

SOULS OF THE HARVEST

Dave Hoing

You can't harvest a crop without killing something. A combine ain't particular, it cuts whatever's in its path. There's no malice in it, just a part of the season, like rain and heat. Food or nesting draws critters in, but come harvest the combine keeps rolling. Some run and live. Others don't, and don't.

After a good day's labor I like to sit on my back porch and breathe in the autumn air when it's thick with the smells of the earth. Clouds in the west promise rain, but up above stars speckle the night, old Orion coming around earlier now on his way to winter skies. Crickets chirp under the house and frogs sing in the ditches where water drains from the fields. And though they're almost done for the year, fireflies drift up out of the flattened crop. They shine their little lights like spaceships or angels come to carry away the souls of the beasts that offered themselves up to the harvest. Got fireflies in front and stars behind, and a land flat and dark as oceans stretching out into the night.

Used to be I could hear the old wood floors inside creaking about this time, and I knew Sal was heading out to join me, maybe have a smoke and a laugh. She'd bring me a beer and a cool wet cloth for my head and we'd chat about whatever news was on the TV that day.

No footsteps rattle the boards now but my own. Sal's been gone these several years, and my boys got called away to the city like boys do. So it was only me at the clinic this morning when the doctor's report come in. Somebody'd circled some splotches on an X-ray, looked like yellow crayon, and there was this paper full of big words. Doc

tried to explain, but hell, I said, the circles tell me all I need to know.

He said, you gonna be okay with this?

I said, sure, why not, and I went home, climbed into my combine, and farmed till sundown, same as yesterday.



The clouds have swallowed up the stars. I love a good storm, but there'll be no ruckus from this, just a gentle emptying of God's pockets. I walk out into the field as the first drops fall. Down by the gully where my boys used to help me make fence, I hold my hands out from my body and lift my face to the sky. The rain is cool in the sticky air, washing over me and cleaning my skin of the day's work. Nothing can wash away the stains inside, but the fireflies rise up around me, rise up through the rain and into the heavens, and I know, now, that there's a light for me here somewhere, too, waiting its turn. If the good Lord's coming for me, let him come. He can take whatever part of me he's entitled to, just leave the rest, leave me to lie down in this field and take root in the earth. That would be all right with me. It'd be all right. ☹️

DAVE HOING



Editor's note: We have room — I'll let Dave speak for himself.

I live in Waterloo, Iowa, with my stepdaughter Jovan (18), a cat named Toro (8), a puppy named Tree (3 months), and, of course, my wife Joni (age unavailable). The final member of the family, stepson Jon (23), has recently left home to see how he likes making his own way in the world. We haven't rented out his room just yet...

Since one doesn't generally get rich writing short stories, in real life I'm a Library Associate at the University of Northern Iowa, and have been for a very long time. (Sadly, one doesn't get rich doing that, either.) UNI is the poor relation among Iowa's three public universities, but it has produced such notables as Kurt Warner (quarterback for the Arizona Cardinals), with whom I once played basketball, Nancy Price (author of *Sleeping with the Enemy*), with whom I studied writing, and Robert Waller (author of *The Bridges of Madison County*), with whom I had no relationship whatsoever, other than to tell him when his books were due.

I'm a member of SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America), with publications in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Interzone*, *PostScripts*, *Century*, *Hub*, and others. Before the genre bug bit me I wrote and published mainly literary and mainstream fiction, with my work appearing in such magazines as *Short Story Journal*, *Crosscurrents*, *The Pacific Review*, *The Coe Review*, and *Jabberwocky*.

"Souls of the Harvest" marks a return to my literary/mainstream roots, but is also my first ever attempt at flash fiction. Damn, it was harder to write than stories of more traditional length! Still not sure I got it right, but it sure was fun trying.

My current project, still in progress, is a historical novel called *Hammond Falls*, co-authored with Roger Hileman. It's set primarily in Iowa between 1910-1940, with spatial stopovers in Paris, Dublin, Chicago, and Buffalo, plus occasional temporal side trips into present day. Written in literary style, with nary a whiff of fantasy or science fiction, its structure nevertheless uses some of the techniques of genre fiction.

Although creating a 100,000-word novel is a challenge, after all is said and done, I'm not sure it's as difficult as writing the 520-word "Souls of the Harvest." Go figure.