



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

founded in 1923, the Scholastic & Writing Awards is the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers in the U.S.

Stan Brakhage

Stan Brakhage (1933-2003), an experimental filmmaker, known for his non-narrative films, is considered one of the most important filmmakers of the 20th century. He received his Scholastic Art & Writing Award in 1951 for this short story.

Three Deaths and the Child

By STAN BRAKHAGE

I remember a hot day and dry grass and a fishpond that didn't lap. I remember a time when a little boy played with a gray kitten on the front lawn. All this happened long, long, ago. It was before Uncle George painted the house. It was even before the gray paint had begun to peel. The little boy was chubby and had blond hair. The kitten was called Paddy and was very young. It was still blue-eyed.

The water in the fishpond had become warm and scummy. A pussy-white foam ringed the pool and flecked the surface where decaying plants floated. The neatly piled rocks which edged the pool were streaked white with dried slime.

The kitten chased about through the dry, snapping bushes and played near the edge of the pool. The boy watched. Then the kitten sharpened its claws on the wooden Mother Goose that hovered over the pond. The claws were tiny but sharp, and bits of white paint chipped off the wood. The boy was angry and grabbed the kitten by the scruff of the neck. He felt the warm bristles of fur and heard the baby squeals and didn't spank the kitten. He squeezed it tight against him and stroked its back. He playfully pulled at the whiskers and allowed the milky teeth to chew on his finger. The pink tongue felt moist and rough against his skin. He loved the kitten. I knew he did.

He squeezed the kitten again. He squeezed too hard, and it cried and ran away through the dry grass. It ran to the edge of the pond and looked down at the orange and black fish which bumped along the concrete bottom. It pawed the surface of the water and then jumped back at the wetness. It sat on a stone and cocked its head and laid back its ears and watched the fish.

The little boy rushed to the side of the pool to see the fun. A heavy stench arose from the pond. The sun was very hot. The water plants festered in its glare. Fish moved slowly along the bottom. The boy wished that one would come to the surface and make a suck-suck sound so that the kitten would try to reach out and catch it. He loved the kitten. He lay on the dry grass while sweat trickled down his cheek like



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

founded in 1923, the Scholastic & Writing Awards is the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers in the U.S.

tears. He wanted to pick up the pet and squeeze it again, but he also wanted to laugh at its foolish efforts to catch the fish. To squeeze...to laugh. Gray, bristling fur. Little pointed ears...so intent...so funny. Short twitching tail—"Rat's tail," Mother had said. Slim, white legs—"Baby booties," the boy had said. Tiny, pink pads...nestled in the white paws...little pink-padded feet—"Little pink nose buds in the snow."

Splash! I don't remember whether the little boy actually pushed the kittle into the water. He moved the rock on which it was standing. I know he did that. He moved the rock to see it jump in terror. He wanted the gray fur to stand on end. He wanted it to make a sissssss noise. He wanted to see the baffled, wild look on its face. He wanted to laugh.

The startled water lapped against the rocks and sucked at the streaks of white. Foamy ooze whirled in the pool and dying plants bobbed on the surface. The boy waited for the kitten to swim. He waited for it to try to catch the frantic fish which darted orange and black streaks across the bottom of the pond. The gray fur was caught and lost in a web of green growth. The weedy mass trembled under the water and then became very still. The pool stopped lapping and seemed to draw together, as though to close some invisible mouth. Orange and black slid along the concrete again.

The boy called, "Mother...Mother!" Then he became frightened and said no more. He reached into the water and fumbled with the slimy growth. The gray fur was well covered. The pond was silent. He got up and brushed the bits of twigs and crusty earth that stuck to his arm. Then he walked slowly around to the back yard to see what else he could find to play with. There were some clouds in the west. They looked like white foam on blue water. Maybe it'll rain tomorrow, he thought.

II

I remember a boy named Larry. He was chubby and had blond hair. One of the boys had called him "fatty." That wasn't nice. The Sunday-school teacher had heard it and said it wasn't nice. The other boy had said, "I'm sorry, Larry." The Sunday-school teacher had made him say it. When she turned her back, the nasty had stuck his tongue out. That wasn't nice either.

Larry knew three things about himself, and he knew them very well. He knew his name, his age, and his address.

"My name is Larry Singleman. I'm seven years old, and I live at 873 East Bushwell Avenue." This was what he said when company came or when he was introduced to people. Everybody said that he was very cute. He also knew how to stand on his head and everybody said that was cute, too. Whenever company came to the house,



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

founded in 1923, the Scholastic & Writing Awards is the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers in the U.S.

they would ask to see Larry's dog, Muggsie, because Muggsie was also cute, and she knew how to do tricks.

She would stand up on her hind legs and Larry would dress her in the old beggar's coat or the Indian costume and war bonnet and everybody would laugh. Muggsie could roll over, jump through the hoop, play dead, and even smoke a pipe. Larry's mother had taught Muggsie, but she never said anything, and everybody thought that Larry had done it himself. Some people said that it was very clever of him to do such a thing.

Muggsie was a small black-and-white English terrier. When she was very young somebody had cut off her tail. Larry wondered why. His mother said it was because of a "fashion," like whether you wear a long or a short dress. Larry said it was mean and cruel.

"It's a mean, nasty thing to do."

Muggsie had a hard time wagging the short stump of a tail. It was very funny to watch. Everybody said it was mean to cut off a dog's tail, but everybody laughed when Muggsie tried to wag her stump.

She was a good dog. She never got angry with Larry when he pulled her hair or played rough with her. She never barked at strangers. Mother said that this was especially important. Larry loved the dog very much. I know he did.

Muggsie was a bad dog about two things. One, she had a habit of digging holes in the yard. She like to bury things. She even buried ice cubes. This was very funny to watch. Two, she like to chase cars. Mother said it was a bad thing to chase cars and someday she would get run over and killed. Larry thought it was exciting to see her race after the spinning wheels up and down the street. He always spanked her when she did it, because Mother had said that was the right thing to do. After a while, Muggsie stopped chasing cars. She only did it once in a while.

One day, Larry set up a Kool-Ade stand on his front steps and sold drinks for three cents a glass. Muggsie sat on the lawn beside the white table cloth and sparkling glasses. She panted because it was hot. The little boy from next door came over and bought a glass. He had dark hair. He said that Larry shouldn't keep Muggsie near the glasses because it wasn't clean. The boy's father owned a drugstore, and there was a sign on the door which said, "No Dogs Allowed." The boy spilled some drink on his shirt and this made him mad, and he said that Larry should make a sign which said, "No Dogs Allowed," and should send Muggsie away. Larry said that Muggsie was there to protect him from burglars. The boy said that Muggsie was too small to protect anybody from anything. Larry said that Muggsie could run and get help. The boy



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

founded in 1923, the Scholastic & Writing Awards is the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers in the U.S.

said that Muggsie was too fat to run. Larry said she was not. The boy said she was.

“She is not!”

“She is so! She’s nothing but a fat little old dog.”

“You’re just jealous ‘cause you don’t have a dog.” One time a girl had thrown a stone at Muggsie, and Mother had said she was just jealous because she didn’t have a dog as nice as Muggsie.

“My father says dogs are dirty,” the other boy said.

“Muggsie’s not dirty. Mother says she isn’t.”

A car turned the corner and rumbled down the street. Muggsie lifted her head sharply and started to get up. Then she looked at Larry and sat down again. Lazily she laid her head over the outstretched paws. Larry knew she wanted to chase the car.

“You wait,” he said. “I’ll show you how fast she can run.”

Another car came into sight. Larry waited until it slid passed the house, and then he said, “Sic ‘em!” He gave the puzzled dog a push, and she rushed after the car. She never barked. She never made a sound. Silently she raced beside the spinning black wheel. Larry was proud of her. He loved her very much.

The car reached the end of the block and turned sharply. There was a hard bump sound. The dog yelped and then whined softly several times. When the two boys reached the corner, Muggsie was dead. She lay in the gutter, a crumpled thing. Her mouth was open and the sharp teeth were like white slivers against her tongue. Larry cried. He loved Muggsie. He loved her very much.

III

I can remember very well what it was like to be twelve years old. I was not so much like a different person at twelve as I was at seven and at four. Perhaps in years to come I will forget what twelve years old is like. It is good, then, that I write this story now.

There was a park near our house where the trees were very thick in the summer, and the grass was very green. In winter the trees were slim and bare. They looked like swift strokes of black paint from a brush. When you got close to the trees they looked spotty-black, like smears of charcoal. These pictures come to my mind as I describe the trees, because my Uncle George was a painter and that’s how he described them at the time. Uncle George also said that the winter ground in the park looked like a painter’s easel all spotted with bright colors. I think that’s a very pretty way to describe the leaves on the ground. Mother says that Uncle George was a poet. He died last year, and almost all the family came to the funeral because he was liked so much.



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

founded in 1923, the Scholastic & Writing Awards is the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers in the U.S.

I liked Uncle George, too. I remember, at my twelfth birthday party, I said that the two best friends I had in all the world were Uncle George and Gilbert Mead. Gilbert was a small, frail boy who lived down the block. He was younger than I, and he always looked up to me and respected me. I suppose that's one reason why I liked him best. Mother told me that I shouldn't have said that about Gilbert and Uncle George, because it wasn't being nice to the other kids at the party. I remember that Gilbert was very happy that day.

At that time most of the other boys in the neighborhood were older than I. Gilbert was the only younger friend I had. I remember that I wanted to do just exactly what the older boys did. I wanted to be one of them. This was hard, because I was fat and often made fun of. Whenever the others laughed at me because I couldn't run as fast as they, or climb trees as well or play the same games they did, I always went to play with Gilbert. We had a lot of fun together. I liked Gilbert very much. I know I did. But when the other boys accepted me and allowed me to play with them and Gilbert wanted to come too, I found it hard to know what to do.

One day, a cold day in November, the older boys decided to go to the park and climb trees. They said I could come along. Gilbert wanted to come along.

"Can I come too?" he asked.

"Aw, you can't climb trees," one of the older boys said.

"Fatty can't climb trees either, can you, Fatty?" another boy said. I was very hurt.

"Gilbert and Larry can come along and watch if they want to." The boisterous group of four started off down the sidewalk. Gilbert and I followed. I was angry at Gilbert because he had asked to come along. I said so.

"Why didn't you shut up! You can't climb trees. Now they'll make fun at me all afternoon."

Gilbert frowned a little and looked down. He didn't say anything. Pretty soon we came to the park.

The ground was all spotty-colored, and the trees were black and bare. Strong strokes of black trunk peeled off into slim tentacles and brittle twigs. The older boys shinnied up into the lower branches of the trees and began playing "airplane." Gilbert and I stood on the ground and listened to the nasal nnnnaaaa o'www sounds they made. Finally one of the boys called down to me.

"What's the matter, meatball, can't you make it?"

I was ashamed and decided I would show them. I picked an easy tree and managed to climb it without much trouble. I clung shakily to one of the lower branches and seated myself in the tree couch. I was very proud. I wanted to have some way of



SCHOLASTIC ART & WRITING AWARDS

founded in 1923, the Scholastic & Writing Awards is the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers in the U.S.

showing my superiority. I called down to Gilbert, who looked very small standing in the dry leaves below.

“Come on, Gilbert, you can climb one of the trees. It’s lots of fun.” He seemed suddenly happy and ran over to the tree which I was sitting in. He wanted help. I shook my head.

“No, you climb your own tree.”

He stood below me for a few seconds, holding out his hand and looking up. He didn’t say anything. He just stood there, in his little red coat and blue jeans, and waited for me to help him. The other boys didn’t pay any attention, but continued their game. I wanted them to look and laugh at him, as they had at me so many times. I wanted to laugh with them...at him.

“No!” I said. “You find your own tree and climb it yourself.”

Then he turned and looked about for a tree to climb. The leaves rustled softly when he walked away. He chose a tall, gnarled-looking tree across the clearing. He stood at the bottom and looked up at the giant tree. I laughed.

“That one’s too hard. You can’t climb that one.”

He didn’t look at me. He began to shinny up the rough bark. The black wood scratched at his red coat and made sharp sounds against his shoes. It took him a long time to get to the lower branches.

“Look!” one of the older boys said. “Gilbert’s climbed a tree.”

“Gee, he’s better than Fatty, ain’t he?”

I didn’t say anything.

Gilbert didn’t look back, and he didn’t stop climbing. When he was about half-way up the tree, he began to cry. I was a little sorry for what I had done. Suddenly I was afraid.

“Hey, Gilbert,” one of the older boys said, “You better come on down now.”

Gilbert was crying and sobbing loudly, but he didn’t stop climbing. Then there was a sharp crack. A small dried branch broke off in Gilbert’s hand. He slipped against the bark and seemed to dangle in air for a second. He screamed and dropped straight down to the ground.

I sat stiff in the tree and looked across the clearing at him a long time. One of the older boys went for help. Another came and lifted me down the tree. I walked across the dry leaves and looked at Gilbert. He was very, very still. Pretty soon I was sick and threw up behind a tree. Gilbert was my best friend. I had always said so. He was my very best friend.