

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

“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

“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 par*