

Epic Rites Press

blood and
greasepaint

Stories by Karl Koweski

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Epic Rites Press: “because all our fingers are middle ones”™

For my wife, Marie

Contents

Blood and Greasepaint at the Tombstone Bar and Grille	7
Billy Starkiller and the Rainbow Rodeo Rider	34
Rebel.....	53
Big Angry Cocks.....	63
Eli Whittaker's Super Fantastic Family Circus.....	90
Give Satan An Inch and He'll Swear He's A Ruler	105
Nervous Harold and the Implausible Impala Incident	127
The Great Ice Cream Truck Robbery	146
The Great Funeral Home Candy Bar Heist.....	156
The Great St. Casimir Hard Liquor Theft	170
Ill Gotten Gains	188

Big Angry Cocks

1.

“Hey, Jesse. Uhm... what about it?”

Jesse leans against my roll-around cart piled high with glands I intended to weld to hydraulic cylinders. By his glassy eyes and the set of his jaw, it's safe to assume he's upset and looking to take his angst out on the sole Yankee employed by the machine shop.

“Not doing worth a damn,” he spits. “Got a tooth pulled and it's hurting like a sonofabitch.”

There seems to be swelling along his jaw line, but that might just be the Skoal longcut. A pulled tooth leaves him three by my count. How did the dentist even know which one to pull?

“That's too bad, Jesse.”

“Yeah, I'm sure your heart's broke.”

We stand there a moment in utter silence. Or at least as silent as a factory can be when there's all manner of machinery cutting, facing, drilling, and grinding steel.

“What you know 'bout raising cocks?” He asks.

I hesitate. His three teeth peek out from his lips like shit-dipped Tic Tacs in what could be considered a grin.

His question reminds me of the time he asked if I liked duck meat. Though I never tasted duck meat, I answered affirmative thinking; if pressed for details, I could just say it tasted like chicken and get on with my life. Upon saying I liked duck meat, Jesse motioned toward his groin and invited me to duck down and help myself to his meat.

“Jesse, I can’t speak on behalf of other cocks, but I can say nothing raises my cock quicker than a spread-eagled blonde.”

Jesse narrows his eyes to slits. “Spread eagle blondes? What the hell? I’m talking rooster cocks, not dick cocks. What the hell’s wrong with you, boy?”

“Uh...”

“You’re a dag gum Yankee that’s what’s wrong with you. They not fight roosters where you’re from?”

“Isn’t it illegal?”

“So is cooking meth. Sure don’t stop nobody, does it?”

“I guess not.”

“You do a helluva lotta guessing and not a lotta knowing.”

I watch a trickle of tobacco browned saliva bungee jump off his chin. The steady flow of juice had long before eroded a trench from his lip down. As is so often the case when talking with Jesse I can’t figure anything to say that won’t elicit an attack on my geographic origins.

“Now you’re gonna clam up, huh?”

“Uh...”

“What you know ‘bout the innernet?”

“Internet?”

“Yeah, smart ass. Innernet. You look like you spend all your free time pulling yer pud in front of a computer.”

I think back to this morning, the Erica Campbell spread on worldsex.com. How did he know?

“I know my way around a computer,” I answer cryptically.

“Well, that’s good to hear, Yankeeboy. ‘Cause me and you, we’re going into bidness together.”

2.

“How ‘bout bigangrycocks.com?”

“I don’t know, Jesse.”

“I do. Write it down.”

I flip the memo pad open and scrawl “big angry cocks” on the line below “ring ready cocks.”

I had whiled away a good portion of last night looking up Jesse’s suggestions for website names. All I got for my troubles was an eyeful of dick, most of which put mine to

shame.

“If fighting cocks is illegal, why start a website advertising it?”

This seemed like a fair enough question to ask as we were getting into Jesse’s ‘82 Chevy pick-up. Jesse thought differently.

“What kinda partnership this gonna be if I gotta pat yer hand the whole dag gum time? We ain’t advertising fighting ‘em. We’re advertising that we got ‘em to breed and sell. We ain’t doing nothing wrong. We’re just training ‘em to kill. If someone wants to buy ‘em and fight ‘em, that’s on them, not us.”

“Ok.”

“Course, we’re gonna be fighting ‘em too.”

During the course of the last couple days, while I’ve been scraping together my finances and surfing the internet, Jesse got his new set of dentures through the mail. He’s been smiling like a jackass all morning. His dentures are already a muddy brown, but at least he’s been able to keep the tobacco juice off his chin and clothes for the first time in twenty years.

By the time we reached Mobile, Jesse had supplied me with another twenty possible names I just knew were going to lead to more penis.

“Alright,” Jesse says as he exits the expressway. “Leldon Wendall is a hall of fame cock raiser. He’s giving us such a good deal on some yellow legged hatch ‘cause I tole him

you was my nephew and wanting to get started fighting cocks.”

“They got a hall of fame for chicken fighting?” I ask, dubiously.

“Goddammit. See, that’s why I want you to keep your mouth shut. In fact, it might just be better you stay here in the truck.”

“But...”

“Gimme your half of the money. I’ll talk to the man.”

“But, I want to see what...”

“Cause you go in there talking ‘bout chicken fighting and he’s liable to put a load a buckshot in both our asses and dump us on our ears.”

“What do you...”

“It’s called cock fighting. Ain’t no chickens. Ain’t got no use for no chickens. We’re coming here for some big angry cocks to tear hell out of everyone else’s chickens.”

Leldon lives on what he refers to as “farm” and most law enforcement would term “compound.” The house is thick and squat like my women, and appears easily defensible against the Republican hordes. There is a good amount of barb wire that might have been a fence though it sort of peters out two thirds of the way around the compound.

Just inside the barbed wire, junked cars crusted with chickenshit ring the perimeter. Many of the vehicles are missing

such vital components as motors, wheels, transmissions and drive shafts. The vehicles were placed far enough away to allow at least fifty yards surrounding the house devoid of cover should any minions of a shady government agency descend upon his haven and attempt to revoke his God given right to fight chickens.

Said chickens run rampant as we pull into the gravel driveway. Here and there, we see chickens clucking and strutting, ruffling their sleek brownish red feathers. One cock roosting on a disembodied axle catches my attention. Its wings are tied to its legs with what looks like bungee cord. The cock struggles to pull itself erect.

We see Leldon, the Willy Wonka of this chicken empire, right off, leaning against a gigantic, twenty year-old Chevy Blazer painted a tasteful camouflage. He greets us with a cool tip of his dirty Carlsbad Stetson. He stands 5'11 but if you removed his ten gallon hat and shit splattered boots he'd go maybe 5'4. He wears Liberty overalls and a black t-shirt emblazoned with the hillbilly war cry "Git-R-Done."

I'm thinking about heeding Jesse's advice. Leldon takes that option away from me, opening my passenger side door before we've rolled to a complete stop.

"What about it, Earl," he hollers.

"Earl?" It dawns on me I'm supposed to be Jesse's nephew, but not before confusion registers on my face.

"We all call 'em Dumbass, on account of he's a dumbass," Jesse explains.

“Oh hell,” Leldon says, offering a sympathetic nod. “My cousin Cora’s boy’s the same way. ‘Cept we call him Goober. Dumb bastard tried to find a propane leak by flicking matches. You ain’t that dag gum stupid, are you?”

“No, sir.” Then again, it seems the longer I’m here the more IQ points puddle into my shoes.

Leldon introduces us to a few cans of Natural Lite he keeps iced down in a cooler stashed in the back of a stripped-down El Camino.

“So you never guess who I talked to the other night.” Before we can hazard a guess, Leldon continues. “Roy Jones Jr. Called me up wanting to know if I was coming out for the tournament this weekend.”

“Fighting glaives?”

“Nah, talons. Five hundred dollar entry fee. They’re gonna be havin some world class cocks goin head to head. I’m considering taking Dodgy, Dizzie and Jethro. Those are my best natural fighting roosters.”

The name clicks. “Roy Jones Jr., the boxer? Champion in three different weight classes?”

Leldon gives me a look I’m sure cousin Cora’s kid is familiar with. “Yeah, the boxer. How many Roy Jones Juniors you know?”

I come dangerously close to calling bullshit. I hold my tongue and shrug my shoulders, reinforcing Jesse’s claim of hopeless incompetence. In my defense, let me just say that,

south of the Mason/Dixon line, I'm sure there are thousands of Roy Jones Juniors. Jesse watches me closely.

“Fact is, I told him just the other day, I says, you know, Roy, when I die I want you to be pall bearer. He asked why and I says ‘cause it’ll be your last chance to put me down.”

Jesse laughs as though he just got me to admit I like duck meat. I try to smile in a way that doesn't call attention to my contempt. My contempt catches Jesse's attention. He cuts his eyes at me as he drains his Natural Lite.

Not wishing to share any more beer, Leldon asks if we'd like to see the cocks he's got lined up for us.

I'm curious as to how he can tell the difference between cocks. I'm sure there are slight variations in size and color, but once you get one or two hundred chickens all clucking and skittering and flapping their wings, I imagine they start to blend together.

Leldon leads us around back. We're greeted by the constant tornadic sound of flapping wings, annoyed bawking, clucking and talons scratching plywood. The roosters are caged; the cages piled on top of each other six high in rows of ten forming a sort of Cabrini Green of poultry.

Set aside, our cocks are stuffed in makeshift boxes of cast off wood nail gunned together and festooned with chicken wire. The cocks don't look particularly promising, but then, all the chickens I've ever come across have been deep fried and carried in a greasy bucket.

“Yellow legged hatch,” Jesse says in a neutral tone that,

as his business partner, I find alarming.

Leldon nods, swelling with pride as we inspect his cocks.

“That’s mighty fine breeding right there,” Leldon says. “These here cocks come from a long line of savage studs. The grandfather was state champion. Ever hear of Ernest?”

“Hell yeah. I hated his movies.”

Jesse winces. Leldon who I doubt watches very many movies that doesn’t involve Burt Reynolds getting chased across Texarkana by Jackie Gleason, favors me with a tight-lipped smile.

“Ain’t no movie made about Ernest, yet. But I tell you what. Ernest was the finest cock ever lifted its head to the morning sunrise. Jesse, I’m sure you heard how Ernest ripped open Tamminy’s cock at the annual Tennessee Malt Liquor Festival. Ernest had both legs and a wing broke and his heart hanging out of his beak and still killed the hell out of Tamminy’s cock. And that cock was twice as big as Ernest. Course, I had Ernest shot up with enough crystal meth to kill a trailer park.”

Jesse grins. “They’re still talking ‘bout that out in Hopewell.”

Patently untrue. I live in Hopewell and never heard shit about Ernest, or any other cock.

Leldon stares at Jesse for an awkward moment. “Jesse, you get teeth?”

Back in the truck with the scions of Ernest's illustrious bloodline clucking away in their cages behind the cab, Jesse consults his watch.

"We got three hours to get home, then head back out to Ottawa County. How much money you got?"

There is forty dollars remaining in my wallet, huddled like shell-shocked survivors of a vicious battle. "About twenty bucks."

"No, goddammit, how much you got in the bank?"

One thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars. "I don't know. Not much. Five hundred dollars, tops."

"Good," he grunts. "We're gonna need it."

"Need it for what? I just gave you two hundred and fifty bucks for about eight dollars worth of chicken, fried. What more do we need?"

I've never raised my voice to Jesse before. I can tell he doesn't care for it much the way his hands wring the steering wheel as though it were a chicken neck.

"Firstly, they ain't chickens. They're fighting cocks. I ain't gonna tell you again. And secondly, we're gonna need some money for an entry fee and a little betting money on the side."

"An entry fee for what?"

"For the cock fights tonight out in Ottawa County,

that's what for. You think they just let us come in and throw any damn bird into the ring? Hell no."

"I thought we were breeding them."

"We are. After we fight 'em and make sure them cocks are worth a damn. Ain't no sense in wasting time raising cocks if they're just gonna end up limp fowl."

"But... you heard Leldon. Their grandfather was a legendary rooster."

"Yeah, well, maybe they take up after their mother hen. You ever think of that? Course you ain't 'cause you're a dumb Yankee. You worried 'bout the money?"

"Well..."

"Cause I'm matching every cent you put in. That's what bein business partners is all about. Listen, we're gonna go to this here cockfight; we're gonna maul them other cocks, split the winnings and raise us some world class cocks. We're gonna have every man in the Tennessee Valley wishing they had our cocks. We're gonna have every cockfighter across the country checking out our website and looking at our cocks."

"I don't know html."

"You ain't got to. I know everything there is to know about raisin cocks and I'm here to tell you, all they need is a little TLC and some PCP to get their nervous system fucked up and ready to fight."

"I don't know."

“Well, you have time to think about it while I stop at this here cold beer store. Gimme another twenty so I can invest in some beer for our corporation.”

3.

Five minutes later, our corporate holdings include three fighting cocks, a case of Natural Lite and forty-five possible names for a website. I'm down almost three hundred bucks to say nothing of the self-esteem I've lost looking at big dicks on the computer half the night.

But the Natty Lites taste good going down. And if anything, the five beers Jesse guzzles on the way home improves his driving ability, and I begin to feel like I'm secure in the cab of a truck rather than strapped down in the cockpit of a NASCAR stock car.

By the time we reach town, I'm lubricated enough to withdraw three hundred dollars from the ATM with scarcely a whimper.

An hour later, anonymous back roads culminate in a horse meadow that stretches out miles in every direction. Jesse had entertained the notion of blindfolding me, perhaps believing that I might come out here to fight cocks behind his back, but I was able to dispel his paranoia by reminding him I'm a dumb Yankee and couldn't possibly find my way back to Ottawa County, yet alone this incredible span of pasture owned by the locally famous Seymour Blanton who made his fortune dealing in auto parts and crystal meth.

As Jesse pulls onto the penultimate dirt road, he leans over, his breath strong enough to pickle eggs. “Same rules

apply here. Don't speak to no one. They hear your Yankee voice they're liable to string you up by your scrawny neck and, even worse, ban me from the sport."

"OK, Jesse."

"Don't 'OK, Jesse' me. From here on out, you use hand gestures. And don't forget. Your name's Earl."

I connect my thumb and ring finger in a circle and raise three fingers.

"And lay off the beer. Otherwise I ain't gonna have enough to last me."

I extend my thumb and bring it down in a violent motion.

"Good," he says. "So long's we understand each other."

The dirt road ribbons to what appears to be a horse path. This leads us to a horse barn the size of a rural airport. We skirt around the building and already I can hear the buzzing of activity. The revving of engines. Hollering. Laughing.

I don't know what I'm expecting as we near the festivities. Professionalism, maybe? Perhaps a tidy ring surrounded by bleachers. Vendors selling peanuts, popcorn and Redman tobacco. Perhaps an ESPN van with a satellite dish mounted to the roof.

What I find when Jesse bounces the Chevy around the barn is a winery of twenty pick-up trucks of varying vintage

parked in a loose circle.

The sharp twang of chicken shit permeates the air. Surely to God, I think, so few chickens can't be responsible for such a stench. Maybe Seymour fertilized his field earlier to mask the stink of cooking meth rumored to take place in his Taj Mahal of a barn.

The cacophony of cocks clucking and clawing and roosting at Leldon's compound was like the audience of a symphony orchestra compared to the raucous mosh pit of noise which greets us here. Everywhere, good ole boys with their cocks hanging out in homemade cages, holler and horselaugh and pass around mason jars of clear liquid that I decide right then and there I'm not going to partake of. Lynyrd Skynyrd jams through a set of factory speakers. Occasionally, some will yodel "Sweet Home Alabama" even though it's "Tuesday's Gone" that's playing.

The men here can be divided into three categories: Men who wear John Deere caps, men who wear Crimson Tide caps and men who wear Dale Earnhardt Jr. caps.

When Jesse parks the Chevy and gets out, the whole shitkicker carnival goes so quiet you can hear a fly spit.

I step out of the cab feeling like the first pilgrim to set foot on Plymouth Rock, greeting the native redskins with a lopsided grin and a raging case of yellow fever. The sudden atmosphere of suspicion, distrust and ill will is as cloying as the reek of chicken shit.

I keep my eyes focused on the ground as if the lackadaisical alliance of hillbillies were back alley muggers and

my survival depended upon my inability to recall individual characteristics.

Still, certain details catch my peripheral attention. Like the guy wearing overalls without a shirt, looking as though he's only moments away from wrestling the Iron Sheik for the Intercontinental Championship. Next to Hillbilly Jim, there's Alabama's version of a metrosexual. He wears clean shorts, a pastel shirt devoid of lawn care product advertisements, socks, sandals and a phone clipped to his belt. I bet he takes his tobacco mentholated.

Seymour Blanton is in attendance. Even I recognize him. He sits on his throne; the tailgate of an extended cab Ford pick-up. Every so often he takes a hit off a joint and chuckles at what I can only imagine to be a private joke.

The man who greets us wears a Chicken Master Incubators gimme cap and a T-shirt emblazoned with a rooster that looks to have been painted by Norman Rockwell with SPORT OF KINGS written along the bottom. He doesn't look pleased to see us and he gets right to it.

“What the hell you doing here, Jesse? I thought we decided you weren't welcome no more?”

Jesse treats him to his best “you ever tried duck meat” smile and pulls out my wad of money from his pocket. Married with Jesse's money, the roll of cash is large enough to choke a horse, if Blanton's horse barn kept any horses.

“I've got the cash and I've got the cocks. I figure that'd be enough to get me anywhere, Mr. Flynn.”

Mr. Flynn sizes up the money, glances at the trio of feathered champions shitting and scratching in their cages. “Alright, Jesse. I’ll pencil you in for the fifth match.” Mr. Flynn’s bloodshot eyes find me. He assesses me with the same arrogant glare he used on the chickens. “I’m not sure I like you bringing unfamiliar faces around here.”

“Ah hell, that there’s Earl. Glenda’s kid. He ain’t all there, no way.”

He holds me in that gaze another uncomfortable moment. I have no problem shying away from him like a simpleton. He turns his attention back to Jesse and tells him to keep the potato head away from the cocks. “And I hope you brought glaives,” he adds. “It’s going to be a short night.”

“Yes sir.”

I’ve never been quite so intimidated by a man with a chicken on his shirt. I tell this to Jesse once Flynn’s receded toward the pit.

“Firstly, it’s a fighting cock. Or, at the very least, a rooster. How many times I gotta tell you? And secondly, that there’s Felton Flynn. And you do not want to fuck with him. He’s Brindlee Mountain Mafia. What he says goes round here.”

“Brindlee Mountain Mafia? Whatever happened to the Klan? Have they updated their image, injecting the sort of sophistication into their criminal activities one might find on cable television?”

“No,” Jesse says. “Mostly they just go around, torturing and killing smartass carpet-bagging Yankees who don’t

know how to shut their dag gum mouths.”

Carpet-baggers. When Jesse reverts to using Civil War era words, I know it’s time to go back to ass-kissing mode.

Getting Felton Flynn’s blessing immediately endears us to the other cocksman. Jesse introduces me (as Earl) to the gallery of southern stereotypes, a Saltine factory worth of backwoods crackers. After the third person asks why I’m not wearing a helmet, I feel a sulk coming on. And once Lennie asks when Jesse’s going to “bring that dumbass Yankee what shot your second best coon dog,” I’m ready to go home.

As the first round begins and the men prepare their poultry combatants, Jesse leads me to the back of his truck. In my palm he places two pieces of metal, like hooked needles, razor sharp and about three and a half inches long.

I must look confused again because he says “those are glaives, boy. Them’ll pierce the skin of a warthog. Good thing Lennie had an extra pair to loan us.”

“What do we do with them?”

“You tie ‘em to their feet. What do you think?”

I don’t bother answering as Jesse reaches into the bed and pulls out the first cage onto the tailgate.

“What do you think we oughta call this one?” He asks.

“Uh, how about –”

“We’ll call ‘em Stonewall, after my coon dog you got

kilt.”

“Jesse, you shot him, I –”

“You think I wanted to shoot my second best coon dog? If’n it hadn’t been for you knocking that coon on ‘em, it never woulda happened. But bygones under the bridge and shit. Help me get this cage to the pit.”

The pit is a concave dirt bowl, three feet deep and ten feet across. By the time we carry Stonewall to the red corner, the dirt is already stained with fresh blood and chicken shit, feathers stuck here and there like banners of war.

Across the pit, Felton Flynn kneels down and pulls his cock out. Jesse hardly glances in his direction as he unclasps the cage. He reaches in and grabs hold of the cock with both hands. It squawks and pecks and sprays shit, but Jesse is in the zone. Nothing can faze him. He withdraws Stonewall and instructs me to tie the glaives around its feet.

Come to find out, tying an insanely sharp piece of metal around an excited chicken’s clawing, pin-wheeling talons is comparable to lassoing a rat with a loop of dental floss. A rabid, attacking rat. After five minutes, I get the first one tied on. The point juts at a forty-five degree angle.

“Good enough,” Jesse huffs, unable to ignore the guffaws and catcalls as well as I can. “Get the other one. The other one. Dag gum potato head.”

The second one goes on a little easier, which is to say, I only suffer three more deep scratches across my hand.

“Okay,” Jesse says as we crouch over the side of the pit. “What I need you to do now is stick your finger up Stonewall’s ass.”

“Pardon?”

“What? You fart? Stick your finger up its ass.”

“Are you insane? Why would I want to do that?”

“You want a soft little chicken going out there, or a big angry cock?”

“Well...”

“If I stuck my finger up your ass in front of all these people, would you be fighting mad?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Then get your finger up its ass. On the double.”

Finding a chicken’s asshole isn’t much easier than tying a glaive around its leg. I jab my index finger all over its tail end before finding anything remotely resembling an orifice. And even then my finger meets heavy resistance.

“This ain’t your boyfriend. Jam it up in there.”

“Sorry,” I mumble not quite sure if I’m speaking to Jesse or Stonewall.

I hold up, breathe, and ram my finger in up to the knuckle. The cock unleashes a shrill squawk and goes nuts.

Jesse can scarcely hold on. The signal (comprised of Seymour Blanton simply saying “go”) is given and Jesse and Felton simultaneously throw their cocks into the pit.

There’s a five second flurry of wings and talons, a tornado of high pitched chicken war cries, and then Stonewall’s on its side, dead as hell, one wing raised as though trying to claim victory in death.

The men gathered around the pit immediately start hollering. Money changes hands. Felton’s cock stands erect, cawing proudly.

As the noise dies down, Felton says “somebody better call Colonel Sanders.” Though I’m sure it’d been said a hundred times before in this venue, the guys laugh as though it were a bright, shiny new joke pulled from the lips of Larry the Cable Guy himself.

Jesse pulls the limp cock out of the hole. Back at the truck, Jesse unties the glaives and dumps the dead bird. He pulls the second cage to the edge of the tailgate.

“I think you stuck your finger in too deep,” he says. “You’re suppose to get ‘em riled up, not rearrange its insides.”

“Jesse, you gotta be kidding me.”

Jesse spits a stream of tobacco at my feet. “Does it look like I’m kidding you? You’re gonna hafta get your head outta your ass. Start thinking. We ain’t here playing no bullshit games. Our cocks are on the chopping block and that sumbitch, Mr. Flynn, is holding the hatchet. You wanna lose everything?”

“No.”

“Well, then, when we take Nathaniel Forrest here down to the pit, you stick your finger in to the first joint, and that’s it. Got it?”

I nod my head yes and he tells me to grab the glaives.

The second round. The second cock. Its asshole is a bit easier to find. A bit more accommodating to my finger. Same opponent. Felton Flynn hunkers down across from us, grinning like the fox in the hen house.

Upon release, Forrest immediately leaps high, driving the glaives into its adversary’s chest.

Jesse’s victorious roar stops short. Felton’s cock has some life left in it. A lot of life. Even Forrest seems surprised by the cock’s tenacity.

Wings smash together like an orgy of dirty butterflies. Hollow bones snap with the sound of plastic twigs broken in a child’s hand. The spectators holler their approval. And in the end, Forrest lies on its side, dead as hell. Legs kick spastically. Both glaives are broken at the talon.

Back at the truck, Jesse curses Lenny’s name. “Sumbitch knew them glaives weren’t no damn good. Wait till I catch that sumbitch out at the Wal-Mart. I’ll stomp a mud hole in his ass right in front of the dag gum customer service. I don’t even care.”

He inhales and expels great huffs of air. Then he drinks a beer.

“How much more money you got?” he asks as he crinkles the can in his fist and tosses it in the bed of the truck with the two cock corpses.

“You got all my money.”

Jesse sighs. “Wrong answer.”

“You lost that entire wad of cash?”

“Pop your eyes back in your head. It was a Brindlee Mountain bankroll. Big bills on the outside, whole lotta little bills on the inside. We’re down to our last cock. Think we oughta go home?”

“Yeah, let’s go. At least we’ve got one cock we can still breed with.”

Jesse shakes his head. “We’re down the bankroll and another hundred besides. We gotta win to break even. We ain’t got no choice.”

“Then why the hell you ask me if we ought to go home?”

“Just wanted to see if you had any sack to you.”

Jesse lugs the cage off the tailgate and begins hobbling toward the ring of men.

“One more question, Jesse. What if we lose this one, too?”

Jesse glances over his shoulder. “Then I reckon when

they fill that pit back in, we'll be lying on the bottom of it."

This information doesn't ease my nervous disposition. Returning to the pit and the circle of men, all ugly with their mocking primal smiles, and rotten toothed catcall, I feel trapped in a Kentucky-fried Hieronymus Bosch painting. But who do I tell this to? I've come to a land where the art-loving wealthy have Thomas Kinkadee lighthouse paintings hanging over the television.

And I'm going to die here.

The fights are near over. The pit has grown a nest of plucked feathers stuck together with the blood of the defeated. Flynn stands on the far side of the pit. I've never seen a smile as large or as hateful as the smile that splits his melon head ear to ear.

"You and your retard don't know when to quit," he says.

Jesse set the cage down on the side of the pit. "One more cock, Mr. Flynn. That's all I ask."

"We're fighting glaives, Jesse."

"No glaives, Felton."

"Then no fight."

"I'm down what? Five hundred? I'll put Rebel here, natural, against whatever you got. For one thousand dollars."

"One thousand dollars?"

Jesse nods. I feel the noose tightening around my throat. Did that sonofabitch call me a retard?

Felton glances at Seymour Blanton. They exchange raised eyebrows. “Okay,” Felton says. “Lennie, grab Bocephus, won’tcha.”

An orgasmic wave of excitement slithers through the crowd of men. Bocephus means something to these people. By the look of naked dread on Jesse’s face, it means something to him, too.

Lennie rushes back with the biggest, angriest looking cock I’ve ever seen. Its glossy, near black feathers and preternatural stillness leads me to believe Bocephus has some crow perched in its family tree. Its murderous red eyes glare at us as though it plans on ripping our throats out once it makes short work of Rebel.

I unclasp the cage and Jesse eases Rebel out. Rebel comes easily which is more than can be said for the other two cocks. Jesse tells me not to bother with the finger.

“Is it that hopeless?”

“No,” Jesse whispers. “What we got here is a natural born killer. If there’s one cock that can go blow for blow with Bocephus, Rebel’s the one.”

I look at Rebel. Rebel looks at me with its beady little eyes. I think it’d rather be playing hopscotch than battling to the death with Bocephus. But I keep my own counsel.

Felton smiles so wide, drool hangs off his lip. His

cronies hang about him like jack-o-lanterns carved by a caricaturist. Even Seymour Blanton, who'd viewed the previous fights with calculated apathy, takes a spot at the lip of the pit, cheering as the cocks are released.

Rebel saunters toward the center of the pit. Bocephus descends like the shadow of death. As Bocephus rears up to strike, Rebel nonchalantly dips forward and plucks out Bocephus's right eye. If cocks were capable of facial expressions, I'd imagine Bocephus showing horrified surprise. Sort of like Felton's expression.

In the ensuing silence, Rebel gobbles down the eyeball. Then it's personal. Rebel and Bocephus launch themselves at each other. Neither cock spews a sound. Seeing them in such close proximity, I'm struck by the size differential. Felton's black cock has to be at least five inches larger than Rebel. Its one eye glares malevolently at little Rebel.

With the impact of their collision, Rebel's left wing snaps. The wound barely registers as Rebel rakes its talons up and down Bocephus's torso. Their beaks jackhammer at each other, pulling out tufts of feather and bits of bloody flesh.

Jesse's hand grips my shoulder like a safety harness. "I tole you," Jesse whispers. "Look at 'em go."

The cocks seem to levitate inches above the dirt bottom. Fueled by some sort of poultry hatred I'll never understand, they rend each other. Wings flap, desperately, a whirlwind of movement like the Looney Tunes Tasmanian Devil, making it difficult to discern the action taking place.

They break away from each other momentarily, a bare

second, not long enough to catch one's breath, and they assail each other once more. Bocephus attacks high, Rebel ducks low and repeatedly thrusts its beak into Bocephus's abdomen, opening a wound large enough to expose innards.

Bocephus remains disconcertingly silent. Its right leg hangs off its body by a shred of skin. It settles back on its left leg, opening its impressive wingspan. Rebel charges beak first, worrying the abdominal wound, looping out a piece of gut.

Bocephus's beak guillotines down, snapping Rebel's neck. Rebel falls forward, dead as hell.

Felton shows no emotion. Fucking Jesse is a hollow victory, when he gets a lacerated cock as a result.

Jesse lowers his head. Everyone turns toward us. There's not a friend in the bunch.

Felton approaches us, grim as a pall bearer. "I'll be taking my money now."

Jesse's good ole boy smile looks more like a tortured rictus. "Well, Mr. Flynn, I ain't exactly got all of it on me at the moment."

Felton Flynn and Seymour Blanton stand a little too close for comfort. I'm ready to break for the truck the moment Jesse makes his move. He doesn't make his move.

"I fucking knew it. You ain't changed none, have you, Jesse? What are we gonna do with you?"

"I got the money, Mr. Flynn. I thought I had it on me,

but it's gotta be in my other pants. You want, I'll leave Earl here with you while I run back and get it."

"What the hell I want with a goddam retard?"

"As a sign of good faith. That I'll come back with the money."

"You ain't got no good faith, Jesse. But I know damn well you'll give me what's mine. I'll hold on to something else in the mean time."

Jesse doesn't say much on the ride home. I don't say much either. The money's gone. The cocks are massacred.

Jesse never takes his eyes off the road. Without the dentures in his mouth, the tobacco juice runs out of his lip unimpeded, down his shirt, onto his lap.

about Karl Koweski

Karl Koweski moved from Chicago to Alabama fourteen years ago and became the 432nd Alabama resident to read a book, a feat he's accomplished forty-six times in the last decade alone. An enemy of the Amish everywhere, Koweski has death warrants out in no fewer than twenty Mennonite communities. When not chroming metal or battling ninjas, The Polish Hammer, as he's affectionately called by members of the Polish Hammer Cult of Immortality by Suicide, spends his time lounging beneath the mighty oak tree in the back acres of his compound writing poetry, stories, columns, and novels. He's been published widely, but his monk-like humility forces him to leave it up to you, the curious reader, to find out where. Records of his escapades can be found at his column Observations of a Dumb Polack at www.redfez.net.