

# Slimy Conscience

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First Place—Short Story Competition  
The Chris Read Award for Fiction

The sweltering afternoon sun beat down upon two boys. It was the hottest day of the year, Murphy was sure of it. He could hear his brain sizzling in his skull like the scrambled eggs he had for breakfast. Beside him, Jim was lying upside down on the creaking porch swing, his knobby legs thrown over the backrest, bent like broken twigs off the sycamore tree out front. Murphy watched scarlet blotches spread on Jim's cheeks, the blood rushing to cover every surface of his friend's flushed face. Whenever the swing paused with a groan, Jim would propel himself upwards again, fingertips pushing off the sanded, wooden planks of Murphy's porch.

"Man, I'm so bored," Jim complained loudly.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

Murphy counted drop-lets of sweat rolling off Jim's forehead. They landed on the planks below, leaving dark circles on the light-colored oak.

"Yeah, me too."

"Can we just go back inside?" Jim pleaded, propping his hands on the floor, stilling the swing's movement. Beads of perspiration collected on his nose, then slid off to join the others. The circles began to form a puddle.

The roar of the vacuum cleaner drifted through the holes in the screen door.

"Can't." Murphy shook his head. "Nancy's still cleaning."

Jim resumed his swinging.

Murphy leaned his head back against the porch post, its shadow hiding him from the sun's scorching rays. His eyelids drooped.

Murphy woke with a jolt to Jim's startled yelp and turned in time to see Jim fall off the swing, crashing to the floor in a heap. He then stumbled up frantically,

backing away from the porch swing as if it had shocked him.

"What's wrong?" Murphy grabbed at his friend's arm.

A garbled noise of disgust escaped Jim's lips as he pointed to the creature that had sent him into such a frenzy. Next to where Jim's head had been moments before sat a fat green slug. Its moist flesh glistened in the sunlight and a slimy path trailed behind it.

Murphy was about to tease Jim for being startled by such a harmless insect, when he caught sight of the mischievous glint in Jim's eyes. The last time Jim gave him that look, they had lost half of their eyebrows, and Murphy was grounded for two weeks.

"You have any salt?"

Before Murphy could protest, Jim was gone with a slap of the screen door, and he found himself alone with the doomed creature. Upon closer inspection, the slug's skin was

more brown than green. Murphy watched disgusted as its fleshy abdomen twitched; the slug inched forward gradually, ignorant of its impending fate. Its two antennae bobbed from side to side, almost as if they were waving at him.

The screen door slammed open again and Jim emerged, his mother's flower-shaped salt shaker in hand.

"This is gross, Jim," Murphy said, taking a step back from where Jim was crouched in front of the poor bug.

"Aw, c'mon Murph, don't you wanna see what happens?" Jim poised the shaker above the slug and, with a sadistic twist of his lips, disposed of the salt upon it.

Murphy watched with morbid fascination as the slug instantly curled in on itself, writhing as if it were in intense pain. He had once heard that invertebrates

"Murphy found that he  
couldn't look away."

don't perceive pain as most other animals do, but he found that hard to believe as the slug twisted sharply on its side. Its body began excreting a yellow mucus and its soft flesh shriveled, turning dark brown in some areas. Murphy found that he couldn't look away.

Moments later, the slug excreted a spurt of thick milky substance, coating the floorboards, and shrank to half its original size. That's when Murphy heard the hissing, like water on a stove or his father's calloused palms rubbing against each other. It was as if the slug were screaming.

*The slug was screaming.*

The awful noise broke him out of his trance and he became dimly aware that Jim was still applying salt to his shriveled-up, half-dead victim.

With a grunt, he shoved Jim out of the way and stomped on the slug, hard. His new tennis shoes landed with a sickening splat.

He stumbled down the porch steps, tears stinging his eyes, and fell to his knees, spilling the remnants of his lunch on the freshly-mowed lawn.

Jim was yelling somewhere behind him, but the sound grew fainter, fainter, until Murphy couldn't hear him over the hissing in his ears. ▲

## The Chris Read Award For Fiction

The Chris Read Award for Fiction, instituted with the 1994 issue of *Southern Voices*, honors a member of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science's Class of 1991. Christopher David Read was an active leader at MSMS as a member of Emissaries, the Debate Club, and the *Southern Voices* staff. Chris's first love, however, was writing. Southern style.

Chris often wove his Southern tales late at night. Chris would compose either on the computer or on (his favorite) the old, brown Royal typewriter he had bought from the pawn shop down 13th Street South. Faking sleep, I would watch the grin on Chris's face as he worked out the next great story. When he finished, Chris would always "wake me" and excitedly read his new story to me. He never knew that I had been hiding, watching his creative process with admiration. I was not the only one to admire Chris's work. This award stands as testimony to the admiration that we all held for Chris and his work and as a memorial to the Southern writing tradition which Chris loved.

Chris had the potential to become a great writer. Unfortunately, Chris never reached this potential: he was killed in a car wreck on January 17, 1993. Though Chris will never attain his dream of writing a great novel, all of those who loved and respected Chris hope that the recipient of this Award, as well as all the other aspiring writers at MSMS, will achieve their dreams.

Michael D. Goggans  
Class of 1991



## Korcë Gate

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