

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Fiction Category

First Place: “*Tank 199*,” by Matthew Meier

I wiped sweat from my brow as I looked up at Jared, his figure silhouetted by the blazing hot sun high above. Our job was not the best, but I enjoyed it much more than spending the entire day sitting in a classroom. The two of us performed many jobs at the pickle farm, such as cutting grass, draining tanks, and cleaning tanks, all under the cover of the scorching hot sun between the months of May and July.

As I crawled up the ladder, I could hear Jared speak to John, one of the older men that had been working at the pickle farm for many years longer than us. John was a large, heavysset man, who walked with a slight limp, had a short, light grey beard, and a ragged, torn hat, with the name of the company written on it. He was never without a joke, and a fun man to work with while preparing for green season; the time of the year stretching from early-July to late September, when we received cucumbers, and processed them into pickles.

“Jared! Mark!” John said as I hopped out of the tank and pulled the ladder out of the twelve foot deep pit, “Rusty needs you to clean out Tank 199 next.”

I looked up at Jared as he looked back at the tank we had just cleaned out. He was two years younger than me, but he was still a good foot taller. I had been working at the factory for three years, and Jared had worked there for two years, making me his superior. At least, that’s what John said. Jared, who was loosely related to the owners of the company, saw himself as above me.

“We just cleaned out Tank 87.” Jared said as he picked up a pair of buckets, connected together by a long chain, “We’ll work up to it.”

“No!” John drawled as he laughed, “Rusty forgot to clean out that tank in June. You guys need to clean it out now.”

“June?” I asked, “It’s the middle of July.”

“Yeah.” John said as he limped toward a forklift, “Grab that ladder. I’ll move the tuffy down there for you.”

As we walked over to Tank 199, Jared and I argued over who was going to hop into the tank. We had a system where we alternated tanks. I would clean out a tank, while Jared, using the buckets that he carried, pulled the bad pickles, and the occasional dead birds I found out of the tank, and threw them in a tuffy, large fiberglass bins of which we had hundreds of laying around the factory. When we filled up a tuffy with the garbage inside the tanks, John or another employee would take it to the shredder. Knowing that I had just cleaned out Tank 87, I was more than hopeful that Jared would hop down in the tank. But any hopes I had that he would clean it out were instantly killed as we moved closer to the tank.

We started to smell the rancid odor radiating from the tank when we were about twenty feet away from it. Having been doing this job for a while, I had learned to tolerate the smell of rotting pickles, but this was worse than anything I had smelled before. Looking down into the tank, I saw that the brine water, which was supposed to be light brown, was a sickening blackish color, with chunky substances, and traces of a dark red shade scattered around the tank. I could almost

swear I saw bones in the tank, along with other objects I would rather not try to identify. The tank reeked of scents that I never knew existed, and made me want to vomit. It had been baking in the sun for more than a month longer than any of the other tanks, and I could almost guarantee that something died in the tank, and I didn't want to be the one to pull out the body. The best way to shortly describe its appearance and texture of the tank's contents was that of raw sewage.

"So," John said with a sneaky grin as he pulled up in a forklift, carrying a large tuffy, half full of rotting pickles, "Who's going down?"

I set the ladder down and pointed at Jared. Jared threw the buckets and chain he had been carrying down, and pointed at me. John laughed.

"How about this." John said, "You both climb down there, and I'll pull the buckets up."

"You're out of your mind." Jared snapped, obviously not thrilled with John's plan.

"You got boots and gloves." John said as he picked up the ladder, and lowered it into the tank, "Mark has a shovel with him. You'll be fine."

I looked down at my muddy, brine-stained rubber boots and gloves. I had just gotten the gloves yesterday, and they were already in bad shape, but they would keep my hands dry, and my boots hadn't failed me yet. But the smell radiating from the tank was unbearable. My boots would end up smelling like the tank for weeks. Then I looked at Jared. The gloves he was wearing had holes in them, and he was only wearing a muddy pair of tennis shoes. Seeing the situation he would be in, I almost laughed.

"Well," I said with a grin as I tightened my grip on the shovel, "We gotta get our paychecks somehow."

As I climbed down the ladder, I listened to Jared complain about the job at hand. John merely laughed as he lowered the buckets into the tank. As I watched John lower the buckets, the gnats and flies in the tank flew up, forming a literal cloud around me. In other tanks, there were only a few flies, but here, the air seemed to be composed of bugs, and reeked of rot.

I watched as Jared regretfully climbed down into the tank, and through the cloud of bugs. Jared always acted as if he was above me, and believed that he could get away with anything. I thought of him as a friend, but he really got on my nerves at times, and I was glad to see that Jared was finally getting the karma he deserved.

When Jared got off the ladder, John grabbed hold of the end sticking out of the tank, and lifted it out, leaving us trapped inside. I panicked for a split second, but when I saw the look of fear and disgust plastered on Jared's face, I began laughing.

"John!" Jared snapped, gagging as he inhaled the tank's rancid odor, "What are you doing!?"

"You're not allowed out until you're done." John snickered as I went to work, shoveling the blackened pickles out of the knee-deep brine, and into a bucket. "Get to work."

I tried my best not to breathe down in the tank. Not only did it look and smell repulsive, but the cloud of gnats and flies seemed to be everywhere. Whenever I inhaled, some of them flew up into my nose or mouth. As I sneezed the bugs out of my nose, I thought I noticed a few bones in the bucket of rotting pickles. I assumed the bones were from a long dead bird or frog, which tended to find a way into a closed tank every now and then end up drowning in the brine. I did not dwell on this thought too long though. I was too focused on trying to ignore my surroundings. I watched as Jared grabbed onto a few rotting pickles, but they turned to mush in his hand, and fell back into the brine. I shook my head and laughed as Jared shouted curses and insult after insult at John.

"Christ, John, it smells like you farted!" Jared gagged, "What? You couldn't make it to the toilet?"

“Jared!”

“It smells like shit down here! I’m gonna puke!”

“Go ahead.” Rusty, another longtime employee said as he peered into the tank, grinning like a child, “You’ll make it smell a thousand times better.” Sadly, he was right.

“Why didn’t you clean this out in June!?” Jared snapped, gagging as he inhaled the air inside the tank.

“Just to make you suffer.” Rusty laughed as he walked away, leaving John to watch me work, and Jared fuss about our job.

“Rusty! Get back here and clean this out! I sure as hell won’t do it!”

“Jared!” I spat, fed up with his constant complaining, “Shut up! I’m sick of listening to you whine and cry like a little girl!”

Above us, John erupted in laughter at my comment. While John was laughing, Jared clapped his hands together, and showed me the palm of his shredded orange gloves, which was covered with the squashed bodies of bugs. I nodded, pretending to be interested as I plunged my shovel back into the rotting brine.

Thinking I was distracted, Jared reached out and grabbed my shovel, and pulled it towards him as he screamed, “Give me the shovel!” The gloves Jared was wearing, after all, had a fair amount of holes in them, and the mushy pickles, and whatever decomposed in the brine, was now filling his gloves, and soaking his hand. I let go of the shovel, deciding to at least let him have a tool instead of letting him use his bare hands.

The sickly colored brine that had been picked up by my shovel flew onto Jared’s face, and into his open mouth as he pulled the shovel towards him. John and I erupted in laughter as Jared gagged and spat, trying to get the taste of the decomposing waste out of his mouth. I leaned against the side of the tank, trying to hold back my laughter as John fell against the side of the tank. Jared was prancing around the tank, gagging and crying, only adding to the humor.

Now, in each tank, there is a small dimple, a foot or so lower than the rest of the tank. It is there so rain water can be sucked out of clean tank. Normally, the odds of stepping in it are slim, assuming you are careful, and watch where you are walking. Unfortunately for Jared, prancing around and complaining like a child isn’t the smartest thing to do down in the tanks. John and I lost it when Jared stepped in the dimple, and fell face first into the foul smelling brine. When he pulled his face out of the liquid, solidified, mud-like brine came out with him, stuck to his face, while John and I continued laughing. It took a while for us to pull ourselves together, but we went right back to work the instant we stopped laughing. Jared kept his mouth shut for the rest of his time in the tank. John and I were different. We laughed and joked about Jared’s situation for the rest of the day, much to his carnage. When we were finished, John lowered the ladder into the tank, and watched as Jared quickly climbed out, thanking God that he was finally free. Luckily for him, Jared lived less than a block away from the factory. He could go change out of his cloths during our next break.

Free from the nightmare, Jared and I picked up the buckets and ladder, and made our way back to Tank 88. When we arrived, I placed the ladder in the tank, and stood aside. It was Jared’s turn. Jared began to climb down the ladder as I moved to throw the shovel down to him.

“Oh my God!” Jared shouted.

Thinking something had happened, I peered down into the tank, seeing Jared standing in the knee-deep brine, looking up at me with a wide grin. I looked down at him in confusion as I dropped the shovel into his hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“It smells like a field of daises down here!”

JUDGE’S COMMENTS

I very much enjoyed this glimpse into the world of pickle-making (although I’m also glad I’m not crazy about pickles, now that I have this new knowledge). The writer introduces us vividly to the realities of pickle-making, with the added dimension of the underlying conflict between Mark and Jared, combined with John’s older, wiser perspective. It’s a situation dying to be written about, with a satisfying ending as well. If you revise this, make it even tighter with more “showing.”

*Catherine Frerichs is retired after many years of teaching writing, literature, and other humanities courses at Glen Oaks Community College, Albion College, and, most recently, Grand Valley State University. She is the author of *Desires of the Heart: A Daughter Remembers Her Missionary Parents* (Cold River Studio, 2010), in which she uses her parents’ letters, journals, and other research to write about her parents’ 40 years of working in Papua New Guinea and the costs to their children. Currently, she is working on a book that explores her relationship with her three Sudanese children whom she foster-parented for seven years and who have remained her children.*