

Most of the stories in this issue are set somewhere in the future. "The Bluehole" takes us far into the past, back to that scary time known as 1982 when MTV was young and aliens ruled the box office. Parents and teachers might want to vet this story before sharing it with younger readers.

The Bluehole

By Dale Bailey

THAT WAS THE SUMMER OF '82, a bastard hot summer if there ever was one. Sauls Run sweltered in the crucible of the Reagan recession. "Hungry

Like the Wolf" blasted down the airwaves from WROK, in Princeton, a county of unemployed coal miners away. *E.T.* flickered in the dark at the Lavon Theater on Main Street. Lines stretched around the block well into June. I must have seen that movie half a dozen times.

Mom had been dead just a little over six months by then. Thirty-eight years old, and a stroke dropped her in her tracks while she was wrapping Christmas presents in the spare bedroom. A bleeder, the doctors called it, the worst kind, like you even needed to know that when you'd found your mother laid out on the rug, a square of Christmas paper crumpled across her chest and a rope of saliva leaking out of the corner of her mouth. A bleeder. Like you didn't know that was the worst kind of all. Like you couldn't fucking see.

We buried her the day after Christmas and went home to a houseful of presents. I remember Dad shoving them unopened into plastic garbage

bags and dragging them down to the curb while Chris and I watched from the door. A Mom-shaped black hole had opened in the center of our lives and it sucked everything we'd ever known down into it. "Don't cry, faggot," Chris said, knuckling my head, and after that we subsisted on week-old milk, cold cereal, and silence.

The silence lasted into the spring. Dad spent even off-duty hours in his squad car, patrolling the streets of the Run. Chris took to the pavement as well, skipping school to cruise around in Joey Stratton's beater of a Camaro, drinking Thunderbird and smoking weed. Me? I trudged along the way I always had, keeping my head down at school and pounding out my homework at the kitchen table, the way Mom would have wanted me to. Things got a little better in May. The seventh graders took a field trip to the World's Fair in Knoxville the last week of school. My class shared a bus with some kids from Broadview Junior High, across town, and I kissed a girl on the bus the night we came back. I forgot her name a long time ago, but I still recall the bump in the bridge of her nose and the way her hard little tongue probed at the closed fence of my teeth.

The seventeen-year cicadas emerged in force a month after that, mammoth green insects an inch long or longer, with red eyes and enormous translucent wings. Some mornings I woke to find the yard littered with their husks. They sounded like helicopters when they took flight; their din reached colossal proportions in the heat of the afternoon.

That was the summer I turned thirteen, the summer I smoked pot for the first time, the summer I fell in love with movies and science fiction and rock 'n' roll. That was the summer of the Bluehole, and whatever it was that plied its opaque, fathomless depths. That was the summer Jimmy moved into the house across the street. I think I was half in love with him from the start.

I dreamed of him last night, him and the Bluehole both. I do sometimes. Not as often as you'd think, two or three times most years, I guess. Maybe four. But every cicada summer, twice seventeen years ago now, the visitations grow more frequent, especially as July tips over into August.

In the dreams, the vast expanse of the Bluehole opens like a gray eye before me, the far shore a humid blur, reeds upright in the windless

afternoon. The flat drone of the cicadas booms out of the trees. We are swimming — as we did that day. Jimmy slices the water before me, his arms knifing through the chop. I struggle along behind him as I always do, gasping for breath, doomed by foreknowledge, jaws locked, tongue swollen in my mouth. Then, ahead, the water froths and begins to boil. And something comes. By morning, only the faintest impressions linger: a long shadow arrowing through the depths beneath me, a glimpse of slick black skin, rolling for a heartbeat above the waves. Three nights running, that dream, and I knew it was time to go back. To scramble down through the underbrush to the steaming, mosquito-infested rim of the lake, and there to take a reckoning.

Oddly, what came back to me in that moment of decision is something my second wife said, in the weeks just before our marriage finally came apart. I recall her leaning over the sink, scrubbing her hands raw, her face streaked with tears. “When are you going to accept yourself for what you are, Jeremy?” she said.

But Jimmy came before all that, in a yellow Ryder moving van that pulled up one day late in June at the house across the street. They were all company houses in that neighborhood, built in the twenties when Holland Coal still owned Sauls Run. By ‘82 Holland was long gone, Woolworth’s had replaced the company store, and work in the deep holes was dwindling in the face of mountaintop removal. But the company houses remained, scabrous and gray in the sunlight, grimly uniform: two narrow dormers, a concrete stoop, a front yard the size of a fingernail paring. That was where I saw Jimmy for the first time, a few days after the van departed. He was sitting on the stoop in the shade of a towering oak: a lean, smooth-limbed boy, reading a paperback and smoking Marlboro Reds, methodically snapping off the filters and flipping them into the sparse grass.

I’d been staring at him through a gap in my mother’s curtains for half an hour or so when he set aside the book and came striding purposefully toward my house. He knocked on the door. Sometimes I think everything would have been different, my whole life up to now, if I hadn’t answered that knock. Sometimes I dream about that, too: just turning away and wandering back through the house into the living room, snapping on the television, and letting the bilge of daytime programming wash over me:

Wheel of Fortune and *The Price is Right*. Sometimes I think everything would have been better. Sometimes I know it.

The truth is, I almost did turn away. I felt a faintly voyeuristic embarrassment for one thing. For another he was everything I was not: tall, tan, blond, handsome. The confidence that had propelled him across the cracked, weedy pavement of Maple Street was breathtaking.

But then he knocked again, and this time his voice came through the door as well.

"If you're going to sit there and stare all day, you might as well come outside."

Trapped, I opened the door.

He stood on the stoop, smoking, clad in cut-off blue jeans and black Converse hightops, blond hair tousled over a perfectly symmetrical face. *L.A.M.F.*, his tee shirt read, pink dripping letters scrawled across a field of black, and I remember wondering what the letters stood for.

It was ten o'clock in the morning, the sunlight almost blinding. The heat settled over my shoulders like a sodden blanket. The cicadas were tuning up for the afternoon show. Jimmy took a final drag on his cigarette, pinched the cherry between his fingers, and flipped it into the street. He blew the smoke out through his nostrils. The smell of it brought tears to my eyes. It reminded me of my mom's Virginia Slims — she used to smoke them right there on the stoop, squinting into the fumes as she snapped beans — and a torrent of grief so powerful that I thought I might drown thundered through me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sun got in my eyes."

Jimmy had drifted back toward his own house. We sat side-by-side on his stoop. Music blared through the open window, something raucous and loud and totally alien to me in that month when "Ebony and Ivory" ruled the charts.

"What're you listening to?"

"Dead Boys," he said. He picked up his paperback, creased the spine, and started to read. I crossed my arms over my knees, rested my chin upon them, and gazed out over the yard, letting the raw power of "Sonic Reducer" wash over me. The music's barreling sense of chaos barely under control — not to mention the lyrics, which declared that they didn't need

no “mom and dad” — spoke to me strongly in that summer of rage and loss. I leaned back, letting the fury wash over me. When I finally opened my eyes, a cicada, involute and green, clung to a stalky weed nearby, its abdomen pulsing. The heat summoned shimmering pools out of the pavement. The day smelled of dry grass and smoldering slag. Dad was long gone. Chris would crawl out of his sheets like a troll sometime in the next hour or so; he’d scarf down a bowl of dry Fruit Loops and hit the road with Joey Stratton for another day of sucking down Budweiser — Because U Deserve What Every Individual Should Enjoy Regularly — behind the abandoned mill on Mount Horeb Road. The long day stretched before me. I might wander down to the Woolworth’s and look for a new Robert B. Parker on the spinner rack. Not that I could afford it if I found one. I’d long since exhausted the library’s paltry collection — and I could do little more than steal a few paragraphs at the Woolworth’s before Mr. Kowalski ran me off, jabbing his finger at the sign that said *This Is Not a Library. Please Buy Before You Read*. At four, I’d watch a rerun of *Batman*, and after that an episode of *Battle of the Planets*. Most days I masturbated — with a certainty of impending doom — and then I napped away the restless afternoon.

Jimmy shook two more Marlboros out of the pack and snapped off the filters. He lit up and handed me a cigarette. I took a deep drag and vomited over the side of the stoop.

“Nice,” he said without looking up from his book.

WHAT CAN I TELL YOU of that summer, thirty-four years later? What can anyone say about the past? Memory is the kingdom of deceit, self-serving, colored by desire. I’m forty-seven now, almost half a century of life behind me: two wives and three children, two of whom no longer speak to me; six cars, though I’ve never owned a new one; three novels that sank like stones; more jobs than I care to count, framing houses, tending bar, you name it, whatever it took to make a living while I banged out stories on a Remington manual typewriter, a secondhand IBM Selectra, and almost as many reconditioned Macs as cars. How do you disinter the past and see it for what it is? The summer of 1982 was the golden moment of my life, even if it culminated in a horror that has never quite ended — but what can I really see, or say, beyond the haze of nostalgia?

The soundtrack of that summer still thunders in my ears — Television, the Jam, the Undertones, Jimmy's long row of vinyl. Summer days we used to lie roasting in his bedroom listening to *Blank Generation* and talking about girls. Jimmy was infinitely more knowledgeable than I was. I had my kiss. He had a hand job in the back seat of a '77 Caprice while *Darkness on the Edge of Town* played on the eight-track mounted under the dash.

And I remember the day out on the stoop when he changed the course of my life forever. He handed me a Marlboro with the butt snapped off and a battered paperback copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The smokes will probably kill me — I still snap the filters off and flip them into the street — but the books saved my life. It started with Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect and the Vogon Constructor Fleet, and it went on from there — Silverberg and Bradbury, Simak and Lovecraft, the lights that would illuminate my miserable high-school years. A whole new well of call numbers opened up before me down at the public library, when that went dry, Jimmy taught me the fine art of shoplifting down at the Woolworth's. That's how I sustained my addiction in the years that followed, when Jimmy was gone — *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Sandkings*, *The Day of the Triffids*, two dozen others. I still have them on my shelf at home.

What else?

Summer days down at the pool, where I sat on a towel, my heart clenched with anxiety, while Jimmy disported himself in the water with an expert's abandon. I didn't swim well, and hadn't been in the pool since an incident involving the high dive last summer. Overwhelmed with terror — of the height and of the water below — I'd had to climb back down from the board. Yes, that, plus banging stones off the pitted stop sign at the end of Maple Street. Shooting bottle rockets at eighteen-wheelers on the turnpike. Stealing cigarettes from the gas station vending machines they used to have back then: two quick blows from the flat of Jimmy's hand and a deck of Winstons or Marlboros would rattle down into the tray. He must have shown me how to do that trick a thousand times, but I never mastered it.

And there was the booze, of course. The bottle of MD 20/20 we snagged out of Rodger Dillon's glove box while he and Chris were behind

the high school getting high. The six-pack of Schlitz we lifted from the 7-Eleven. The fifth of vermouth we filched from Jimmy's mom's liquor cabinet. We sucked it down in the patch of scrub behind Loudon's Hardware. Jimmy held it together, but I staggered out of the woods to vomit on the battered dumpster. All fun and games until Old Man Loudon himself put in an appearance. Reeling or not, we scooted. He must have chased us fifty yards down High Street, his face brick-red and his gut swaying, before he turned back, cursing between gasps.

Later that afternoon, Jimmy sprawled sweating across his bed. I sat cross-legged — Indian-style we called it those days — on the floor, still buzzing as we listened to the cicadas and the LP spinning on the stereo just then — *Germfree Adolescents*, by the X-Ray Spex.

I wondered aloud where he'd buy records in Sauls Run — knowing that the limited selection at the Woolworth's would not cater either to his taste or my developing one (on the other hand, if you wanted "Ebony and Ivory," you were in luck).

"Beats the hell out of me," Jimmy said bitterly.

I'd heard the story by then, of course. Jimmy had been dragged back to his mother's home in West Virginia from southern California when his parents divorced. His mother had found work pulling the day shift at the Maidenform plant over in Princeton.

So much for the Pacific, bye-bye to the Buzzcocks, sayonara to the Slits.

The last chords of "Identity" faded. The needle bumped the center of the record; the looming wall of cicada song filled the room. I picked up a copy of *Starlog*: Kurt Russell and *The Thing* were on the cover. We didn't actually see the film until early August, but our anticipation had been thoroughly whetted by mid-July. Between the two of us we'd thumbed that magazine slick. *The hell with that fifties Gunsmoke guy*, Jimmy had said, *this is going to be the real deal*. We'd hunted up a copy of "Who Goes There?" in *The Best of John W. Campbell* in the library. One sentence still sticks with me: MacReady was a bronze man.

So there were a lot of firsts that summer. A lot of beginnings.

But this story's really about endings. I think most stories are. What I really remember about Sauls Run in the summer of '82 is that mom-shaped hole, which occluded everything that had come before it. What I

really remember is the stultifying heat, the din and hum of the cicadas.
What I remember most is the Bluehole.

IT LOOMS LARGE in my memory — another turning of the way — but at the time it was just another late-July morning. Jimmy had pinched ten bucks from his mother's wallet and we blew it playing *Galaga* at Dewey's Arcade on Main Street. Afterward, we scrambled down the overgrown embankment under the great arc of the Stone Bridge. We lounged in the shadow of the bridge, smoking Marlboros as cars rumbled by overhead. The tangle of railroad tracks before us stretched a hundred yards to the other side of the declivity. Every once in a while a freight train, cars loaded with glittering mounds of coal, would rumble by. In between, we talked about music, girls, or the murderous heat. The sun boiled in a flat gray sky, and the underbrush was parched and brown. Jimmy wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of one hand.

Finally, he said, "The hell with this," and climbed to his feet. He struck off west, his sneakers scuffing the gravel. We hiked down the tracks in the blistering noon sun, jumping from crosstie to crosstie, or walking the curving rails side-by-side like tight-rope artists, placing one foot carefully in front of the other, our arms outstretched like wings. Everything was a contest. Who could leap the most crossties? Who could balance the farthest walking the rail?

When we discovered the abandoned caboose on a spur of track that ran down into the tangled woods, I shrank from what we found inside — a cache of damp-swollen men's magazines, a handful of wrinkled condoms, a graying bra draped over the back of a vinyl seat. Jimmy crowed in delight. I wondered what kind of woman left her underclothes behind when she was done. Hell, I wonder that still.

He looked up at me, grinning as he peeled apart the pages of a moldy *Gallery* ("Home of the Girl Next Door") and dangled a mossy centerfold before me. "How'd you like a piece of that, Jeremy?"

"Who knows where that thing has been? C'mon, let's go."

"Don't be a faggot all the time," he said.

But he cast aside the magazine, pushed his way the length of the caboose — I still remember that way he passed through the bars of shadow

and light slanting down through high louvered windows — and out onto the platform at the far end. There, far below us, sparkling like a toxic sapphire through the trees, lay the Bluehole.

The name is misleading, I guess — it suggests an abandoned quarry, something deep and narrow. It was actually a lake, a mile or so wide and three times or more as long, winding through the hollows with great forested massifs climbing to either side. In another time — in a place less stricken by poverty and despair — it might have been developed; instead, trees and brush, a mix of evergreen and stunted oak, bramble and thorn, ran untouched down its steep, rocky shingles. Its waters glimmered an opaque blue; I suppose it must have been irretrievably polluted by run-off from the Holland mines.

But none of that would stop Jimmy.

“Hey, wait up!” I called, but he was already swinging over the platform’s railing. He landed with characteristic grace. I climbed over the railing and set off in pursuit. By the time I’d blundered up behind him, he’d already stripped off his shirt. His upper body was lean and tan, well muscled.

“Care for a swim?” he said, grinning as he unzipped his shorts.

“You can’t,” I gasped, head down, hands on my knees. “You can’t.”

“Sure I can.”

“No, really, you can’t — ”

“Why not?”

He slid down the shorts and stood before me. I swallowed hard. “There are stories.”

I guess there must be stories about any large lake, particularly one as deep and cold as the Bluehole. My father told me the first story, or at least the first one I recall. I was probably four or five years old then, and I suppose he intended it to warn me away from the potential hazards the lake posed. But in later years I would learn that his story of the Bluehole — in some variation or other — was common currency around town. The gist of the tale was that back in the early days of the railroad — this would have been sometime in the 19th century, I guess — the C&O line had run a track down into the water, loaded up obsolete freight cars, and disposed of scrap iron in the hole. How long this went on (or indeed if it went on at

all) I cannot say. But when the war came — the sources disagree on which war — the battle on the home front called for civil engineers to salvage any scrap metal they could lay hands on. So a team of divers deployed to locate the abandoned cars. Anyway, the story goes that the divers never found the cars, of course; worse yet, they never found the bottom. Nor did the divers themselves escape unscathed. One never came back at all. Another spent the rest of his life in the Weston State Hospital for the Insane, raving about monsters. The rest of the divers never spoke of what they had seen in the shadowy depths.

As a kid, this story held me mesmerized with terror. I could imagine the divers flipping backward off the boats, the lake growing calm as the algae-thick water took them in. Kicking deeper then, the water growing colder, the pressure tremendous, the darkness ever more impenetrable. How puny their flickering cones of hand-held light must have seemed — I could see the glittering sparks of sediment in the murk, the flash of schooling fish wheeling away into the gloom, the rails themselves plunging ever deeper into the midnight depths, red and scaly with rust and strung with veils of greenish-blue weed, until the earth gave out beneath them and they twisted away into the abyss at last, torn asunder, as if by some unimaginable geological cataclysm.

“Bullshit,” Jimmy said. “Bullshit on the divers and bullshit on the monster, too. Especially the monster.” Shaking his head in disgust, he waded naked into the water. A moment later, he began dancing from foot to foot. “Cold, jeez it’s cold.”

“I told you.”

“No, you didn’t. You told me some crap about railroad cars disappearing into the bottomless depths.” He hugged himself, shivering. “And lake monsters.”

“Screw you.”

He didn’t bother acknowledging this riposte, just waded farther out, still shaking his head in disbelief. And then he disappeared. For a moment of heart-stopping panic, I feared that the bottom had cut away beneath him, but then he surfaced, flinging water out of his hair. The spray glittered in the sun. “Cold’s always better once you get your head wet,” he called back to me; then he swam away from the shore, five yards, ten —

I sat down by his scattered clothing, pulled my knees to my chin, and wrapped my arms around my shins. The incessant clatter of the cicadas rang from the trees around us. Jimmy swam with natural grace, his body slicing the murk. At twenty yards, anxiety began to build in my chest. At twenty-five it felt like someone had jammed a hand grenade between my lungs. At thirty they pulled the pin.

I stood, cupping my hands around my mouth. "Far enough, you idiot."

Jimmy executed a perfect flip, like a seal, and dove. White legs flashed in the sunlight. Water frothed around his kicking feet. A moment later the surface settled into placid, unnatural blue.

He was gone.

I don't know how long it was before I started counting seconds, but I was at sixty-five when he breeched the surface. Treading water, he laughed out loud, a laugh so full of joy that I couldn't hold on to my resentment at the scare. "You touch bottom?" I shouted.

"Too deep," he gasped as he began the swim back to shore. A minute later he walked out of the lake and flopped down beside me. He leaned on his elbows and turned his face to the sun. He was as unconscious about his body as any human being I have ever known, and I count myself lucky, even now, to have had the opportunity, if only for the space of a single summer, to have known him.

Did I envy him, then? I don't think I did. Not yet. What I felt was a kind of worshipful adoration: he was everything I wanted, everything I could never be. His ease in his own skin, his casual disdain of authority, his physical grace: I admired them all. I wanted to be Jimmy, I guess. And if I couldn't be him, I wanted to bask in his charisma, to look at him, to love him from afar.

Kids had drowned there.

Three that I knew of for sure, and others that the high-school mythology I'd overhead only dimly hinted at. The three were easy to confirm: they had died together nine years ago in a Senior Skip Day challenge gone very bad indeed. I don't suppose the tradition of Senior Skip Day varies much from town to town. If you were shooting for the perfect attendance badge come Awards Day, it placed you in a tight spot; otherwise it was a day free of the stultifying boredom of Sauls Run High

School. By ten that morning a two-keg bash had gotten underway down at the Bluehole. By noon, a third keg had been procured and the Bluehole was rocking: kids splashed in the shallows, made out along the shoreline, thronged the keg. Somebody in the scrum — it could never later be determined who — issued an alcohol-emboldened challenge, and five young men set off to swim to the far shore, over a mile away as the subsequent investigation would confirm.

Three of them never made it back.

What exactly happened was never quite clear. The small audience on shore lost interest and drifted away as the figures disappeared into the distance. The two strongest swimmers pulled ahead; by the time they threw themselves panting on the far shore, the tragedy must have already occurred. The other three must have drowned, of course: one can imagine the onset of beery exhaustion; the panicky cries for help skipping unheard across the sun-shot surface; the final thrashing resistance as the waters closed overhead. A last desperate splash. Then, nothing: just water, opaque, icy, indifferent.

Two of the bodies were never recovered. The third, what was left of it, washed up on shore months later — long after the official investigation had issued its conclusion. But by then, whispers had already gotten started: some of the students out there that day, working the deep edge where the bottom sheared away into the abyss, had seen and heard things that their friends on shore had missed: a clap as of distant thunder, a brief animal stench, a thin shriek, like the screech of torn metal. Then, far out in the blue haze at the horizon, a great silver plume shot up and pinned itself glittering to the wind. A heartbeat later, it collapsed into spray; and a heartbeat after that, the kids floating out there in the deep water felt the shockwave pass, a gentle rocking in the deep, like the sway of ocean currents.

The Lavon Theater debuted *The Thing* near the end of July and then only as a late-show special. It was rated R, and Hazel Pinsky, who sold tickets most nights, sternly policed admission. Getting in required some ingenuity: Jimmy's idea was to stand outside waiting for the late showing of *E.T.* to end, then slip through the exiting crowd murmuring — *lost my wallet, excuse me, ma'am, lost my wallet* — and hey presto, magic.

Usually, the mere threat of a hiding would have precluded such a stunt. But three *Starlog* articles on *The Thing* — including one about special effects, accompanied by appropriately gruesome photos — had whetted our appetites to a razor edge.

Besides, Jimmy shamed me into it.

“Come on, Jeremy, do you want to be a pussy forever?” he would say, tousling my hair to show it was friendly. Or, abruptly, spinning down the volume on Black Flag, he would chant, “Jeremy is a pussy,” his voice lilting over the syllables.

By the time we slipped outside that evening, the summer sky had deepened to indigo and the first stars were starting to wink through. The windows of the neighboring houses printed buttery trapezoids on the scorched grass. The constant buzz saw of the cicadas cut the air. “*The Thing*, baby,” Jimmy crowed, throwing an arm around my shoulder as we loped across the lawn. And soon after we’d managed the not-so-difficult trick of free admission — Jimmy’s idea worked like a charm — we were settling into front-row seats.

The theater went dark. The previews began and the lingering dread of Hazel Pinsky faded. I barely remember the sticky floor underneath my feet or the teenagers hooting at the screen in faux terror. What I do remember — the last thing I remember before the film swept me into its spell — is an image of Jimmy staring rapt at the screen. He was handsome in profile, a vision of the man he’d never live to become.

Then the movie took me. Despite the Antarctic setting, despite the film’s surgical dissection of posturing male heroics, what I saw on that screen — what I see to this day — was a reflection of myself. Campbell’s story of an alien that could take the form of any living thing spoke to someone who felt so much like an imposter in his own skin. And the paranoid premise of the film — that you couldn’t trust anyone, not even your closest friends — hit me with unexpected urgency. Maybe that’s simply the existential condition of adolescence, but to me it felt — it still feels — stunningly real.

But that intellectual understanding of why the film spoke to me came later — much later. What came that night was sheer exhilarating terror. From the opening frames to the final shot, what I recall is a series of stark flashbulb images, so sharply limned that even to think of them now is to

plunge me back into the lacerating dark of the Lavon Theater. Can a movie haunt you? Those images haunt me still — a dog gnawing in terror at its chain link enclosure, the sheer magnitude of the spaceship buried in the ice, a man's severed head growing spider legs and scurrying toward an open door, before the white-hot flare of a flamethrower consumes it. What I remember most of all is a single eidetic image of a man only partially transformed, standing alone in a sea of churned-up snow, his face transfixed with terror and loss, great alien talons where his hands should be. What I remember is his cry of desolation and despair, his echoing and alien lament at being stranded forever in a body — in a world — that is not his own. That alien wail still haunts my imagination, all these years later.

I COULDN'T SLEEP that night, of course.

The walk home in darkness had been dreadful enough.

But the darkness of my room was, in the short run, anyway, infinitely worse. The streetlight outside my window swathed the room in shadows. A basketball in the corner might any moment grow legs and scurry across the room toward my bed. And when I closed my eyes, I could see that pitiful man in the snow and hear his awful alien scream. How long I endured it, I cannot say. But the true measure of my fear came somewhere in the small hours of the night, when, exhausted by terror, I clambered from my bed and stole down the hall to Chris's room. He lay snoring on his back, arms out-flung, sleeping the sleep of the drugged or the drunk or both. I crept into his bed and snuggled into his heat, thinking of my mother, the way she used to crawl into my bed and wrap me in her arms when I was afraid.

Chris's snoring hitched — I could smell the ripe stench of beer on his breath — and he turned his back to me. "Don't touch me, faggot," he groaned, and then he resumed snoring. I lay awake for a long time after that, until somewhere toward dawn I fell into a restless, tossing sleep.

I dreamed of Jimmy that night — maybe for the first time, though I can't say for sure. But I remember standing naked before a mirror, staring at my reflection in wonder, for the boy staring back at me wasn't me at all. It was Jimmy, lean and tan, his penis tumescent in its nest of golden hair. I reached out to touch him and the boy on the other side of the mirror

reached out as well. Our fingers met, sending concentric ripples expanding across the surface of the glass —

Then I was awake, clutching at the corona of pain that had burst just above the small of my back. “What the hell are you doing in here?” my brother was saying. I curled fetal to protect myself from the next kick — it exploded in a bright flare of agony square above my kidney — all too aware of the morning erection tenting my undershorts.

My brother must have been aware of it, too — I had a nightmarish image of him stirring to wakefulness with it pressing stiff against his back — for as he aimed another kick at me, he snapped, “Go play with yourself in your own room.” Which would have been fine, except he didn’t seem inclined to let me go. I scrambled across the bed, dragging the sheets over my crotch. Chris, shirtless, advanced on me, his thick hands — he had my father’s hands — curled into fists. I think he might have beaten me badly — very badly — if the horn of Joey Stratton’s Camaro hadn’t split the morning air.

“Shit,” Chris said, turning away. “You got off lucky this time, faggot.”

He shoved his feet into a pair of beat-up Adidas and snatched an Iron Maiden T-shirt from atop a pile of dirty clothes. “You better be gone like the fucking wind when I get back,” he said. He slammed out of the room and clattered down the stairs. A moment later, the Camaro screeched away and I was alone.

I took a deep breath and tipped my head against the wall, panting.

I must have sat like that for fifteen minutes, breathing through the pain, before I heaved myself off the bed. That’s when I noticed that Chris’s bureau drawer was ajar — and glimpsed the yellow box shoved in among the rat’s nest of unmatched socks. I should have left the room, of course.

All I can say is that I found myself pulling open the drawer instead. I pushed the socks back, pulled out the box — it was a cardboard cigar box — and put it down on the bureau. And then — remember that scene in *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta opens the briefcase and golden light comes pouring out? — I lifted the lid.

A wad of bills as thick as my fist had been shoved in on one side. A heap of neatly rolled joints lay upon the other. It didn’t take long to put two

and two together. Chris was dealing — at the very lowest rung of the ladder, true, selling individual joints in the halls of Sauls Run High School for three dollars a pop — but dealing all the same. Once upon a time — when my mother was alive — I would have closed that box and turned away. But Mom was gone now. I think sometimes that her death was the catalyst for everything that followed. I don't know. Maybe our dooms fall upon us from the start. All I could say for sure was that I had nothing left other than the kid across the street. So I took another step down that fatal path. I palmed two joints and counted ten bucks out of the unruly wad of cash.

The ten dollars sustained us through the morning in the arcade on Main Street.

It's just empty storefront now — I drove by it yesterday — but all I have to do is close my eyes and the years peel away to disclose the place to me in all its shabby reality: the astringent stink of the urinal cake in the boy's room, the cacophony of beeps and explosions, most of all the rattle of quarters in the change tray. For a single cultural heartbeat, a lot of people made a lot of money. But it's all gone now, of course; you can get better games on your phone — though your reception in the Run, deep in its cleft of mountains, is basically for shit. It doesn't matter anyway. Who have I got to call?

It's the past that lies before me now, if that makes any sense — the summer when *Minor Threat* and *X* banged out of Jimmy's speakers, and the sticky days of July spilled over into the still stickier ones of early August, bringing us ever closer to our fatal rendezvous with the Bluehole. But our doom — and I use the term deliberately, *our* doom — had yet to fall upon us, and if I hadn't nicked those joints from Chris's cigar box, if I'd taken only the money that we blew at the arcade that morning — it might never have fallen upon us at all.

But I did take the joints, and the money only lasted so long.

Ten or fifteen minutes after we ran dry of quarters, Dewey showed us the door. "You're loiterers," he said from behind the array of novelty prizes under the counter. He squinted at us through smoke from the butt jammed between his teeth. "You're fucking loitering, aren't you? So scram." He waved his hand dismissively and turned back to his paper.

"Screw you, Dewey, you old fuck," Jimmy said outside, kicking at a Miller Lite can that someone had thrown out in front of the pool hall. It rattled into the street and rolled into the mouth of a sewer grate. The pavement baked in flat, oppressive heat. Sunlight flashed off chrome in dazzling silver bursts as cars whipped past. Jimmy hopped the guardrail by the Stone Bridge. I followed reluctantly. We scrambled down the slope and hunkered in the shadow of the overpass. A dry breeze chased dust devils across the tracks. The air smelled of spent oil and shale. "Jesus," Jimmy said, leaning on his elbows, legs extended. He laced his hands behind his head and stared up into the shadows. I reclined beside him. A crumpled can of Tab leached white in the sunlit weeds beyond the bridge. Ants marched across the open lip and disappeared into the dark. The undergrowth rang with cicada song.

"I'm so bored," Jimmy announced, and in that moment I made the worst decision of the summer: I dug in my pocket, extracted the two joints I'd stolen from Chris's cigar box, and straightened them between my fingers.

"Holy shit," Jimmy said, and suddenly I felt like the coolest kid who had ever walked the streets of the Run. "Where'd you get those?"

"I have my sources," I said, feeling even cooler — feeling in fact almost as cool as Jimmy. "Wanna?"

Jimmy dug out his lighter and passed it my way. I sat up and got the joint going. Holding it between my thumb and forefinger like the seasoned pothead I would soon become, I took a long coughless drag: the apprenticeship with the Marlboros had served me well. I passed the joint to Jimmy. "Chris," he said, holding it to his lips. And then, exhaling: "Chris's gonna kill you."

I dropped back on my elbows beside him, feeling the pressure of the smoke in my lungs. I let it stream through my nostrils. "Chris's never going to say a word, not unless he wants Dad to know he's dealing," I said, and Jimmy, shaking his head in something like admiration — I felt the pleasure of it all through my body — passed the joint back to me. As it burned down, the cars overhead seemed to *whoosh* by. The bridge's shadow sharpened; the light beyond grew brighter. The cicada song deepened. Complex rhythms now textured the blank drone. I suppose the pot must have been absolute skunk weed compared to the stuff I buy today, but I still nurse a kind of reverence for that first buzz: arms out-flung, buoyed

weightless by the earth, watching the smoke eddy in the dim under the bridge. A cicada blurred to rest on a blade of sunshot heather, and I remember watching its jeweled belly throb, pushing out song. Harmony pervaded everything. I've never been able to get back that sense of primal unity, no matter how much I smoke.

Jimmy flipped the roach out on the tracks and we lay there for a while — I don't know how long — marinating in heat. I might have dozed — I would have — if Jimmy hadn't nudged me.

"Leave me alone."

"C'mon. Let's jet. It's hot out here."

"Where?"

"That lake. You know, the Bluehole."

"Screw you."

"C'mon," he said. He got to his feet and extended his hand to me.

"I'm not swimming."

"So don't swim."

A train rumbled past, kicking up dust. I closed my eyes. Jimmy prodded me with his foot.

"Get up."

"Fine. Okay."

"C'mon, man," he said, "it'll be fun."

I opened my eyes, and let him heave me to my feet. Seduced again. What I think about that summer now is how often Jimmy used some variation of those words —

— *it'll be fun* —

— to entice me into doing things I would never have considered when Mom had been alive: smoking Marlboros on his front stoop, lifting a six of Schlitz at the 7-Eleven, sneaking into the Lavon Theater. I could name half a dozen other cases. And the Bluehole, of course, that most of all. I told my first wife about it once, the way he lured me down there, the way I was helpless to resist him. "Sounds like you were in love," she told me, and I suppose I was. So I tagged along. I could name the boys who had drowned there — Milton Childs, Sam Procter, and Loyal Brown — and though I had said that I would not swim, I knew that Jimmy would coax me into the water. It was the water that I thought of most of all: the Bluehole itself, how cold and dark it was, how deep.

"People have drowned there, you know."

"People have drowned in their bathtubs. You gotta go in."

"No, I don't."

"Sure you do. This hot? You gotta be kidding me."

"I'm not kidding."

We turned aside from the tracks, slipping down through the undergrowth, past the derelict caboose, and into the jungle of brush and stunted pine beyond. Jimmy bushwhacked through the bracken ahead of me, skidding now and then. The lake glimmered through the foliage, a flat, poisonous blue, flashing diamonds of light when the sun caught it. I could smell it, a rich organic funk of rot and regeneration, and when we emerged panting on the shore, the stench grew stronger, almost overpowering. The Bluehole lay before us, still, opaque, the far shore lost in a haze of humidity. Dragonflies darned the air, setting off concentric ripples whenever they settled to the dark water. Cattails stood in the shallows, unmoving in the windless afternoon. Down here in the woods, the racket of the cicadas was louder still, shot through with those complex polyrhythms. It sounded beautiful to me then, God's music raining down upon the planet, and maybe that was the last turning point in that summer of turning points, maybe everything would have been different if I hadn't been overwhelmed with the stoned beauty of the place, the lake and the cloudless sky, and Jimmy beside me in the grass, his knees pulled up to his chest. We could have stripped down and splashed around in the shallows. Instead I pulled out the second joint.

"Now you're talking," Jimmy said, and we sat in the grass, looking out over the lake, and smoked it. Occasionally, I stole glances at Jimmy. He too had taken on an ethereal beauty: his blue eyes, and his blond hair, and the way the light fired the tiny beads of perspiration along his jaw, so that his whole face glowed with that particular quality of light you see in impressionist paintings. I thought then — I still think — that he was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. When I leaned toward him to flip the roach into the water our faces were maybe six inches apart, and what I thought of then was the girl on the bus from the World's Fair — Nina, her name was Nina, it comes back to me after all these years. What I thought of was Nina, her determined little tongue probing at the closed rank of my teeth. I don't believe I thought at all about what I did next. It seemed to

happen of its own accord. My hand came up and I brushed Jimmy's face with the tips of my fingers. He didn't say anything. He just looked at me out of those pale blue eyes, and then my face moved closer and my lips grazed his. They were chapped and peeling from the sun, I remember that, and I remember that he neither moved toward me nor pulled away. Everything was very still: the lake and the air and the tiny rustlings in the weeds. Even the cicadas seemed to have gone silent.

Then the moment was over.

I pulled away, I could feel the heat rising in my face. But Jimmy only stared at me. We sat like that for a long time, just staring at one another. There was no apprehension in those blue eyes of his, no judgment, no shock, no welcome. Just a flat blankness. The world resumed turning once again. Something splashed at the verge of the lake. The cicada song sprang suddenly into the air, a flat featureless drone. Somewhere in the thirty seconds between the kiss and the heartbeat that followed, all that beauty had drained out of the world. I was my old self again, stunted, dark, and unlovely, riven with desires I could neither name nor fulfill. Doomed.

"Jimmy — " I said.

"Let's swim the lake," he said.

Milton Childs. Sam Procter. Loyal Brown.

The names rang in my head as I waded into the waters of the Bluehole. The ground underfoot was weedy and slick. Icy hands climbed my legs — ankles, calves, thighs. I gasped when they seized my crotch and I felt my nuts retract into the heat of my body — what remained of it — like hard little stones.

Laughing, Jimmy ducked his head. "C'mon," he said, "You'll feel better."

But when I lowered myself into the water, I felt only another icy shock — and then, abruptly, he was right. The water was still cold — painfully cold — but no longer intolerable. I waded deeper. The water rose chest high, then shoulder, until finally it lapped at my chin — and the old terror reasserted itself: the divers, the three boys, the rumors of something out there in the deep waters.

"Jimmy," I said, "people have died swimming the lake. Seriously. Three kids I know of for sure — "

"We're not going to die."

"I just think — "

"Don't think," he said

And he dove. He surfaced ten feet farther out.

"C'mon," he said, and I came.

One step, two steps, three — and the bottom dropped out beneath me. I went down, flailing, water filling my nose. I kicked toward the sun, a dim blur through the greenish water. Exhilaration seized me when I broke the surface, and I thought even at the time that this was what it must be like to be Jimmy, this constant surge of reckless confidence. A sliver of envy pierced my heart in that moment, a shard of hatred so bright and hard that it might have killed me. I recalled the feel of his flesh, the touch of his lips, peeling and chapped from the heat, tasting slightly of salt.

"C'mon, pussy," he called from twenty feet farther out, and with that shard sawing at my heart, I struck out after him. He waited for me, flinging water from his hair as I drew near.

"C'mon," he said again, and with that he struck off into the deep water.

I followed. Dear God, I followed.

He drew slowly away from me — five feet, then ten, swimming smoothly, his hands slicing the water. My own arms hacked at the surface. My breath burned in my lungs. My legs already felt leaden. I could feel the terrible gravity of the abyss dragging me down.

And then — the near shore was but a distant line at our back, our destination still lost in haze before us — then it happened. There in the sweltering heat of an early August afternoon, with the sun beating down on the iridescent blue water and the song of the cicadas ringing in my ears, I watched my best friend die.

It happened fast.

Jimmy was maybe thirty yards ahead of me, gliding through the water, when something came out of the icy depths below. I glimpsed it in a single strobic flash — ten seconds or so, that's all — a deeper shadow against the dark as it streaked below me, twenty feet long or longer. There and gone again, passing bullet-like thirty or forty feet down, trailing a violent churning wake that swayed me in the water, so alien that I might have imagined it, that I thought I *had* imagined it, and then, for the space of a breath, a heartbeat, nothing more, it was gone.

The water was still.

You have to understand how quickly it all happened. I screamed at Jimmy — I don't remember the words to this day — but he turned, treading water, as I hurled myself thrashing through the water toward him. I reached out to him, and he shrugged me away.

"I want to swim the lake."

"Jimmy — "

"What?" And then: "Did you want to kiss me again?"

It was like a blade sliding between my ribs.

And then the thing took him. I smelled it, a deep animal reek, like the reek of the lake itself, but I barely saw it — a black tentacle, rolling languidly above the surface to encircle Jimmy's chest. Nothing more.

The sound of the cicadas boomed across the lake.

"Jeremy — " Jimmy cried. He reached out for me, grasping, tearing at my flesh, and, God help me, I clawed at him like an animal, gouging furrows of blood down his cheeks. I drove my feet deep into his belly — I heard the plosive gasp as air exploded from his lungs — and I saw him go down. I remember it like it was yesterday — his arms outstretched to me, his mouth frozen in a silent scream, bubbles trailing up as he went under. I dove then, and swam as deep and far as I could, until my breath screamed in my lungs, and when I burst through the membrane of water at last, I looked back, helpless not to, Lot's wife. The lake was placid and still.

All my life I've been a pillar of salt.

IN THE YEARS SINCE, I've given those moments a lot of thought. Sometimes it seems like I've thought of little else. The thing that took Jimmy was too big — no lake the size of the Bluehole could sustain a breeding population for long. Not enough food. Not enough water. And if it did, sooner or later one of the things would wash up dead on shore.

But the countervailing evidence speaks for itself: that animal reek, that glimpse of black flesh rolling up through the water. Milton Childs, Sam Procter, Loyal Brown. Most of all maybe, the diver who died in Weston State Hospital, raving about monsters — if even he existed at all.

Maybe I've read too much science fiction. Maybe I've written too much.

But I wonder.

Maybe there really are thousands of realities, pressed close against each other like bubbles. Maybe there are thin places in the membranes between. Maybe something sometimes breaks through.

Speculation, of course, but speculation is my trade.

Maybe.

I told them nothing of the sort, of course. I told them he drowned.

I pulled on my clothes and pelted back toward the tracks, yanking myself uphill by the weeds and the stunted saplings and the sticky, sickly looking pines. I remember the way the brush seemed to come alive around me. The way it seized at me and dragged me back, the way it clutched at my ankles and drew stinging lines across my face.

And then I was free, still pulling on my shirt as I raced toward the Stone Bridge.

I leapt in front of the first car I saw, waving my arms, and when the man inside yanked open the door —

“What the hell, kid?”

— I fell upon him, weeping.

After that I don't remember much. Just fragments. The first of the police to arrive, old Charlie Bevins, who used to drink beer with my dad in those days, and then Dad himself, thin lipped and grim. He embraced me; I'll always remember that, the scent of cigarettes on his clothes and the flash of the wedding ring upon his hand. He walked beside me as I led them back down the tracks, past the abandoned cabooses, to the shore of the Bluehole. Jimmy's clothes were still piled in the weeds. One of his sneakers lay turned on its side, a black high-top Chuck Taylor, the laces dangling. I remember that. It's funny the things you remember.

The men just stood there, looking out over the water.

There was nothing they could do. He was gone. There was nothing anyone could do.

They didn't drag the lake. I didn't like to think about it anyway, those curved hooks scraping the bottom until they dislodged a body; I didn't like to think of Jimmy bobbing to the surface and peering out at me from his death-glazed eyes. I didn't want to see the accusation reflected there.

So here I am, thirty-four years gone, camped in a dingy motel with threadbare sheets, writing out the past in a composition book that I purchased at Finnaker's Drug, or what is left of it. The lunch counter is gone, most of the newsstand, the spinner rack of paperbacks near the checkout counter. It's just a drugstore now; the Run is just another dying town.

Time slips away from you. The world changes. These days, looking at the Run is like looking at a palimpsest, the town I knew as a kid just barely visible beyond the shell it has become. Woolworth's is gone. So is Loudon's Hardware. And the company houses on Maple Street have been cleared away for trailers and prefabs.

But the Stone Bridge is still there. Yesterday, I hiked out the railroad tracks that run beneath it. The cicadas sang me on my way, and time slipped its sprocket, the way it does sometimes. For the space of a breath or two, I was a boy, my best friend tramping along beside me; the past erased itself, and it all lay before me once again, the whole world. Then the moment collapsed. History will have its way: I was pushing fifty, paunchy, panting in the heat. Three or four miles later, I glimpsed a spangle of sunlight far down among the trees. I pushed through the brush and stood on an embankment two hundred steep, overgrown yards above the water. It was still there, all right, poison blue and depthless, stretching its length alongside the tracks for miles. The far shore was invisible in the haze.

I stood there for a long time, just looking at it. ¶

COMING ATTRACTIONS

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE, KJ Kabza returns with "The Color of Sand," a fantasy about a boy named Catch.

We also expect to celebrate a bygone style of pulp fiction with Rus Wornom's "In the Mountains of Frozen Fire."

And Alex Irvine keeps it real with a speculation on the electronic future, "For All of Us Down Here."

We also have new stories in the works by Eleanor Arnason, Charles Coleman Finlay, James Morrow, Geoff Ryman, and many more. Sign up now for a subscription at www.fandsf.com or use the card in this issue.