

The Law of Natural Selection

by Jack Swenson

Tony taught biology. He was an early riser, and he would get to school at four or five in the morning. As he walked down the sidewalk from the parking lot to the science building, he would crunch the snails under his feet. He was God, he said. Some lived; some died. It was the way things worked. The law of natural selection.

Tony was a big Italian with a red beard and fierce blue eyes. The students loved him. They would bring him things. Birds with broken wings. Live mice for the snakes. Once a student brought him a jar of black widow spiders. Tony put it on his desk. Somehow the jar got tipped over, and the spiders got out. He discovered this one afternoon when he woke up from a nap at his desk. He would tell a visitor not to worry. He would find them eventually, he said.

He liked to have visitors in his general science class when he fed the snakes. He had the creatures in glass cages on a long bench under a bank of windows. He fed the snakes live mice. One day he asked me if I wanted to watch. I said no thanks.

One day I asked Tony why he decided to get a degree in biology. He said he had always liked and admired animals. He was born and raised in Cleveland, he said. People there didn't like people who were different. Folks were always squabbling and causing each other trouble. Animals are better than people, he said. For the most part they live and let live. They don't go looking for trouble. If they had bigger brains, we'd be the ones in cages, and the world would be a better place.

