

Mexican Standoff

By Jonathan Woods

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

Neiderbaum is the bane of my existence.

I pull aside the tent flap. Rain whips down in acid sheets, making the night as black as the inside of my stomach. The area around my tent is a quagmire of mud not unlike the winter trenches of the Great War.

Ten yards away, secure on a stone platform, Neiderbaum's tent glows like an alien spaceship. It's made of some new high-tech translucent cloth. Backlit by a gas lantern, two silhouettes, one on top of the other, hump wildly, the old *el dick-a-roo* slamming away at *la pussy* with utter disregard for anything but its own pleasure.

I'll kill the bitch! is what comes to mind as I watch this shadow play. At the same time I've got a hard on.

Correction. I'm going to kill Theodore Neiderbaum.

It all began six weeks ago in Cal Western State's Archaeology Department, the last day of the spring semester. I'm the junior lecturer. Neiderbaum is Vice-Chairman. I'm standing in the departmental office making small talk with the new typist Brenda, a buxom little thing with a cherry blossom complexion and myopic eyes. A chest-high counter divides the room in half. On one side sits Brenda and the departmental files. I'm on the other side leaning over the counter.

"You're sure you won't come for a drink?"

"Gee, Alex...I mean, Professor Silverman, my boyfriend would be pissed," says Brenda. "I don't want to get a black eye."

"If he threatens you, you can always sleep at my place. On the couch."

"He killed a man once in a bar fight."

"Frankly, I don't understand why you would take up with someone who's clearly a psychopath."

"Who can explain my trailer trash urges?" she says blithely.

At that moment Neiderbaum in garish tweeds walks by. His thick, hairy fingers pluck from my hand resting on the countertop the printout of my trip reservation. His eyes scan the page. His tanned brow wrinkles like a plowed field.

"Where is it you're digging this summer?" he asks.

"Zetehux, down in the Puuc Hills. A four-hour drive south of Merida. The last two on dirt roads.

"A third tier site, isn't it?"

"We're the first team to dig there. We're hoping to find a bunch of shit the grave robbers missed."

Neiderbaum refolds the itinerary and slaps it back and forth across my nose. Brenda giggles. My face goes Tabasco red.

"Maybe I'll see you down there," he says.

Like hell! I think.

The itinerary leaves his hand. I grab for it. But it swooshes away through the air, grazes the counter top, slips over the edge and nosedives into the crack between Brenda's desk and the half-wall supporting the counter.

"I'll print you another one," Brenda says, still laughing.

Neiderbaum is now walking away.

"See you later Teddy," Brenda calls after him.

My team for the dig at Zetehux consists of three graduate students, Mary Beth, Chip and Fawn, and four 'locals'.

Mary Beth is pudgy and enthusiastic. Chip is thinking about dropping out of the program and applying to business school. Fawn is trouble.

Five six-ish, jet black hair swept back from the an unsullied brow and tied with a rubber band, neon blue eyes set a tad too close together on opposite sides of a petite upturned nose, lush lips cast in a pout, small but assertive chin and a raging pair of knockers designed by God himself. She favors tight T-shirts and baggy cargo pants. A space exists between her front ivories through which she periodically spits globs of tobacco juice with daunting accuracy.

The locals are the usual swarthy, malnourished lot. Extras from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

We've been in Zetehux a month and Mary Beth's legs and arms are covered in throbbing infected mosquito bites. She's running a fever.

I stand looking down at her flushed, distorted face, wondering whether I should send her to the hospital back in Merida.

Fawn and Chip are over at the dig: a mound of stones that were once a towering Mayan edifice, lying broken and hidden for centuries under a camouflage of ravenous trees and vines.

Mary Beth looks like dog crap. Pale with a tinge of yellow. Dark lemur-like circles around her eyes. Lips parched and cracked. Slow shallow breathing.

I take a stained and greasy washrag from her forehead. Finding it bone dry, I soak it with water from a jug, fold it like a blindfold and lay it across her eyebrows. Her cheek twitches. Not quite dead yet.

I think: you really need to send her up to the hospital in Merida. Chip can drive her. Except Chip does a lot of the heavy digging, as well as managing the Mexican spade crew. He's fluent in Spanish. On the other hand, with him gone, Fawn will have no choice but to capitulate.

Because of Mary Beth's illness, Fawn and Chip share a tent. As far as I can tell they aren't fucking yet. But Fawn uses him as an excuse every time I suggest a walk in the jungle or some other nonsense. My tawny eyes follow her like albino bats. She is a goddess. At Cal Western State we have a bylaw that prohibits faculty/student rutting. But this is Mexico.

My random thoughts are interrupted when one of the Mexican crew bursts into the tent. His pupils are dilated. He's nervous, jittery. Is he stoned on some hallucinogen?

"What is it, Miguel?" I ask.

"Come see," he says, "*Muchos dioses antiguos!*"

Miguel stinks. I hand him a cigarette and fire it up with my Marine Corps issue Zippo, before lighting my own. The Corps' emblem rises from the chrome plain of the lighter's surface like an anthill on the Serengeti. I bought the lighter in a pawnshop in Fresno. The acrid smoke of cheap Mexican *cigarillos* drowns Miguel's stench.

Ancient gods? What is he talking about? Is it possible they've made the astonishing, career-making find I dream about? A chill scuttles up and down my spine like the little pink feet of a white mouse.

I glance down at Mary Beth one more time. What the fuck am I supposed to do? Then I motion to Miguel.

"*Vayamo.*"

We exit the tent, cross the slash-and-burn clearing, and start up the path that slices through the jungle. On the left is the latrine. It and Miguel smell about the same.

As a matter of personal hygiene, I can't go for more than two days without a shower. We rigged one up outdoors just to the right of our three tents. Fawn, sipping a *mescal* in the early twilight, often watches me soap down my tanned and seasoned physique, then rinse off. But when I come back from dressing in my tent, she's sitting on Chip's lap.

Around the next bend in the trail, a sudden tree-covered hill blocks out the sky. The Mayan temple we're excavating. At a propitious spot we've sunk a trench into the side of the ruin. So far the only results are a few worthless shards of pottery.

At the moment, Chip and two more of the Mex crew – Juan A and Juan B – squat in a half circle at the mouth of the trench. As Miguel and I come up to them, I realize they're passing a jay. Chip hands me the reefer without looking up. I take a long pull, closing my eyes and letting the smoke slither deep into my lungs.

But pot doesn't really do it for me. Just a slight veering off track, a dazzle of light in the corner of my eye.

"What's going on? You're taking a lunch break already?"

"Go take a look," Chip says, nodding in the direction of the trench.

"Where's Fawn?"

"In there."

The overcast day steepes the trench in heavy shadow. Fifteen feet into the hillside it becomes a tunnel penetrating into the depths of the pyramid, a wormhole into a long-hidden, undead past.

I grab the flashlight lying at Chip's feet and head in. I have to duck my head to enter the cave-like portion of the excavation. To prevent cave-ins, a veneer of rough boards covers the walls and ceiling of the tunnel. Ahead I detect a faint glow. Scrambling over a landslide of dirt and stone, suddenly I'm standing at the threshold of an oblong room two thousand years old.

Gripped by sudden vertigo, as though standing at the brink of a bell tower, I reach out and steady myself against the wall. The only light in the room comes from a white gas lantern set in the middle of the floor. Fawn stands next to it, furiously scribbling into her notebook. I am overcome by lust.

She turns and sees me.

"Alex! We fuckin' found it, Alex." She waves her hands in the air and twirls like a dervish into my arms. "Look at this place."

We're hugging. I nuzzle her neck. She throws her head back, laughing. I go for a breast. Nibbling the nipple through her T-shirt.

Suddenly, she breaks away; strides back to the center of the room.

"Not here!" she says. "It'd be like doing it church."

"I'd like to do it in a church."

She ignores me, gazing around the ancient room. "So Alex, what do you think the twisted fucks were like who painted this place?"

But I'm already staring at the mural-covered walls. Kings, and queens and high priests, warriors and their prisoners, sacred animal totems, gods and goddesses. Many of the images are familiar from other sites. Except they're all engaged in wild fornication of one form or another. Each panel is a Mesoamerican version of a Paul Avril etching. The tongue of a squat toad-creature laps a princess' nether regions. Choc, lord of storms, rains semen down upon a dozen maidens. The aged fertility god Itzamnaj, toothless and gnarled as the bark of a cottonwood, spryly partakes of plump poontang. We've discovered the fucking Mayan Kama Sutra! The Pompeii of the Yucatan!

I'll be rich is the first thought out of the gate. Followed by *and famous*. The Fawns of this world will be lining up outside my door.

Three hours later my mind has had enough of Mayan porn. Too many whips and chains and beheadings. Snuff porn.

"We need to go back to camp and think about all this," I say. "Besides, I could use a drink."

"Me too!"

"Whatever," says Chip, who gave the Mexican crew the afternoon off. "I think we should lock this place up."

"There isn't a door, dingbat," Fawn says.

"We should make one," Chip says. "I'm concerned about how the peasants in the nearby villages may react if they see this stuff. It's creepy."

"Relax, Chip," I say, "this discovery is going to make us millionaires."

"Take me to your *mescal*," Fawn says, pushing me toward the tunnel. I hope she'll grab my *cojones* from behind, but she doesn't.

Back at the camp, I take a quick check on Mary Beth. She's awake and smiles weakly up at me. Petrified that I'll catch whatever it is that's devouring her alive, I place my hand on her forehead. It's burning up.

"How do you feel?"

"Like dog shit."

"Interesting..."

"Oh my God!"

Mary Beth leaps out of the cot, dives through the door and makes a beeline for the latrine.

I turn and walk to our makeshift clubhouse, a rough-hewn table and four aluminum and canvas camp chairs under a canvas fly. Chip hands me my first *mescal* of the day.

"Bad news," I say, tossing my thumb in the direction of *el latrino*, or whatever they call it down here. I drink the *mescal* in one gulp, wince at the burn, then continue: "Chip, you'll have to drive Mary Beth up to Merida. To the hospital. I'll give you a list of things to bring back."

Chip purses his lips and nods sagely. “Lots of bad news comin’ down. I stopped by the kitchen to get a fresh bottle of hooch. Looks like the spade crew have given us the finger. Disappeared without a trace, as they say.”

“You’re kidding. Why would they do that?”

Chip shrugs. “Fuck if I know.” He taps the mescal bottle on the lip of my empty glass; then pours in a double, while I hold it steady. “Drink up,” he says.

By five o’clock, Chip and Mary Beth are in the Mitsubishi, ready to go. Mary Beth, in the passenger seat, has the shakes now. She’s wrapped in an old hand-stitched quilt, her eyes shimmering pools of fever, her teeth chattering.

“I envy the fresh sheets you’ll be sleeping in tonight,” I say to Chip.

“I’m not sure who’s getting the better deal out of this,” Chip says, gazing at Fawn where she sits in the clubhouse.

“We’ll see you in a couple of days,” I say.

“You hope.”

Even when Chip screeches his wheels, Fawn doesn’t look up from the novel she’s reading. Her hand automatically reaches out to her fourth *mescal* cocktail resting on the tabletop and draws it to her lips. As I long to be drawn.

A cloud of dust erupts as the Mitsubishi jolts and farts up the laterite streambed that pretends to be a road in these parts.

I sit down opposite Fawn. As I pour another drink, my eyes rake from her nose to her toes and back again. She squirms in her seat. But she knows she can’t postpone the inevitable.

I flash back into consciousness like a bat diving from its perch. The squeals and hee-haws of a four-wheel drive vehicle thumping and sliding its way down the rough roadbed disrupt the undertow of the jungle. It can’t be Chip, I think, unless I’ve been asleep for two days.

As I scoot from bed and slide into jeans and a T-shirt, I realize Fawn isn’t next to me in my doublewide canvas cot. On the wood crate next to the bed sit two half-full glasses of Mexican rotgut, a torn foil condom wrapper and the Chester Himes thriller I’m reading.

I poke my head through the mosquito netting, then the tent flap.

Coming down the hillside is a very expensive Mercedes all-terrain vehicle. And gripping the wildly lurching wheel is none other than Teddy Neiderbaum.

FUUUUUCK!

When he sees me, an array of white teeth glint from ear to ear. I know I’m about to be screwed twelve ways to Sunday. I should have listened to the alarms ringing in my subconscious, retrieved the .38 pistol from under my pillow and put the asswipe out of business. Instead, as Neiderbaum climbs out of the still rocking vehicle, I say:

“What the hell are you doing here?”

We circle each other like strutting fighting cocks looking for an opening.

“I told you I might show up. My other plans for the summer went to hell in a hand basket. Anyway, I haven’t been on a dig in years. Need to get back in shape.”

Suddenly the door of the latrine bangs open. Fern walks toward us, looking fresh as a daisy.

“Professor Neiderbaum. What a surprise.”

“Teddy. It’s Teddy. Came down to give Alex a hand. Beneficiary of my years of experience. Brought a case of 10-year-old Canadian whiskey too. Box of Cohibas. Do you smoke cigars Miss...?”

“Fawn.”

“Miss Fawn?”

“Just Fawn.” She spits a bullet of tobacco juice into the dirt half an inch in front of Neiderbaum’s ostrich skin cowboy boots.

Neiderbaum is a big man, a fact I never fully appreciated before. 6-foot-3. Face like a bulldog on steroids. Barrel chest. Arms thick as smoked Virginia hams. Eyes seething with quicksilver emotions.

For the rest of the morning he works like seven devils hauling wheelbarrows full of rock and gravel from the dry streambed to a slight rise opposite our campsite, constructing a stone platform on which he pitches his tent.

I’m sitting in my canvas chair drinking *mescal* sunrises and wondering what the hell Neiderbaum’s really doing here.

I throw Fawn an ironic glance, but she remains distant and unresponsive as she goes about her camp chores. She looks sumptuous in short shorts and a fitted linen safari shirt.

After lunch we take Neiderbaum to the excavation. He is appropriately dazzled by our discovery, teetering like a drunk from painted panel to painted panel, gaping at the panoply of Mayan perversions revealed by the beam of his flashlight.

Then Neiderbaum makes his own discovery: in one corner a low, narrow doorway obscured by a cave-in of stone and sand. Grabbing shovels we clear away the debris.

On the other side is a small airless room with rows of shallow niches running down two sides. Each niche contains its own special accoutrements. Ceremonial rattles, obsidian knives, incense burners, weed pipes, stone animal totems and fired-clay figurines, and a hundred and one other pieces of Mayan ceremonial tsatske. It’s the storage closet of the high priests of Zetehux.

Unbelievably a giant phallus, five feet long, eighteen inches in girth, leans nonchalantly against the room’s back wall. Its details are spare, the work of some avant-garde minimalist who lived a thousand years ago. Yet it’s unmistakably a dick, painted a lurid red color.

Close up it turns out to be carved out of wood, with a hollow interior. Easy to move. At Neiderbaum’s insistence he and I lug it into the main room. Fawn goes into hysterics, slapping her knees, falling to the floor where she rolls from side to side gasping for breath. Finally she recovers from her giggle fit, only to catch sight of the twelve-inch marble dildo Neiderbaum found in the storeroom and thrust into the pocket of his cargo shorts.

“Is that a banana in your pocket?” Fawn asks, breaking into fresh howls of laughter.

We carry the big wooden dick out into the open air. Dark, rain-heavy clouds torment the heavens. Neiderbaum’s pupils have shrunk to shimmering black currents behind which madness dances. His lips are caked with dried spittle. When he thinks I’m not looking, he mutters gibberish to himself. Is he on drugs? Suffering from sunstroke? Going insane? But he is Vice Chair of the Department, so I don’t make a fuss.

“What are we doing with this?” I ask, indicating the gargantuan prick.

“Taking it over by my tent, so I can examine it later.”

I flip my head skyward.

“Better put it under the clubhouse fly. You don’t want the paint to wash off when it rains.”

We end up putting it in Neiderbaum’s tent.

Exhausted by all this activity, I collapse to the ground. My shirt is completely sweated-through. Fresh blisters on each hand throb and ooze. My head is pounding from the pressure of the incoming tropical depression.

Neiderbaum pours Crown Royal into a pair of glasses. But I can’t drink it. Next moment I’m on my knees retching bile into the dirt. I hope I’m not coming down with the same bug ravaging Mary Beth’s interiors.

“I need to lie down,” I say. “Take a nap.”

“Up all night tomcatting?” asks Neiderbaum.

I don’t bother to reply. Neiderbaum heads back to the excavation. I take four aspirin and a sleeping tablet and sack out.

The waterfall of Fawn’s laughter draws me awake. She and Neiderbaum are having drinks in the clubhouse. Her safari blouse is nonchalantly disheveled. One of her legs rests sideways across the arm of her camp chair. Neiderbaum’s fingers trip the light fantastic across the bare stage of her thigh.

Rage and jealousy savage my brain like ravenous wild dogs gnawing a corpse. Have they been getting it on down at the excavation? How could Fawn betray me like this? I’ll castrate Neiderbaum and mail his balls to the Smithsonian!

Tamping down my chaotic emotions, I stroll nonchalantly over to the clubhouse.

“Anyone for dinner?” I ask.

A month-old sports section from the Caribbean edition of the Miami Herald and an open can of peanuts form two-thirds of an odd tableau on the tabletop. My Marine Corps ashtray, in which two fat Cohibas smolder like burning turds, constitutes the final element of this inanimate melodrama.

“There’s some baked beans sitting in a saucepan on my Coleman stove,” Neiderbaum says. “Add a can of cocktail franks, reheat and you’re golden.”

“Golden?”

“Oh, please,” Fawn says. “Don’t start.”

I jerk her to her feet; pull her against me.

“What about last night? Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“Get a life, Alex.”

Neiderbaum leaps up, and with a baroque flourish, presses the barrel of a pistol to my head. My brain spins like flushed water in a toilet bowl. The situation is completely and irrevocably out of control.

“About those beans and franks,” Neiderbaum says.

I release Fawn. She picks up the limp sports section of the Miami Herald and slaps it back and forth across my face. Then she turns and walks toward Neiderbaum’s tent. Jumbo drops of rain plummet from the sky. Moments later it becomes a raging downpour.

“Night,” Teddy says. His testosterone bulk, an evil troll from a Grimm’s fairy tale, splashes across the clearing.

I'm left with the peanuts and a half empty bottle of Crown Royal. I feel an inescapable need to kill someone.

Watching them fuck behind the veil of the tent wall is both a turn-on and a hugely deflating bummer. I remain transfixed until Fawn screams for the third time and kicks over the white gas lantern. With a tinkle of broken glass, Neiderbaum's tent turns pitch black.

The pouring rain of the storm despoils the night. My forehead throbs with fever, sweat dripping like 3-in-1 oil down my neck and chest. It feels as if someone's red-hot fingertips are searing into my shoulders.

I need to go back to sleep. Knit up the raveled sleeve of care. There'll be plenty of time to shoot Neiderbaum in the morning.

The sound of drums roots around in my head like a pig searching for truffles and at last nudges me awake.

Drums?! You must be shitting me. It's the fever.

But it is indeed drums. Two to be exact, calling and answering each other in deep somnambulistic tones.

When I poke my head outside the tent, the sun is burning the edges of some feathery clouds, the remnants of last night's storm. The effect is like grilled cheese sandwiches sliced open with a filleting knife. The beat of the drums intensifies.

A crowd of straw-hatted and shawled peasants stands in front of Neiderbaum's tent on its raised platform of stone and gravel. The crowd sways left and right to the rhythm of the drums. Among the gathered flock I see at least two men from our excavation crew.

As the light thickens, the wooden cock becomes apparent, rising like a giant's middle finger in front of Neiderbaum's tent.

In the next instant, Neiderbaum, entirely nude, steps from the tent just as the sun breaks like a burning wave over the jungle canopy and sweeps across the shadowy slash and burn clearing where we're camped. Neiderbaum's tanned flesh turns to burnished gold. Half his face is painted a sickly green color, the other half bleached flour white. His eyes burn as brightly as blood diamonds caught in the white-hot glare of an arc lamp.

A leather harness encircles Neiderbaum's buttocks like a spider its prey. This contraption holds in full erectile display the marble dildo that had sent Fawn into hysterics the day before.

My mind reels. What is going on here? It's as if I've stumbled onto the set for a Tarzan remake directed by Larry Flint.

Then Fawn appears, draped in a blood-orange robe that glints in the sunlight. A pair of loin-clothed acolytes draw her toward a wooden bench in front of Neiderbaum. She stumbles, sways, rolls her eyes. She must be drugged to the gills.

Her robe falls away. Stark naked she is guided to the bench, where she sits, then rolls onto her back. A patchwork of black and red Mayan glyphs have been painted on her body, defiling the perfection of her flesh.

Neiderbaum and the whole bunch of them are totally bonkers! Seduced by a dark spell emanating from the room beneath the ruined pyramid. Caught in some Mayan black juju. And Fawn is their sacrificial victim.

No fuckin' way, pal!

I wave my .38 revolver in the air.

"Stop!" I shout.

The drums cease. All eyes turn toward me.

"Alex," Neiderbaum says. "What a surprise."

"Let her go."

I walk through the crowd, which separates in front of me like flesh beneath a surgeon's blade, and step up onto the stone and gravel platform. I look out upon the faces of the surly peasants.

"The show's over," I say. "Everybody go home."

Neiderbaum pushes me roughly sideways. We stand facing each other.

"You don't understand," he says. "What you've discovered here at Zetehux is the doorway to a new world order in which there are no limits, no boundaries."

I'm holding the revolver; Neiderbaum grips an obsidian sacrificial knife. Our eyes are locked in cold fury but neither of us is prepared to make the fateful first move.

With a Herculean effort of will, I break out of the Mexican standoff.

Die, asshole!

My finger curls around the trigger and pulls it back. But the firing pin clicks on an empty chamber. I've forgotten to load the fucking weapon.

Neiderbaum lunges with the knife.

We struggle, teetering wildly back and forth, a ganglia of intertwined arms and legs. Somehow my hand encircles the marble dildo. Its harness gives way and the phallus comes free. Even as his teeth sink into the muscle of my shoulder, I bring the striated stone schlong crashing down again and again on Neiderbaum's skull. Bone and brains transmogrify into pulp. Neiderbaum's teeth release their grip. He groans; crumples to the ground. Rivulets of blood cover my hand and forearm.

A cry of dismay rises from the crowd of peasants. Then a great stillness descends, as though a Victorian bell jar has been lowered over the clearing.

But the sharp scent of danger snakes up my nose like ammonia arising from a broken ampule. This is no time to take a break and consider the existential dilemma of my sorry-assed existence.

Fawn stands; stumbles toward me, hands outstretched like a sleepwalker. For a moment I think I see Mary Beth and Chip among the crowd of peasants. Then I realize it's their heads alone, impaled on wooden spikes, bobbing up and down as the crowd equivocates. Am I hallucinating?

A swarm of peasants bent on revenge rush toward the dais, their faces distorted by rage.

"Don't leave me behind," Fawn begs.

But like a spent lightning strike, my lust for Fawn has drained into the earth.

"Sorry, baby. You should have thought twice before you betrayed me for Neiderbaum. You're on your own."

I turn and sprint toward Neiderbaum's Mercedes parked a dozen feet away behind his tent. As I reach the vehicle, the forefront of the crowd pours over the stone and gravel platform. Fawn is swept away.

As I clamber into the driver's seat, a stone strikes me behind the ear. My fingers touch the wound, feel the warm rush of blood. A larger stone slams into the back window, a web of cracks spreading from its epicenter.

When I yank down the sun visor, Neiderbaum's keys tumble into my hand. The gods are with me!

The engine turns over on the first try. I blast out of there with a spray of sand and mud. The air conditioning flips on automatically, chilling me to the bone.

Five miles down the road I arrive at a four corners. A hand-painted sign in front of a tumbledown shack offers beer and *tacos al carbon*. On the front veranda a woman lolls in a hammock nursing a sickly baby.

An ancient and dilapidated *autobus* has pulled to a stop while the driver takes a piss or a snort of coke. Two boys offer an iguana for sale to the passengers. They walk back and forth beside the bus, holding their prize aloft to the array of open or missing windows. Desperate Indian women, dressed in black, hawk slices of pineapple and mango dusted with chili powder. A soldier armed with a machinegun gazes at the passing scene with a worried expression.

Sitting in the stationary SUV taking all this in, I realize my hands are shaking uncontrollably, overcome by palsy. Swirls and droplets of dried blood cover them. Neiderbaum is dead. Fawn too. And Mary Beth and Chip. All dead. The beat of the drums pounds relentlessly in my head like the undecipherable thoughts of an idiot savant. But I know one thing for sure. One thing.

There is no going back.

I run down my side window. The sudden intake of warm moist air fogs the windshield. I motion to the two boys holding the prehistoric iguana.

"Que direccion es Guatemala?"

One of the youths points.

Even as I toss out an assortment of *peso* coins, I steer the Mercedes down the rutted byway designated by the iguana seller.

I'm heading south into uncharted territory.

In seconds the fecund wall of the jungle closes in on either side, shutting out the sky.

Jonathan Woods is a writer living in Dallas, Texas. His stories have appeared in Dogmatika, 3:AM Magazine, Plots with Guns, Noir Originals and Sein und Werden. His reviews have appeared in Dogmatika and 3:AM. He is working on a novel: a noir sequel to Jean Rhys' After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. When not writing he works part time in a small art gallery in Dallas (www.dahliawoodsgallery.com) or travels, most frequently to Mexico & Italy. Links to his published work are at: www.southernnoir.com