

From the Window

Sam Ritchey

GLEAMING, spring sunlight burst through the circular window, and projected an oval beam down upon the small form lying on the top step of the staircase. From the window the figure resembled a marble statue, motionless, a beautiful stone child whitening in the sun. The sandy-haired, freckled-faced boy, his features illumined, traced the outline of the carpet's flowery design with a searching index finger. Each petal and leaf of the multicolored fabric received an imaginary edging from the careful finger. He would not stop until he touched every flower in the sunny circle. Back and forth, in and out—then one more stoke brought a sigh of content and completion. What could he do now?

The steep, narrow staircase led down to the musty cellar of the old frame house. He could not distinguish the heavy door in the darkness at the bottom of the stair. He remembered that the door was made of thick planks bolted together, and that the latch and hinges had streaked the wood with orange rust stains. But blackness seeped from the cracks around the door and had swallowed the entrance to the unused basement; this murky pit erased half of the stairs and unpainted walls. The wooden steps were worn and cracked from the scuffling shoes of past occupants of the ancient house. There were no banisters, and the drab, streaked walls were grimy from the countless hands that had reached for support during a climb or descent.

The boy sat up, put his elbows on his knees, and clasped his chubby hands under his rounded chin. Sometimes when he was alone and had nothing to do, he would pretend that huge, grotesque arms stretched out from the darkness. Now he stared into the pit made by the stairway, and slowly the blackness began to stir. In a few moments the lower part of the darkened staircase became alive with groping, ugly members detached from some unknown body. Contorted limbs, black bony growths with leathery skin, strained to grab their helpless prey and devour it in the damp cavern below.

Every other step—that was the secret of the eerie stairway. The boy knew that if he stepped only on every other step, the arms could not harm him, and by descending halfway down the staircase, he could defeat the monster once again.

The cuffs of his worn denim pants fell to touch the tops of his scuffed shoes as he stood to challenge the writhing limbs. He scratched his knee, then, steadying himself against the wall, poised his right leg to take the first step. One, two, three steps—and the boy, glassy-eyed and grinning slyly, stood one move away from the arms. He carefully dropped to the next level, and black fingers uselessly at his legs and body; the hideous growths completely encircled

him and blocked the sunlight from the window. But he knew the secret that made this monster powerless. His thin blond hair hanging down across his forehead, his face damp with perspiration, the boy began a high-pitched, defiant laugh. He waved his arms hysterically and screamed, "You can't hurt me; you can't hurt me." One more step, and he would be triumphant. Searching in the blackness for a foothold two steps down, he lost his balance and began falling, falling, falling—

"Johnny, are you coming out to play?" A friend's voice came through the circular window from the outside. But inside, the only movement was that of the sunny oval as it left the staircase, moved up the wall, and then disappeared.

The Infernal Comedy

Harry Yankuner

"Midway in our life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and awoke to find myself alone in a dark wood."

—DANTE—*The Inferno*

MIDWAY in my ponderous journey through my freshman year, I recognized that I had strayed into the Valley of Erroneous Grammar. As I looked around, I saw The Mount of Precise Grammar and started to climb to the top. However, as I started, my path was blocked by three beasts: The Leopard of the Incorrect Sentence, The Lion of the Disorganized Paragraph, and The She-Wolf of the Diffuse Theme. Overawed by the horror of this sight, I was driven back. As I was losing hope, Noah Webster suddenly appeared, explaining that he could lead me from the valley, but that I would have to journey through Grammatical Hell. Exclaiming that I should be honored to be escorted by him, I joyously agreed to follow.

Webster explained that I would have Grammatical Grace in traveling through Hell, for I would be unable to make the journey unprotected. As we started our trip, we came to the Vestibule of Hell. At my first encounter with poor grammar, sentence fragments were crying out in pain, for they were neither making sense nor were they completely meaningless. Clinging to each other, they would try to steal a verb or a subject to become complete. Next we came to the River of the Misplaced Commas. At the bank towered an exclamation mark who wailed, "Now you shall see your butchery of the English Grammar."

After crossing the river, we came to the first of two circles I had to visit. As we walked, I noticed the path was strewn with commas and, the further we went, the more numerous and more grotesque they appeared. Continuing, we saw a clearing where a black mass of commas was crawling over four restrictive clauses. I started as I recognized one of the unfortunate clauses from my latest English