

'The Painted Dolphin' by Chris Schoon

1st place fiction

The sign said REPTILE PARADISE—AGELESS SERPENTS—FOSSIL TITANS—4004 MYSTERIES—FREE PARKING!

The boy watched as the sign shot past. Before it receded into the heart-image pools, behind them, another sign emerged along the sweep of highway in front. Its comic-book colors danced in the sun-glared distance, visible for miles on the empty plain.

The boy's mother and father had been ignoring the signs, sitting silent in the front seat. He waited until the new sign drew close and read it out loud.

"Three miles to monster lizards, marine mammals, dancing cobra, guided tour, don't miss Reptile Paradise."

The boy's mother shuffled some maps and asked his father how far to Denver and when they could get this air conditioner fixed. The boy leaned forward.

"Could we stop there, Dad?" He tried to sound offhand. He knew his parents wouldn't want to stop, wouldn't want to spend the money. It was late afternoon and hot, too, and his father seemed to be in a hurry, even though it was only their first day of vacation.

HIS MOTHER SAID they'd just stopped for lunch a little while ago, speaking with her eyes closed, fanning herself with a map.

Another sign approached, bigger than the others and leaning over, as if hit from behind by the wind. The face of the billboard was in shadow, only partially visible from the highway. The boy could just make out the words, NEXT EXIT TO REPTILE PARADISE—EGYPTIAN CROCODILES—MIDWEST'S ONLY DOLPHIN TALKS TO YOU—AIR CONDITIONED!

As the sign went by, he saw the picture painted below the printing. It was almost lost in the deep shade cast by the lowering sun, but he saw it was a dolphin, glowing with unusual color, the shadows adding an undersea effect.

"Can those dolphins talk to people?" he asked, the image of the painted animal remained in his mind, hanging in his mind like a flashbulb dot.

His mother didn't even think a dolphin was a reptile. She fanned herself with a map in each hand now and asked his father how far till they were in Colorado.

"YEAH, BUT COULD we stop and see if it really talks? Some dolphins are supposed to be pretty smart."

A small panic was kindled inside him as he imagined the exit ramp speeding by and disappearing into the haze behind.

"On TV once I saw one that... couldn't we stop this once, please, and look? The sign said it's air conditioned there and all, and we could just look at part of it, OK?"

The panic seeped into his mind's eye, growing and blotting the vision of the mysterious dolphin. It swam back to the shadow sign, became paint and wood again. He tried to hold its smooth, curving form from fading as the exit ramp rushed up across the treeless prairie. He gripped the front seat, pulling himself forward to ask them to stop, to tell them it was important to stop—DON'T MISS REPTILE PARADISE—his jaw tightened as the exit was upon them. Maybe it wouldn't cost so much, he should tell them. The dolphin's odd smile flickered in shadow. He closed his eyes to escape the foolish panic—felt his heart beating hard—a dolphin shape spiraled across the inside of his eye. He looked again and saw the exit curving away beside them now, opened his mouth to speak but his breath was gone...

HIS FATHER'S HAND moved from the wheel, knocked the turn signal up, and pulled the car off onto the ramp.

The boy fell back in his seat, feeling sheepish about getting so worked up over this one place, and relieved that his father hadn't noticed. He'd practically yelled in his ear!

His mother looked over at his father and said he must be tired and that she could drive if he wanted her to. He rubbed his eyes and shook his head no. She didn't know how their budget would hold up if they kept stopping everywhere like this.

The car pushed at the top of the ramp. About half a mile from the highway stood a tall red and yellow fence with WORLD'S

ONLY REPTILE PARADISE on it. The tops of the three quonset huts and a flagpole could be seen inside the fence. Fields of wheat and stubble spread buildingless to the horizon.

The boy's mother wondered if this place was air conditioned, and dropped her maps to the floor.

The gravel parking lot threw up its dust around them as the car crunched to a stop near the only visible door. A sign over the door read ENTRANCE, and the letters were little red and yellow snakes twined together.

A MAN IN A straw cowboy hat came out to the door and stood. He was fat and had on snake-skin boots and dark glasses. He greeted his customers and spoke with the boy's father, exchanging talk, money, tickets. He held the door open and they went in. A dirt path bordered by two lines of white painted stones led to the first of the quonset huts. The buildings looked old and worn out, almost deserted, but the boy felt the presence of very different things inside—the strange little kingdom promised by the road signs, and somewhere, a dolphin waiting. He ran ahead on the path, but the door of the first hut was padlocked.

As he watched the others approaching, the boy noticed the word EXIT painted in black on the back of the sign that said ENTRANCE from outside.

"How can the entrance be the exit at the same time?" he asked himself in mock astonishment, cocking his head to one side for effect. He knew grown-ups could answer questions like this to their own satisfaction, but the answers always seemed to him somehow incomplete. He turned this over in his mind, trying to come to what it was about the question that interested him. He resolved it with the image of a glowing dolphin, smiling quizzically, swimming through an underwater gate, in and out at the same time. A breeze from somewhere cooled him suddenly, and was gone.

"HOW COME YOUR entrance is an exit?" he asked the Fat Man, who worked a key around in the padlock, breathing hard and sweating dark stains onto his shirt after the hot walk up the path. The Fat Man got the lock open and turned to look at the boy, then squinted across at the exit sign.

"I'll have to think about that," he said

slowly, swinging the door open. But before he let them enter, he pushed his sunglasses up off his nose and looked down at the boy. "What's your name there fella?"

"Reed Addams,"

"Reed," the Fat Man said solemnly, "Welcome to Reptile Paradise."

The dark inside of the building closed around Reed like a cold, wet blanket, momentarily catching up his breath in his throat. He stood still, eyes surprised and useless in the black. Most air drifted a musk-and-dead-leaves mix of scents to him, triggering a comfortable, spook-movie kind of fear. Air conditioning machinery sounded through the cool, animal-spiced air as the dim room gradually presented itself.

As his sight returned, Reed saw that the room was filled with rows of high-top tables. Those near the door were covered with what looked like sculptured stone forms and unidentifiable debris. On the tables toward the back were glass boxes of various sizes. Reed's mother eyed those suspiciously. The walls were piled high with shelves, charts, jars, books and a confusion of hardware.

REED NOTICED SOMETHING twitch in one of the far containers and started for it immediately, but the Fat Man removed his hat and with one motion clamped it down over Reed's head and held it there, turning the boy around to face him.

"If a person wants to understand the reptiles," he said, raising the hat from Reed's head, "he wants to start at the start. There's no place like the beginning, as far as reptiles are concerned." He swept his heavy arm up to indicate the tables jumbled with stone and Reed realized the piles of debris were in fact groupings of animal bones and shapes pressed in flat rocks. FOSSIL TITANS—he wondered what dolphin bones would be like.

At this point, Reed's mother said she would really prefer sitting down with something cold to drink, so his father walked her over to the Coke machine and some folding chairs in the front corner.

Reed was concerned, at first, about his parents' lack of interest in what the Fat Man had to show, but the Fat Man appeared perfectly content to reveal his treasures to Reed alone. His parents hadn't paid very much attention to the signs, he decided.

THE FAT MAN spun out his dinosaur lore to the boy, detailing the presumed

martyrdom of the first amphibious convert to crawl gasping from the sea; the designs retained and rejected through Nature's endless craft; the rise of the cold-blooded creatures to reign over the terrible Lizzards, and the end of that reign, due to unknown calamity, the reason lost in a geologic blackout.

Reed, impatient to investigate the glass enclosures to the rear, forced himself to listen sporadically.

"Of course, we do have our survivors. Don't worry, we'll get to those," said the Fat Man, running his hand over a jet-black thigh bone that stood taller than Reed by a foot. "Probably shock old brontosaurus to death to know what it's all come down to. Hoptoads and ginkos. He'd disown 'em." The Fat Man smiled to himself, stroking the cracked ebony surface of the great leg-bone, eyes searching among the skulls and vertebrae littering the table tops.

Reed imagined the dinosaur up to its neck in the sea, four tree-trunk legs sunk into the muck bottom. A shape glimmers between the legs, moving through the murky water. The dolphin flashes beneath the leather belly stretched over the tree trunks. It arches its tail, spins close to Reed's face and away, showering him with bubbles of light.

THE VIVIDNESS OF the daydream surprised Reed and he had to shake his head to clear it.

They turned at last to the glass boxes at the back of the building. Stretching on tip-toe, Reed peered through the soiled glass of the nearest cage and was eye-to-eye with a large, listless water moccasin, thick as a man's arm, lying looped and glistening on dirty straw like a fresh cow pie. The snake had its eyes open, but they looked dull and sightless and gave no sign of noticing Reed. He considered the possibility that it was dead.

"Guaranteed deadly," said the Fat Man, but his voice lacked conviction. "The survivors tend to rely on trickery to make up for being runts." He glanced back at the fossil collection, pointed to a horned skull the size of an easy chair, "Now triceretops there wouldn't skulk up to a fella in the dark and shoot him full of bile when he wasn't looking. He was as honest a reptile as you're likely to find. You pester him, he'd roll you flat. None of this hiding under rocks when the going gets tough."

Continued on page 8

Todd Peterson

Honorable mention photography

