

Magnum Opus

by Randy Lowens

Raymond walked onto the stage and looked down. Less than a hundred had gathered for the performance. Ah, well. He'd always been something of a local sensation, his following small, but loyal. From the audience, someone called his name. He smiled and waved.

The scaffolding had been difficult to construct. The rock floor of the bluff offered no purchase, so he'd been forced to anchor braces to the trees behind, then span some thirty feet. Overhead, a cantilevered gallows reached another fifteen feet past the stage's edge.

Performance art was the culmination of his career. In school, his poems had been well received, but upon graduation he'd abandoned art. The economics of marriage had led to a mill job, followed by depression, addiction and divorce. In recovery he began to write again, and paint as well, doing brief stints in jail for unpaid child support rather than returning to the mill. Eventually his ex-wife gave up, and stopped having him arrested; she remarried and, with his son, moved away. Later he became a folk musician, finding onstage the human connection that neither writing nor painting afforded. But in performance art, in creating that which existed wholly in the moment, he believed he had reached his zenith.

However, as with intoxication, the comforts of art were fleeting. Each work pleased, but only briefly. Restlessness always returned. The hunger to conjure something new, original, something greater than he'd ever done, was never long sated.

So he had come to this, his masterwork. He walked the beam beneath the gallows and inspected the noose (as he had done several times while the crowd gathered). There was comfort in the ritual, in performing motions meticulously rehearsed. His palms were moist, but his hands, steady.

The event had been advertised on the strength of his name alone. The crowd didn't know what manner of performance they had been invited to witness. Their chatter reached up to him as he tugged the

noose a final time. Placing the full burden of his weight on the rope, he brought it taut, causing the overhead beam to flex. But at the limit of its extension, it held solid. He placed the rope around his neck.

The noise of the crowd tapered to a whisper, then silence. He stepped off the plank into air. The audience consisted mostly of long-time patrons, of those accustomed to the artist's eccentricity, his insistence on mystery. So few were taken aback when veins bulged from his forehead. They waited patiently, intent on absorbing each nuance. But when the kicking of his legs slowed and a large stain appeared at his crotch, while a grotesque, pink tongue lolled from his mouth, someone said "I don't get it," and another replied, "I think I get it. But I don't like it." But the first person who truly got it only murmured, "Sweet god almighty, what has that fool gone and done now?"

