

Catfish Gods

By Weston Ochse

© 1999

Note To Reader -This story originally appeared in the bestselling Darktales publication, **Scary Rednecks and Other Inbred Horrors**. This groundbreaking collection will be republished in the fall of 2003 in hardback by Medium Rare Books. At the end of the story, check out the new cover for the collection. While you're at it, see if you can get your hands on a copy of the sequel collection, **Appalachian Galapagos: A Scary Rednecks Collection**.

Trey sat on the community dock staring out across the green August water of Chicamauga Reservoir. His tanned legs swung gently. His fingers gripped the rough gray wood as thoughts of mortality tripped through his thirteen-year-old mind.

His grandfather had died six months ago and there were times when the heat and the bickering of his family and the memory of the loss became so much that he needed to be alone. Times like that he'd sit and remember every word the old man had spoken. Remember every action. Every smile.

All grandfathers are special, but Trey felt his was even more so. It was as if the man's mere presence could calm the world. It was as if he was a God and when Gods die, one never forgets.

The dock was where Trey went when he needed to remember and think. Other than his bed, it was the one place he spent most of his time. His first fight, his first bass, the first time he slid his trembling fingers along the curve of a breast as he massaged oil into the soft skin of an older high school girl—all had taken place on the dock. Called the Community Dock, it had been abandoned by the city years before he moved in. Although the access was grown over with tall weeds, a path had been pounded into the red Tennessee dirt by a faithful herd of children who now called the dock their own. The dock was a sacred place where parents never tread.

There was one month a year when nobody could swim in the lake and this was the month. It made the interminably hot days long and filled with a hundred attempts to ease the constant boredom. The only good thing was that the mosquitoes had been all been killed when the TVA men lowered the water level by several feet, leaving the eggs to dry and die along the muddy beaches of the Tennessee lake. The side effect, of course, was that long weeds grew up from the lake bottom as the sun, for the first time since winter, finally managed to plumb the depths, arousing the lake's deadly kudzu cousin. The weeds were as thick as a wrist and halted fishing, boating, and now swimming since they found Billy Prescott drowned last year. They said the weed had wrapped around him a dozen times as if the leafy weed arms had reached out and snagged him, but that was just something the grownups said to scare the kids away.

At least he was pretty sure it was.

So even with the lull in swimming, and the death of his grandfather and the possibility of cthulhu weeds searching for sustenance, Trey's thirteen-year-old mind identified his freedom and the golden sunset against the green water as a rare time he would remember when he was old and the lessons of school and the minutiae of life long forgotten.

The next day dawned ugly with the brightness of the summer sun dulled by the dishwater sky. The waves of the slate gray lake seemed to reach up as if they could free the oppressed light.

Trey struggled out of bed and plodded into the kitchen. The coldness of the sky did nothing to alleviate the humidity, sweat immediately forming as a second skin. He poured himself a tall orange juice and held the glass against his face.

As he drank, he walked to the floor-to-ceiling window and eyed the driveway. Only the old Ford was left. His parents had driven to Jacob Mountain for a Sunday gathering—*part business, part fun*, they'd said. He'd been invited, but had pretended to be sick and promised to stay in bed until they returned. At thirteen, his parents had been slowly lengthening his leash and today was the first day they had ever let him free.

Trey smiled. And he and Greg had planned it well. Today was their fishing day and they were going to try the loading dock across the inlet at the old TNT plant which was rumored to be the deepest place in the entire lake -- with the exception of the dam itself, of course. Every week, tarp shrouded barges could be seen be loaded with Army's secret stuff. If all the tales were even half true, then there were fish down there as large as automobiles.

Trey had dressed and was getting the gear together in the garage when Greg swung around the corner of the driveway toting his favorite rod and an oversized tackle box.

"What's up, Trey? You ready for a little fishing? Ready to catch the big one?"

Trey nodded. Greg was three years younger, but a good friend nonetheless. When it came to fishing, age didn't matter anyway. As long as you were patient and followed a few basic rules, it was God's will that sent the fish your way. At least that's what his grandfather used to say.

"Go ahead and take the poles down to the dock. I'm gonna get the battery out of the car."

"Are you sure we ain't gonna get into trouble about this?" asked Greg, his blue eyes worried under his shag of red hair.

"Naw. They'll never even find out. They ain't supposed to be back until after dark anyway and we'll be done long before that."

"What if we actually catch one of them beasts?"

It was Old Man Hassle that called them *beasts* and Greg was at the age to believe everything the old caretaker said. Trey was pretty certain they wouldn't see any catfish that big, but twenty-five or thirty pounders were fairly common.

"Shit. If we bring one in, I'll just tell the folks I was feeling better. I'll tell them you and me went fishing from the dock. They won't be real happy, but Dad will be so impressed with the fish, he'll shut momma up."

Greg grinned from ear to ear, the dream of a huge fish and his best friend's intelligence was going to make this a day to remember.

They slid the yellow canoe from under the community dock and Trey pressed his sneaker against the footpad that was the trolling motor's accelerator. He'd snuck it from the downstairs storeroom, its very presence among old boxes and broken tools creating the idea to fish by the TNT dock. The dock was too far to paddle, so the small motor was what made the trip possible.

The motor had been a gift from his grandfather to his father and had yet to be used. Trey felt a sadness in that and saw his use of the old motor as a way to be closer to his grandfather. In his heart, he knew the old man wouldn't mind. He could almost see him now, standing in heaven, a martini grasped in his large hands staring down and wishing his grandson luck.

The weather had worsened. Brackish two-foot swells made the going slow and difficult in the small boat. Greg sat in the prow gripping the seat with both hands. When Trey guided them around the larger clumps of weeds, both of them were wary of getting them caught in the motor. Occasionally, they'd pass a fish held just under the water in the unrelenting grip of the weed, eyes milky and rotten.

The air was heavy with humidity, their shirts and shorts already sopping with sweat. The scent of honeysuckle drifted from the shore on the wind, mixing with the smell of rotting fish and the heady scent of the weeds. Breathing was hard during any August in Tennessee, but upon the lake's surface it was almost impossible. Both boys alternately held their breath against the foul smells of deadness and the sweetness of the surrounding forest.

They'd both grown up on the lake, their summers filled with days where shoes and shirts were left indoors as they tried to become one with the sun and the water. When they weren't fishing or mowing lawns for some extra money, they were swimming around the community dock. Their favorite sport was underwater tag, spending more time holding their breath under than they did playing above.

During those long games, Trey often imagined he knew how a fish felt, chased and cornered by a fisherman. He could hold his breath for over two minutes and would slither in and around the old wooden pilings, propelling himself from one end of the dock to the other in his efforts to escape the touch of his friends. The only greater feeling was when he shot to the surface for that breath of air that he needed for another dive.

Often, when his mother and father were fighting and he found himself down on the dock, crying and wishing to be someone else, he would pray to the Gods of the fishes. He would beg to be released from his human bonds and become one with the water -- a true fish. Their lives were simple and he envied the pleasure of the water, imagining himself too smart for the hook, plumbing the depths and coasting with the current.

Trey had often thought that of all the fishes to choose from he'd wish to become a catfish. Their lives were spent on the bottom, gliding and discovering the cast-off treasures of their human hunters. They moved with the slow stately purposefulness of kings. They lived long lives and grew to be immense. He remembered the picture he saw in the Guinness Book of World Records, the jaw of the fish large enough to swallow a small boy.

And then there were the stories of Old Man Hassle. He wasn't the only one who talked about it -- everyone had heard the rumors -- but it was the old caretaker of the community dock who spoke of it more than anyone else.

The lake was only about fifty years old and wasn't the sort of place to hold things ancient and mysterious. Still, divers would descend every few months to check the dam's integrity, searching for any cracks or holes in the millions of tons of concrete that could threaten the greater part of Chattanooga sitting just down river as a magnificent southern gem. During the years, old wrecks of cars and trains had been dumped along the base to add to the width. These rusting fortifications were deadly to the divers, some becoming caught in the tangle of twisted metal as they inspected and pretended to be fishes. Even so, there was no end to divers who wanted to delve the lakes deepest depths. The pay was supposedly the highest of all, and the list was long.

And that same list moved quickly as the divers went down, came back up and swore never to enter the lake again. It was the catfish

that sent them scurrying back to the surface, arriving screaming and babbling incoherently. They spoke of catfish as big as Ford LTDs and Lincoln Towncars that swam up to stare at them as they inspected the aging concrete.

People said it was all the old cars that had been dumped down in the lake's depths that provided them with their source of measurement and it was this single thing that made people believe the stories. It was also what had kept people coming from everywhere in attempts to catch the mythical beasts.

Trey and Greg crossed the barrier from the haven of the green weed and shallower water, to the black mysteriousness of the deeper water. They breathed a sigh of relief to be safe from Billy Prescott's fate. Greg turned in his seat and began preparing his rod, attaching a number six hook and opening a can of corn with an old P-38.

As they moved to the fishing hole, they found themselves in the shadow of the immense dock where the barges were loaded. They stared at the pilings, easily three times larger than any telephone pole and covered with a black coating of tar that kept the water from rotting the important timber. The dock itself rose at least a hundred feet above them, a thousand stray wisps of fishing line from the large tires bolted to the side evidence of bad casts and impossible snags.

Trey cut the motor.

They drifted for a moment and then stilled.

The dock was protected from the wind by a small peninsula of trees, creating calm water where even the brown bubbles of pollution remained immovable. As Greg dropped his line in the water, Trey turned and tightened the clamps on the motor. It would be his death if it fell over the side. Like the battery between his feet, the motor was *off limits*. As long as it didn't break or sink, however, he felt sure that his father would never find out.

Mere moments later the smaller boy stood up and screamed in delight as he reeled in a rather pathetic bluegill.

"Greg. Sit down. Are you stupid? You're gonna dump the boat," said Trey as he gripped both sides, attempting to steady the rocking.

"But I got one. I got one," said the younger boy, smiling happily.

"Shit, man. You got bait. After a few more of those, then we'll really start fishing."

Greg sat down and frowned a little as he removed the hook from the brittle lips of the flapping fish. Like all kids with scars on their

hands, he was careful to avoid the sharp spines along the small fish's back. He tossed it into the middle of the boat where it wiggled wretchedly.

"You know what Old Man Hassle said, don't you?" asked Greg, casting a line again.

"That old coot says a lot of things. I wouldn't believe too much of what he says. My daddy says he's an old drunk, anyway," replied Trey, also tossing in a line.

It was Old Man Hassle that had given Trey the idea to try the old Army Docks for catfish, but he wouldn't let his younger friend know exactly how much he really liked the old man.

"Yeah. My mom says the same thing, but still, he's been around forever." Greg cursed as he missed the strike of a fish. He brought the empty hook into the boat, slid on a kernel of corn and tossed it back over the side.

"So what does he say?" asked Trey, pretty sure he knew the answer already.

"He said the biggest of all the catfish live down there," said Greg, pointing into the blackness. "He said this is the place where they lay their eggs. Where they grow new ones."

Trey had heard about the big ones, but the egg story was a new one.

"Old Man Hassle says it's the catfish that make the weeds grow," continued the smaller boy. "Like a fence to keep other fish out. And people."

Trey scoffed. "That's plain stupid. How could fish make the weeds grow?" It was science, biology rather that made it occur. His biology teacher called it photosynthesis. It was the sun, reaching down to the lake floor, making long forgotten seeds blossom and bloom. "I think the old coot was drunk when he told you that. Anyway, it's the TVA men killing the mosquitoes. As far as the eggs go, they can grow anywhere. This isn't the only place."

"No. Really, Trey. Think about it? It makes sense. Old Man Hassle says they're gods. Catfish Gods. He says they have the power to stop people from catching them if they want. It's the bad ones that we catch," said Greg, persisting in his stupidity.

"It makes no sense at all. It's plain stupid, Greg. How can a fish be a God?" Trey shook his head. "Why would you want to catch them, then? Catch a God? Impossible."

Greg frowned and turned in his seat, glancing slowly from Trey to the fishing gear. He was a pretty strict Catholic and was going through catechism. Finally he smiled.

"Yeah, it is pretty stupid," said Greg, smiling.

Trey could tell that his logic had sunk in. The smile was near to one of worship, but then he was used to them. The littler boy looked up to him, and more often than not, would do anything to impress him.

It took half an hour before they'd brought in enough bluegill and crappie for bait. That was the fun about catfish. You never had to buy bait for them. Trey had learned long ago, it was the guts that they preferred over anything else. Disgusting as it was, at least it kept the girls from fishing for them. Once you got used to the tiny intestines, kidneys, bloody brine and fish poop and learned how to hold your breath, it wasn't a problem.

Last year, after he'd heard of the guts, right before the weeds took over, he had been in the same canoe fishing along the muddy flats just off shore from the houses. He had his trout rig and was drifting guts from a large hook, the bait held down by a large sinker, bumping along the bottom. It was his first time using the guts, and he wouldn't have done it except he was fresh out of worms and had snagged all the lures he had stolen from daddy's tackle box on sunken stumps and trash. He really wasn't expecting to catch anything, just enjoying the wind off the water and the sun, hoping for a tan that would carry him through the winter. When the fish first hit, he thought he'd caught another snag. But when the *snag* began to pull the boat out deep, he knew it was an incredible fish.

It took him an hour of alternately paddling and pulling, always sure to keep tension on his four pound test at all times, before he finally reached the shore. It took another ten minutes for him to haul in the biggest fish he had ever caught. To that day his father hardly believed that his own son had brought in a twenty-five pound catfish on such microscopic line.

That had been his first catfish and catching it made him feel more than human. Soon, he found himself on the docks, late at night fishing with trot lines laced with multiple hooks. He would sneak out, having left his rod and gear under his window before bedtime, and make his way through the darkness to the dock. He rarely caught

anything and would wake up near dawn when the chill of the new sun made it too uncomfortable to remain near the water. His mother would pester him about at his sleeping in, finally waking him around noon, and criticizing him for his laziness. Trey never gave away the truths of his nights, however. They were too special, communing with the sky and the water, thinking of all his grandfather had taught him about fishing and life. He enjoyed the peace and feeling of being separated from everything, yet still connected to the universe. As he held the lines, he pretended he was floating in the sky, the water a reflection of the universe.

Trey had to gut all the fish while Greg stared away, pretending to ignore the pop of released flesh and the blood that seeped into the bottom of the boat, making the water a disarming pink. Finished, Trey placed the corpses in a white plastic bag and piled the guts in a small bucket.

"Alright," he said smiling. "You can look now. I'm done."

"What? I was just staring at the water. Looking for some fish."

Trey smiled wider. He'd leave his friend alone and not mention the fact that there was no way his friend could see fish in the dark brackish water.

"Help yourself," he said gesturing at the pile that was already drawing green-bottomed flies. "It's time to catch one of your Gods."

Greg glared for a moment, wondering if it was an insult or a joke, then grabbed a length of purple intestine and placed it on the new rig. They were using a triple swivel with a sinker offset from the large hook so the bait could drift a few tantalizing inches from the muddy bottom.

When they'd let out enough line, they both leaned back and stared at the slow moving sky. On occasion, they would follow a particular cloud, watching as it changed shapes until finally disappearing into the kudzu covered forest that was their horizon.

Finally, Greg's pole doubled over sending him standing as he tried to control the dancing rod. The canoe rocked madly. Trey struggled to still it by shifting his weight. Greg screamed at the top of his lungs as he began to reel furiously.

"Slow down. Slow down, Greg. You're going to break the line," admonished Trey. "Slow and steady. Slow and steady." His grandfather had taught him that. Hell, he'd taught him everything he knew about fishing except what his dad had taught him about creek

fishing. Too many people got too excited and lost their catch. Fishing was a tough thing.

Greg ignored him, his pole making a right angle towards the water. His reeling slowed, less from his effort than the fish's far below. It began to pull the small boat and Trey spun and toggled the trolling motor on. He maneuvered the boat to provide a steady pull against the tug of the captured fish.

It had to be a catfish.

And a big one.

The excitement was contagious, and soon Trey found himself shouting and encouraging Greg. He prayed that the line or the rod wouldn't snap. He prayed that his friend wouldn't get jerked in, forgetting to let go and drown in the murky depths. Trey couldn't help but remember the words of Old Man Hassle, imagining that his young friend had a God on the end of his line. He prayed to the fishes themselves, begging them to let these two boys catch one.

Just as suddenly as the hit, however, there came the snap as the line gave away to the combined pressures of the fish and the reverse pull of the boat. Greg fell back hard, hitting his head against the metal rim of the canoe. Trey stopped the engine immediately and managed to catch the rod before it fell into the lake.

Greg sat up slowly, tears flowing from his eyes.

"Are you okay, Greg?" asked Trey, the wake of the fight still sending ripples across the water.

"Yeah. Yeah. Fuck me," the little boy said, wiping his cheeks with the front of his T-shirt. "I just hurt my head is all."

Trey watched him rubbing the growing bump and knew that it was a deeper pain. He'd almost caught the big one. He'd had it and it was gone.

But that's what made fishing special and so unique. You always tried for that bigger fish, every moment a chance. When you lost it, it was forever lost and you had to start over, not where you left off. When you finally caught it, the glory was so fleeting. It was no time at all before you went looking for an even larger one.

"Shit. That was a big one too. Damn big," said Trey.

"Yeah. Damn big," repeated Greg, still staring at the water.

"I wonder if it has any brothers?" asked Trey. "I still got my line in the water. You better fix yours."

Greg spent a few moments staring longingly at the lake, then hurried to refit his line.

Trey returned to his own line and argued with himself over the need to check the bait. It was an important argument, one where many experienced fishermen made mistakes. If you pulled it up as the fish was contemplating the catch, your chance was forever lost. If you left it in the water with an empty hook, you were wasting the day. It was a tough choice, but Trey decided to leave his hook alone.

He'd chosen wisely. It was right after they finished their egg salad sandwiches when Trey's rod buckled.

Trey was caught off guard and he almost lost the rod as it slipped and banged against the edge of the boat. It wasn't until the last moment that he managed to grip it, already half in the water.

Trey jerked the rod out of the water, partly to set the hook and partly because he couldn't help himself as he stumbled back, knocking Greg over in the process. Somehow, he managed to stand and felt the thrumming of the taught line.

He immediately knew it was the largest catfish he had ever latched onto.

Trey squatted by the motor and struggled to turn it on. It gave a hum, but when he glanced over the edge, he saw the blades turning excruciatingly slowly, evidence of a dying battery. He glanced over his shoulder and eyed the community dock, half a mile away. With only one paddle, it would take forever to reach.

Trey decided against the motor and screamed for Greg to reel in his own line. Momentarily annoyed, Greg soon complied and pulled his line in. The two changed places. All the while, the canoe was being pulled inexorably towards the pilings. It was mere moments before the front of the boat hit the sticky wood and with his free hand, Trey grabbed hold. It was better than being drug out into the lake, or even the weeds. What he prayed for, however, was that the fish wouldn't wrap the line around the great pole that speared the floor far far beneath him.

Luckily, he didn't have his usual trout rig, but the heavy-duty rig he'd been given last Christmas and it wasn't called the Ugly Stick for nothing. The line was twenty pound test and could handle upwards of a hundred pounds if used skillfully. The tip of the rod continued to dance and jump as he could feel a long hulk, struggling far below to get free.

Then suddenly the line went slack. Trey stopped reeling and cried out, tears filling his eyes, just as they had filled Greg's before. Then with an insight drawn from experience he realized the fish could be attempting to surface. Wiping his eyes, he redoubled his fight, reeling the line in furious and quick. He couldn't match the speed of the fish, however, and when the beast surfaced, Greg screamed.

Its gaping maw, at least two feet across, snapped at the air on the left side of the boat as it rose out of the water. The head of the great fish slammed into the water with a huge splash, soaking the boys and the boat as it disappeared silently back into the murk.

Then something rammed them from beneath sending Greg flying into the water and Trey flailing to the bottom of the canoe. A tail smacked the surface of the several times on the right side of the canoe.

Then chaos returned to order as the fish disappeared and the urgency of the moment subsided.

Greg, treading water, began to alternately scream and gurgle as he panicked, trying to kick the fish and swim back to the boat, simultaneously.

"Trey. Trey. Gggg-help me!"

Trey picked himself slowly up from the cramped floor of the canoe, now covered in fish guts and soaked with the bloody mixture from his earlier cutting. The rod forgotten, he grabbed the paddle and held it towards his struggling friend. Within seconds Greg was back in the boat, hyperventilating and crying.

"Jesus fucking Christ. Did you see the size of that thing?"

"Did I see it? It almost *ate* me!" screamed back Greg.

Trey was about to tell him how stupid that was, then stopped. It *had* been the biggest fish he'd ever seen. Too many times he'd swum in the deep water, the *Jaws* soundtrack playing in his mind. Even though no one had ever heard of a person being eaten in a freshwater lake by a shark or a fish, and even though no one had ever been chewed up by a catfish, he couldn't help but wonder.

Trey glanced around and saw that his rod was gone. It was surely on the bottom of the lake being drug around by his own Moby Dick. He maneuvered Greg into the seat and noticed the young boy was beginning to shiver uncontrollably. Trey jerked off his shirt and replaced Greg's with his dry one. He ordered his friend to remove his

shoes and massaged them. Then he worked at the boy's arms and shoulders until he could see the blood return.

All the while, the both of them were crying, their chance at greatness, twice removed.

"I wanna go home," said Greg, trying hard to stop crying. "I don't want to fish anymore."

"Okay. Okay," said Trey, wanting to stay and try again. The lure of all fishermen who had just lost the big one was upon him, but he had lost his rod. There was only Greg's and there was an unwritten rule never to fish with anyone else's pole. His grandfather had said that *if you caught something on someone else's rig, it wouldn't really be your own*. The great fish, if it could be recaptured, would belong to Greg and that just wouldn't do.

Trey gazed at the sky. A storm was moving in. Hard gray clouds pushed aside a summer sky. They probably had only fifteen minutes before it hit -- just long enough for Greg to dry off before he became soaked again. It would take twice that to make it back across the inlet to the community dock. Trey eyed the immense TNT dock and thought about taking shelter beneath it for a time. He had no idea how long the storm would last however, and Greg really needed to get home and into dry clothes.

"Shit," said Trey, accepting his fate.

It was then that he saw his fishing pole about five feet under the water and wrapped around one of the pilings. The Ugly Stick had snapped in two and the line appeared to be all that was holding it in place.

"Look! There's my pole," he said pointing into the water.

Greg turned slowly to where Trey pointed, then sat straight when he saw the unmistakable lines of the rod. "Maybe you can save the reel."

"Sure," said Trey. Perhaps he'd found a small happiness in the tragedy. He'd thought it lost forever. No telling what his father would say or do to him when he discovered that it was missing. As he drew closer, he noticed the tip. It thrashed once, twice, then a series of hard jerks, creating bubbles that rose to the surface. "Holy Freaking Cow. Look at that! The fish. It's still on. The fish is still on the line!"

Instead of being thrilled, Greg got a worried look on his face. "Don't go in there. Don't go into the water." Greg shook his head

hard and stared into the bottom of the boat. "It just too big. Too damn big."

Trey watched his friend for a second and then glanced back at the fishing pole. He let his eyes drift along the piling and for the first time, noticed there were bars jutting out from the sides. Like those on telephone poles, they'd been previously camouflaged by bits of seaweed and moss.

It was indeed a huge fish, but *Jaws* could never happen here. All Trey had to do was climb down, cut the line and then get his reel back. His dad was going to wonder where it was anyway, considering it was a Christmas present and Trey's favorite gift. If they went to the mountains next week, he would never be able to explain it away.

"Naw, it's okay. The fish is gone. I know that. I'm just going to get the pole and the reel. My father would kill me if I lost the whole rig. Anyway, if he finds out it's missing, my parents will find out what we're doing today. And my parents will tell your parents and then we'll be grounded from the lake all summer."

At the threat of grounding, Greg brought his head up sharply. The lake was their life. Trey watched as the emotions sifted through intelligence, expressions dancing on his friend's face.

Finally, Greg sighed and nodded his head slowly. "Okay, but hurry up," he said. "And be careful."

Hurry up and be careful, thought Trey. Those were two things that shouldn't go together. He wasn't going to hurry, but he would certainly be careful.

Trey paddled the canoe back up to the piling, the shadow of the dock placing them in darkness. The smell of decay was strongest here. He noticed the eddies of black oil and multicolored gasoline-slick mixed with trash and the brown bubbles of pollution. If the lake was Heaven, this was Hell. Trey leaned past Greg and used the short length of rope attached to the front of the boat to tie it firmly into place. He removed his tennis shoes and placed them on the seat. He stood and stared at the nasty water, not wanting to enter, but needing to get the reel.

"Alright. Watch me, man. Everything is gonna be okay. I'm just going to get the rod and I'll be right back." Trey put a hand on Greg's shoulder. "Stay cool."

With that, he placed a foot on the metal edge of the canoe and pushed off. The water embraced him as he, feet first, sliced deeply from warm to cool water. He pushed himself back to the surface and side-armed his way over to the piling. Counting to three by thousands, hyperventilating until his lungs were full, he descended pulling himself down using the slippery spikes. The rod was deeper than he'd originally thought, probably fifteen feet.

Through the murky water, he saw the rod and the line wrapped around the piling six or seven times. It was the heaviness of the line that had saved his reel. The tugging had stopped, but he doubted the fish was entirely gone. Maybe he still had a chance to catch it. He really didn't need to cut the line. He could deceive the fish. After all, he was human and he had the superior brain. Trey depressed the reel and let out about five feet of slack. Careful not to tug on the line still attached to the fish, he began to unwind the rod from the piling. He was almost finished when he paused and returned to the surface.

"What the hell are you doing, Trey? I thought you were gonna cut the line."

Trey breathed heavily across the water and grinned. "I got everything under control. When I come back up, I'm gonna hand you the rod. Hold onto it tight until I get back into the boat."

"Don't do it, Trey," begged Greg, his eyes beginning to tear up again. "It's too big. It's gonna eat you. I'm telling you, it is too big."

Trey almost called Greg a crybaby, but laughed instead. "It's not gonna eat me, Greg. Don't get your panties in a wad. I got everything under control." He reached up and punched his friend in the arm. "Hey! Trust me."

By the look in the smaller boy's eyes, he could tell trust was being smothered by fear. Trey cocked his head, winked hard, then, after another count of three, descended back down along the piling.

In no time, he managed to free the rod and line from the piling. He was about to ascend to the surface when he was jerked impossibly hard. Trey surged through the water plunging deeper and deeper. He'd gone fifty feet by the time he thought to let go of the rod. Even after he released it, the incredible momentum continued as he was propelled towards the bottom.

The pressure on his head had become incredible. He felt like a knife was being thrust into the center of his brain. Thankfully,

something tinge of sanity within his mind kept him from screaming and releasing the precious air he needed to survive.

Finally, his descent slowed. The bottom was somewhere near, hidden by shadows below. Trey glanced upwards and like a lighter darkness, glimpsed the faraway surface. Or what he thought was the surface. He was too deep. Deeper than he had ever been before.

Trying hard not to panic, he began to ascend as slowly as possible because of the immense pressure being exerted upon his body. He achieved only a few feet before he felt his ascent halt. Something gripped each ankle painfully.

Trey stared down and watched in horror as weeds wrapped around his ankle. In the almost darkness, he watched as two more moved for him like tentacles from some great beast, encircling his wrists and pulling his arms out hard. Many more waved below, as if beckoning him deeper. The decaying corpses of a hundred fish stared back at him, as did the skulls of animals, picked clean and gleaming.

Trey thrashed, attempting to free himself from the living weed, realizing he was quickly running out of air. As his air depleted, instead of his vision dimming, he saw the water brightening. Although he was very deep, he could now see through the water like it was near the surface and clear.

A figure came into his vision, rising gradually from the depths beneath him. The only movements were the minute openings and closings of the mouth and the almost intelligent waving of its long whiskers. When the catfish was even with Trey's head and staring straight into his eyes, it opened its mouth wide revealing rows of bony teeth and pulsating gills.

Trey slammed his eyes shut. He jerked at his bonds. He refused to see what was about to eat him and felt the warmth of urine seep from his cold shriveled penis. When the first of the whiskers brushed against his face, he screamed, releasing all of his air, condemning him to death.

He finally lost even enough strength to scream and his body reflexively went to suck in the brackish water of the lake, filling his lungs with what he could never breathe. But it didn't happen that way. Trey felt a warmth along his face and neck. It flowed into his chest. A calmness filled him, stilling his panic and his need to breathe. Slowly, Trey opened his eyes to stare into the bottomless eyes of the

catfish's. His fear had left him and he watched as the whiskers, dozens of them, caressed his skin. The mouth opened and closed and he couldn't help but admire the synchronization of the gills.

Trey hung in the water, held fast by the weeds, staring into the huge maw of a fish that he had wanted to catch. The need to breathe had departed him and he wondered if he had drowned. He wondered if he was dead.

Perhaps.

The voice was in his head and filled him with the fullness of love. It was the same feeling as when Shelby had told him she loved him for the first time. Every part of his body had been consumed by the heavy electric feeling of happiness. If this was death, he wanted more of it.

Love is a wonderful thing. It is life.

Yes it is, he felt himself thinking. *It transcends death. Makes life good living,* as his grandfather had said.

He realized, without panic and as if it was utterly sane, that the fish was speaking to him.

Am I dead? he asked.

Perhaps, came the same reply.

How am I breathing?

You are not.

Then I am dead. Although he said it, the thought held no terror for him.

Perhaps.

Why do you keep saying that? Why do you keep saying perhaps?

The choice is yours.

The answer confused Trey. Maybe the fish was mad for his attempts to catch him. Even with the love pervading his body, he laughed at the insanity of the concept. How could a fish be mad? How could it have feelings? Still--

Are you angry?

No. It is the way of the world.

To hunt you, to kill you? That doesn't make you mad.

It is the way.

Then what is the choice you speak of?

Would you die for me?

For you?

Trey was sure he didn't understand the question. Die for a fish? For a catfish? Why should he give his life up for a -- but then it wasn't just a fish. Could a fish do this? Trey remembered what Greg had said about the Catfish Gods. It was stupid, but he was alive, not breathing. Only a God could make that happen. He didn't know what to say. Trey thought of Billy Prescott. Had he been asked the question? Had he answered wrong?

I don't understand.

Would you die for me?

Trey stared hard at the fish hovering in the water before him, caressing tender whiskers along his cheeks. It was easily a hundred pounds. Maybe double that. Its eyes were bottomless black pools that held a strange warmth. He could not deny the majesty of the beast. It was magnificent. It would be perfect above the mantle of any fireplace, eclipsing the largest swordfish. It would make a bass of any size appear to be a pathetic wannabe minnow.

Trey knew his answer was important, but he knew, as well, that the fish understood his every thought.

Why should I die for you? I don't understand. He stole himself for death, but pleaded desperately for an answer.

Because I would die for you.

The answer surprised him. A fish like this, powerful, magical -- a Catfish God -- would die for him? Truly, he was nothing special. Sure, Trey felt himself important, but in the greater universe, he was nothing. What would make this catfish die for him? He knew his mother would die for him. He knew his father would as well. And his grandfather, the old man wouldn't hesitate. Till this day, as he was kneeling before the casket, Trey had never told anyone that he had begged God to take him instead --to let his grandfather live again. If he died now -- if he was to perish down in the depths of Chicamaugua Reservoir -- maybe then he could see his grandfather again. Maybe he could make him some more martinis as the old man lorded over the world. Maybe he would see him smile.

Trey stared deep into the eyes of the fish, alien, but mysteriously human, searching for the answer. There, among the blackness, he saw the same look that Shelby, his mother, his father, his grandfather, even Greg, on occasion, had given him.

Instead of drowning, instead of feeling the quick burning warmth of a lungful of watery death, he felt the warmth of love. Unconditional and pure, it was there for him, just for being alive. Would grandfather want him to die for him? He pictured the old man's tall John Wayne features and knew the answer.

Yes. I would die for you.

Then you understand. Go in peace and live long.

The firm grip of the weeds suddenly released him and Trey felt himself floating towards the surface. He watched the imperious figure of the Catfish God until it had become one with the shadowy depths. It wasn't until his head bobbed to the surface that his body contracted and jackknifed. He automatically relented and allowed his body to breathe in the sweetness of the putrid, yet life-giving air of the dock.

"Trey. Trey. Trey," came the jubilant shouts.

Glancing up, he saw Greg, cheeks puffy and hair matted as if the storm had come and gone. His eyes were as red as his hair and his voice held the hoarseness of a widow.

"Trey. I thought you were dead," said the boy, tears renewing their slalom through his freckles. "It's been hours."

"Hours?" asked Trey absently as he levered himself into the boat. He examined the sky and saw that the sun was setting.

"I couldn't leave. I thought you were dead. I didn't know what to have to tell people. I didn't want to--"

Trey stared at his friend openly with a fondness that hadn't been there before. Greg noticed it and his eyes widened. Then his face went serious and he wiped his cheeks.

"I thought you were dead. How?"

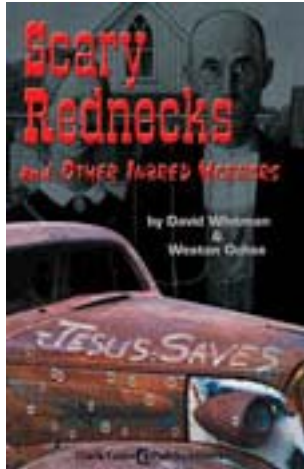
Trey shook his head. "I have no idea, man. All I know right now is that I love you for waiting."

"Yech," Greg said, poking his tongue between his lips and smiling. "You gay or something?"

Trey looked off toward the community dock and began to paddle. "Naw. Just happy to be here."

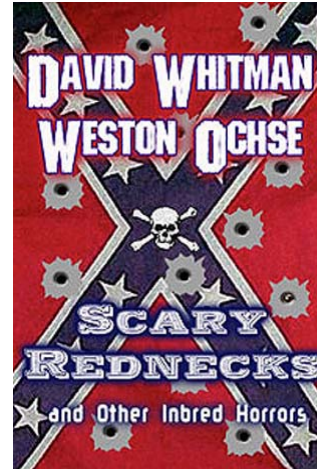
His grandpa used to say that.

That was then



[Click for more information](#)

This is now!



[Click for more information](#)

"...a note about Scary Rednecks. The more I read and re-read this collection by David Whitman and Weston Ochse, the more I am moved by the stories. I really can't recommend this one enough. I will say that it's more than its cover promises. Several of the stories are as touching as they are chilling. A few are hilarious. Almost all of them are absorbing. This is impressive." - Douglas Clegg

"Originally, I was looking forward to the book because of Edward Lee's glowing review of it in HELLNOTES. After meeting Weston, I was even more eager to read the book -- and hoping for the best because he's such a great guy. I doubted it would live up to the hype. But it's BETTER than the hype. I don't want to go overboard (odd choice of words, considering the SCARY REDNECK stories), but stories in the book will remind many readers of the good stuff by Edward Lee and Joe Lansdale and probably Bill Faulkner. There were times, reading some of them, when I was put in mind of Flannery O'Connor." -Richard Laymon

Introducing the Sequel



[Click for more information!](#)

