



Can
By Zak Newman

The heat beats down on his brow.
Days are always like this.
The red sky churns, filled with filth and fumes
that stink of rust and sulfur, the ghost of a past,
lurking on the edge of memory.
The barren earth, baked by the relentless sun,
spreads out for miles all around, red, lifeless.
He breathes deeply through long slits in a bulbous nose,
then expels a grit-lined ball of mucus.
The air is putrid, but
he has adapted. He is humanity.

But he has never known
the sweetness the air once carried
on a mid-summer afternoon in Spring.
Sharp, solid pain runs through his shrunken, bent legs.
Miles have worked their way into his muscles.
Even his second set of arms ache
as they press the dry ground.
Creases prematurely line his young brow
as he looks up at the boiling sky.
It has always been said that the ones before ruined it,
however, he had always managed to find beauty in its patterns.
Twisting and turning, dancing to its own music,
giving glimpses of a divine touch.
Not today. The clouds press down,
making the weight he carries
inside all but unbearable.

Today his journey is over, and the only thing he carries
in his sore, calloused hands is the tool, the weapon he left with,
its two blades on the ends of its shaft blazing in the sun.
The older ones would not consider him one of them
when he returned with no prize like those
they had all found on their own quests.
In another turning of the sky,

when the blackness vanished and light beamed through the clouds,
he would have to make the journey again.
Childhood would forever be his lot unless he brought back treasure.
It did not really matter what, just
something from before,
to be put on display in the Temple of Antiquity.
A ray of light lances through the gray-red clouds
and something sparkles.
His heart jumps.

His short legs and lower arms scurry
toward the shimmering.
He plunges his blade into the ground and reaches
to retrieve the glitter. Holding it aloft,
he examines the shining cylinder.
Its fizzing contents gone for some centuries now, consumed, processed, and expelled
by a species long dead.
His eyes fix on this container of the past
and the sky churns beautifully again.