The Tenure Trap

Neal R. Wagner

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Stephen Dedekind looked out at a landscape straight from Hell, like one of those crazy Hieronymus Bosch paintings of a literal Hades, filled with smoke and fire, elaborate machines, and the most fantastic demons tormenting the damned. A tiny figure near the bottom was Stephen himself, half swallowed by a fish-like creature.

He had started the day in the dark when the first of two alarms woke him. He’d turned off the second and staggered into the kitchen for a quick meager breakfast while his cat Iphigenia frantically rubbed his leg. The apartment’s cooling system groaned in the background—not a regular air conditioner, but only the cheap swamp cooler that locals used in the dry climate. He’d resolved to call the editor early today, find out once and for all. This tenure business was starting to consume his life, keeping him from work and pleasure both. He fed Iffie and headed out, locking his shabby one-story rental.

He drove the old green VW bug along dusty dark streets, with a glow in the east promising dawn soon, past scrawny trees and cactus plants. He turned onto Butte Avenue, a larger four-lane street that bordered the university itself. Then up a hill and into the faculty lot, almost empty
this early. As he left his car the east was getting bright. Already the sulfur dioxide in the air made him choke and cough. He trudged along next to the road past a billboard written in Spanish for the locals. Five years in this godforsaken place and he still knew only a few Spanish words. It reminded him of how little he knew about the cactus plants he was passing, with only his private names for them, such as pincushion or fuzzyspikes, but what their real names were he hadn’t learned.

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Past the huge pit itself and beyond a few low hills, the land dipped down to the river and the copper smelter—with four giant smokestacks spewing pollution, mainly the sul-
fur dioxide that made the campus barely habitable. In the far distance across the valley, at the top of the highest hill opposite, was the statue of Mary, the Queen of Heaven. He called her Our Lady of the Stinking Dessert, or sometimes the Blessed Virgin of the Stinking Dessert. One of his friends said they should run a smelter pipe up through the statue and out her mouth, so she could belch out sulfur.

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