

## Purgatory

When I grew up in the American South, there were fish in the now-dry creek beds, people playing in the parks, shops open with food and clothing, and tolerable weather. That was then, and not that long ago.

There was enough for everyone - except for the power-hungry, self-righteous bigots who salved their insecurities with the domination of others in the name of religion, wicked charlatans controlling the masses with fear and superstition.

But in the end, even with all the forced piousness and mandatory church attendance, or perhaps because of it, all of the places of “worship” were destroyed by rival denominations: the self-implosion of religious fanaticism.

Still, the damage was done.

There should have been room for all of us, but there wasn't.

*Southern man, better keep your head  
Don't forget what your good book said  
Southern change gonna come at last  
Now your crosses are burning fast...*

“Southern Man” was a favorite of mine. It gave voice to the way I felt. It said it like it was. But playing the song in the heyday of the White American Christian Organization would have doomed one to hard labor or worse. There was no room for dissent.

I could never have published this book in that world, the world of WACO. But still, I write this tome with the hope that it will benefit someone, someday, perhaps after I am gone, after history has been rewritten and buried.

*Change what you can and accept what you can't*, to paraphrase the slogan. But now, for me, I know there's nothing I could have done to change anything. The world is the way it is, but it's not *my* world, nor has it changed me. For now I know - I am the same from the beginning.

I am Tod.

## 1.

Tod gazed blankly at the fluorescent ceiling. All a blur. Sounds: murmurs and clicks and bells and the annoying humming of blinding fluorescent lights above him. All strange and discordant, dissonant.

*It's a shame. The whole family. But a miracle the baby survived. Hmmm, hmmm. What a tragedy, and this close to Christmas.*

Tod heard the words, but having opened his eyes and ears for the first time only seconds ago, had no understanding of them.

He closed his eyes, longing for the warmth of the home he had just left, the free-floating effortless, the all-permeating, omnipresent sound-beyond-sound, the golden, weightless, timeless home that was already starting to fade from his memory. The voiceless sonority vibrated through him: *Home... Home... Home...*

He opened his eyes again, straining to focus on the beings standing around him in protective single-colored blood-stained attire and masks. They were completely alien to the newborn. Alien and frightening.

Tod closed his eyes again. The ethereal sound was fading into nothingness. He struggled to stay but to no avail; there was no

going back; he was stuck in this strange new world.

*We've reached out to the next of kin. There's a brother of the deceased father who will retrieve the baby in a few days. Lives on a farm in the South. The doctor sighed. They should never have made this trip so close to her due date in this ice storm. And the whole family. My God, what a way to begin a life!*

Baby Tod struggled with his own feelings of loss, unaware of a sister and brothers and parents he would never meet.

*At least the mother held on long enough for the child, a nurse consoled. Amazing when you see the shredded and burned Gideon's Bible she was carrying in the pocket of her dress.*