sat down to the computer, but I know that isn't true. In all reality this story has been floating with me for the past six years. I just didn't know how to write it.

Many years ago I came up with the idea that people couldn't be around forever, but I just didn't know why. When I sat down to the computer to write this story, I had a totally different outcome in mind. I had originally planned to have the character, Daniel, wander into the desert and struggle with the elements.

Since I like to type fast, I had made the mistake of capitalizing Death in the beginning and so, in reading over the piece again, I decided to make Death a character. Now instead of Daniel struggling with the elements, he would be running away from Death, literally. It kind of scared me when I finished, but it was a good scared, because it worked.

'The Boys of Kashmere'

By

Royce Barton

'The Boys of Kashmere' is a conglomeration of people and events from my past and present. Collecting bits and pieces of conversation and creating characters was my goal.

The people and places are fictional and any resemblance to the living or dead is purely coincidental. I, the author, am not responsible for their morals or actions.

Thank you. Read on.

'Thy Kingdom Come'

By

Chris Collins

It may sound weird but the idea for this story actually came from a dream. I don't exactly know how since I can't remember exactly what the dream was. But the scariest thing is that I have had a number of my dreams come true.

When looking back at the character of Clayton Manovich, I can see many of his traits in myself. Throughout the writing of this story, I came to really know and like Clayton. It was fun writing 'Thy Kingdom Come' because I never really knew what would happen until I got there; it just sort of flowed. I would sit down with what Man was going to do in the current situation and the story would just blast out of my fingers for a few pages before I got stuck, and then I would just have a cigarette until an idea came to me.

After reading 'Thy Kingdom Come' again, I have really come to like it. I think that it kicks ass and hope you think so too.

'cloistered'

By

JOLYN DOCKTER

'Cloistered' happened because I couldn't forget a letter I got from a friend. The more I thought about the letter, the more I had to write this story. Finally, at someone else's suggestion, I did.

By the way, I do know someone who ran away with the vacuum salesman at thirteen.

'Mona and Mount St. Helens'

By

MARION ENEART

I usually write small essays of children's stories, with very little action and dialogue. But when I get together with family and friends, we entertain each other with, "Remember the time ---?" It finally occurred to me that these yarns would make more interesting reading, if I could get them down on paper.

My friend Mona thinks my life is too dull and serious, so for 35 years she has been shaking me up, finding ways to make me laugh. This is just one of many adventures we have shared, with some fictitious punches.

'Perspective'

By

CLINT FLECKENSTEIN

This story, not really much of a satire, may appear as though I have an ax to grind. That's how it got started, but not how I ended up going through it. I ended up taking him through a normal day and making everything politically correct, in an effort to exaggerate to the point of satire. I don't know if I succeeded, and I certainly had no moral or message intended. It's just a day in the life of some really screwed up guy. Take it as you will.

'Mother's Milk'

By

TADD FRANKLIN

I was working on a completely different story when it evolved into 'Mother's Milk'. It seemed to invade the story that I had planned.

'The Sheriff of Cow----'

By

JOSHUA FREDERICK

'The Sheriff of Cow----' came from long, lazy afternoons of listening to my grandma recounting memories of the "olden days," of a particular son of hers and his uncanny ability to find trouble anywhere and everywhere he went. Unfortunately he's only now beginning to perfect this talent.

'I Remember Her Shoes'

By

Marcie Gallagher

My story deals with a friend's experience. 'I Remember Her Shoes' came about as a way to help her and myself through it.

'Coyote Ugly'

By

Jim Miller

The story 'Coyote Ugly' found its impetus as a result of an accidental fall I took several years ago in the ND Badlands. As I lay there, I imagined myself dying, unable to get out. Obviously, I did get out and using this fall as a starting place, I tried to include other parts of life to create a readable, believable story. The whole thing sort of got away on me as I wrote and the result is this piece.

'Tastes like Chicken'

By

Troy E. Riveland

'Tastes like Chicken' goes back four years. I was a sophomore in high school. The assignment was to write a paragraph using all sensory details. I wrote of the sights, smells, and sounds I experienced walking down a country road at my aunt's. All of a sudden these frogs showed up and this alien frog came out of the sky and burped at them. Where they came from, I have no idea. I did nothing with it until now.
Rock 'n Roll, Baby!

'All on Account of Skeeter'

By

Candace Smith

The class was discussing description one day in short story. My mind drifted off track, and I started daydreaming about my parents' farm and neighbors. One of the neighbors is similar to the character Skeeter. The child narrator idea came from children overhearing things when adults don't think they're listening. I thought it would be a different twist to have a child as a believable authority instead of an adult.

'Bittersweet'

By

Michele Stockert

Have you ever run into someone, an old friend or acquaintance, whom you've not seen for years? That was the origin of 'Bittersweet'. I bumped into an old acquaintance and then recorded some of what had transpired. 'Bittersweet' is an expansion of what happened, and the mixed feelings I got from the brief meeting. It is a thin slice of life. Take it for what it means to you.

*'Burning Clean'**By**Judith Swartz*

'Burning Clean' began as a freewriting at least seven years ago. I'd recently seen Raiders of the Lost Ark and it reminded me of the snakes my kid brother terrorized me with. A couple years later I dug it out, read it in a readers' group and got some appreciative laughter. I decided then to do something more with it, but it took me at least three years to come up with the suitable revenge to complete it, and to my surprise I found it in a real event. I also wanted to write something with an air of humor, since so much of what I write is heavy.

*'Friedhof'**By**Michele Williams*

Dreams are mysterious things. So is death. Megan is a character who is able to explore both.

The title 'Friedhof' is a German word for cemetery. Literally translated the word means "court of peace." The title suits the story to a T as Megan finds peace through others' dreams and her father found peace in death.

The invention of the story is mysterious itself. The author doesn't know where it came from ... it just materialized out of nowhere, out of a day dream. It took some research to actually tie everything together.