

*Backpack Adventures Series*

*Raccoons,  
Robbers  
and Radios*

*by*

*Marguerite Swilling*

*Produced through the Partnership for  
Environmental Education and Rural Health,  
Texas A&M University*



**Marguerite Swilling**, author of the Backpack Adventure Series, has loved reading, writing and science all her life. From writing and directing an original play in sixth grade, she advanced to essay competitions in high school and published poetry at Texas A & M where she majored in English and minored in Earth Science. Although she is a certified secondary teacher, Mrs. Swilling has spent the past twenty-three years in the business world and has written and presented training seminars on a variety of topics. Mrs. Swilling lives in Georgetown, Texas with her husband and two daughters.

## **Backpack Adventure Series**

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1       Jace felt a drop of rain hit his head and he ran  
2 back to the museum at Longhorn Cavern. As a  
3 lightning storm raged overhead, Jace wandered  
4 around the small rooms of the museum, looking  
5 intently at the grainy black and white photos that  
6 told the story of the CCC and the building of the  
7 cavern pathways and that very building.

8       The walls of the museum were substantial,  
9 strong and rough. Just like the young men who built  
10 them, Jace thought.

11       “Jace, the tour’s about to start, but you don’t  
12 have to go if you don’t want to.” Jace’s mother had  
13 been glad he had come back from walking so  
14 quickly. The storm had turned out to be very  
15 dangerous and the tour had been delayed until it  
16 subsided.

17       “I’d like to go on the tour, Mom,” Jace  
18 answered.

19       His mother smiled and teased him. “You’re  
20 studying these old photographs a lot, Jace. I  
21 thought you didn’t like all these boring historical  
22 displays.”

23       Jace looked into the eyes of one young man in a  
24 CCC photo. Even in the black-and-white picture,  
25 you could see by his freckled face that he was a  
26 redhead.

27       Jace shrugged. “Some of it is pretty cool.”

1 The two men could be heard hollering for their  
2 lives as they headed down the steep hillside away  
3 from Longhorn Cavern. Pepper's barks echoed off  
4 the limestone ridges and Tick's laughter faded away  
5 to a chortle.

6 "That chase will wear old Pepper out good now.  
7 He'll be mighty hungry when he gets back. Guess  
8 I'll head over to town and see if any of the churches  
9 have got handouts tonight. It's about a ten mile  
10 walk one way." Tick kicked a small white rock  
11 from the pathway. "Sure will be nice to start  
12 workin' again and not depending on handouts. You  
13 gonna join me?"



14 "No, I think I'll stay here a bit longer."

15 Tick nodded and extended his right hand. "Best  
16 o' luck, Jace."

17 "Best of luck to you, too, Tick."

18 As Tick walked off, Jace picked up his  
19 backpack and checked the coordinates. Everything  
20 looked right. He stepped behind a clump of cedar  
21 trees and pressed the buttons that would return him  
22 to where the lightning had struck. He set the return  
23 clock for a few minutes before the actual strike. He  
24 didn't want to be struck twice.

25 \*\*\*\*\*  
26 \*\*\*\*\*

27  *The years have changed you, somehow;*  
28 *I see you now* 

29 Duke Ellington  
30 "Sophisticated Lady"  
31

## An Introduction to Backpack Adventures:

Welcome to the coolest club in middle school! Of course, no one outside the club can know just what makes this group so different. The secret is in the backpack.

**Roman Castillo**, a young teenage technology whiz, developed a powerful mini-computer that can transport people through space and time. He controls the computer with a wireless keypad complete with a screen that displays the co-ordinates for the time and space travel destination. He shared his invention with his best friend, Travis, as well as four others.

**Travis Allen**, Roman's best friend since kindergarten, is the son of a veterinarian and loves animals, the outdoors and math. He wears western jeans and boots that highlight his long, lanky profile. He has a short temper except with his stepsister, Summer. He's very protective of Summer and doesn't like having her travel with the BPC as the group has nicknamed their awesome device.

**Summer Martin**, Travis' stepsister, is two years younger than Travis and Roman. Her bright blue eyes are as merry as her laugh and her blonde hair is cut short and sassy. She loves to read and has a great memory for history and geography. She uses a wheelchair due to a terrible, traffic accident when she was five. Travis and his aunt built a motorized chair for Summer, and she can participate in just about everything with her two best friends, Connie and K.T.

**Connie Castillo**, Roman's sister and Summer's best friend, has long, silky black hair and her dark brown eyes are framed by thick, black lashes. She loves her brother, but sometimes questions the use of the BPC. Quiet and reserved, she is a serious student. Science is her favorite subject and dance is

her favorite pastime. She and Summer have a mutual best friend named K.T.

**K.T. Watson**, is an only child who loves her best friends, Summer and Connie, like sisters. She wears her curly, jet-black hair in dozens of tiny, tight braids so she'll look more like her favorite athlete, Venus Williams. K.T. is full of energy and courageous. A natural leader, she often instigates the adventures with the BPC. She loves soccer and cheerleading. She helped form the Backpack Club and brought in its newest member: her neighbor, Jace.

**Jace Long**, classmate and neighbor to K.T., grew up in China and moved first to California and finally to Texas. He loves soccer like K.T., is a whiz at math like Travis, and is especially close to Summer. As the newest member to the Backpack Club, Jace is the most reluctant to use the BPC for travel, but he thinks it's a great tool for communicating between the members and is the first to try the device for help with homework.

1 campfire with water from Tick's cook pot. Smoke  
2 filled the cavern and gave the youngsters a moment  
3 to run away as the two men fumbled and coughed.  
4 As the boys reached the cave opening, they could  
5 hear the shouted curses from the men as they  
6 struggled to follow.

7 Suddenly, Pepper's low moaning bay rumbled  
8 up from the cavern depths. Jace looked with alarm  
9 at Tick, thinking that Pepper had been hurt.

10 But Tick was bent over double with laughter.

11 "What is it, Tick? Is Pepper alright?"

12 "That's his coon call. Been watching a mother  
13 coon setting up a nest near our camp and I was  
14 wondering when Pepper was gonna sniff her out.  
15 The smoke must o' riled her up too. Like they say  
16 in that new song, smoke gets in your eyes! Boy, it  
17 does. Say, we'd better get out o' the way 'fore we  
18 get runned over," Tick answered, as he scurried  
19 through the opening and hid in the bushes to the  
20 side. Jace quickly followed.

21 A moment later, the two robbers came clawing  
22 and scrambling through the tight opening with a  
23 huge mother raccoon and bleary-eyed coon dog in  
24 hot pursuit. Above all of them, hundreds of free-tail  
25 bats made a smoke-like plume that swirled into the  
26 blue spring sky. Jace wondered where the dust  
27 storm had gone, but evidence of its passing was  
28 everywhere: a fine coating of sooty sand covered  
29 the leaves and ground and coated every blade of  
30 grass.

1 asked the second man who was inching his way  
2 nearer to Jace.

3 Jace's hand slowly reached for his backpack.  
4 He hoped the green glow on the keypad would not  
5 attract their attention. He had set the return  
6 coordinates earlier while he talked with Tick, but he  
7 had wanted to check them in the daylight, just to be  
8 sure they were correct.

9 "How do, strangers? Are you here to get a job  
10 with the CCC like we are?" Tick asked in as calm a  
11 voice as he could muster.

12 "Listen to him, Ezra. He thinks gentlemen like  
13 us would stoop to workin' for a livin'. Most likely  
14 he's trying to get us off track so we don't take the  
15 loot from him."

16 Jace could smell the two men: their scent of  
17 unwashed body, tobacco and alcohol filled the cave  
18 air like poison. Jace pushed himself to a standing  
19 position, his knees quaking. The glint of the knives  
20 was apparent even in the dusky torch light.



21 "Sylvanus, perhaps we should allow these boys  
22 to hand over the Barrow loot."

23 "There's no loot. That's just Hooverville talk,"  
24 Tick replied boldly.

25 "Well then, we'll just have to see for ourselves,  
26 won't we?" said the first man as he lunged for Tick.  
27 Tick deftly dodged his knife and called for Jace to  
28 run.

29 But Jace couldn't leave Tick to fight two armed  
30 men. He grabbed the torch and dropped it on the  
31 smoldering embers, then quickly doused the

## "Raccoons, Robbers and Radios"

1  *Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky*  
2 *Stormy weather...*  
3 *Keeps rainin' all the time* 

4 Koehler and Arlen  
5 "Stormy Weather"  
6 Sung by Billie Holiday

7 Jace could hear his mother calling after him,  
8 warning him not to walk too far away from the  
9 group of sightseers. She wanted him to look through  
10 old photos on display in the park museum while they  
11 waited for the next tour of Longhorn Cavern. The  
12 last place on earth Jace wanted to be was in a cave.  
13 Or a museum. Spring break had been one endless  
14 journey of caverns and caves filled with wet rocks  
15 and bat guano. His parents were immigrants from  
16 China where they had loved caving. They had  
17 devised a torture route of natural wonders through  
18 four states, and today, March 19th, the last day of  
19 the break, all Jace just wanted was to get home and  
20 see his friends. At least he had been able to keep in  
21 touch with them through his backpack computer and  
22 email. Maybe he could find a flat rock to sit on and  
23 try to reach one of them now.

24 Jace carefully picked his way along a rocky  
25 path and then veered onto an animal trail, his eyes  
26 fixed on the ground. He stepped over deer  
27 droppings. He recognized the scattered groupings of  
28  
29

1 round pellets, but not the other scat that looked like  
2 it was very fresh. He wanted to leave the trail, but  
3 the cactus and rocky outcroppings made the walking  
4 look even harder off the trail. The Mexican juniper  
5 or “cedar trees” as they were called in Central  
6 Texas, were especially thick in this area.

7 The weather matched his gloomy mood. A  
8 thick, damp blanket of clouds threatened to unleash  
9 torrential rains at any moment and the rumble of  
10 thunder could be heard in the distance.

11 Jace felt a big, wet plop on the top of his head  
12 and reached up, expecting to find a buzzard  
13 dropping. His whole life seemed filled with animal  
14 excrement. Jace felt another drop on his nose and he  
15 wiped a fat raindrop from his face. It had rained  
16 every day of the trip, so why should today be any  
17 different?, he thought grumpily.

18 A sudden flash of lightning and almost  
19 simultaneous clap of thunder caused Jace to jump,  
20 scratching his leg on a small prickly pear cactus. He  
21 felt the hair on his arms stand on end and he  
22 squatted on the ground, sure another bolt was about  
23 to blast him. The next second he was lying face  
24 down on the narrow trail as a lightning bolt hit the  
25 live oak tree next to him and knocked him flat. The  
26 deafening crack was the last thing he remembered.

27  
28 \*\*\*\*\*  
29

30 Jace opened his eyes to dim sunlight filtering  
31 into a dark recess where he lay on his back on top of

1 formations. Jace looked in awe at the beauty  
2 surrounding him. Never before had he looked at  
3 caves in this type of light. Fissures and passages  
4 crisscrossed the cavern, leading into the  
5 subterranean maze. Here they were safe from the  
6 suffocating dust storm. Here there was no sudden  
7 lightning. Here all was soft light. Here there was  
8 clear water, sanitized by the limestone and collected  
9 in a shallow pool. Tick showed Jace how to cup his  
10 hand and drink from the black pool. They talked for  
11 what seemed to be hours. Both forgot their hunger  
12 pangs as they fed upon the beauty of the crystal-  
13 studded vault. This is the kind of tour I like, Jace  
14 thought. He was in no rush to leave since he knew  
15 he could use the backpack computer to return him to  
16 the moments just before the lightning blast.

17 The fire dwindled to a low glowing mass of  
18 embers. Pepper was snoring off to one side, his  
19 muzzle buried beneath his massive paws. Jace was  
20 drowsy, too, and he tried to find the most  
21 comfortable positions leaning against the rocky  
22 ledges. Tick dozed with his head on his knees, like  
23 he never intended to fall asleep.

24 “Would ya look here, Ezra? We got  
25 trespassers.”

26 Jace awoke with a start to find two burly men  
27 with long knives in their hands staring down at him.  
28 Tick was already on his feet, but Pepper lay hidden  
29 behind a large stalagmite.

30 “You don’t suppose they’s down here looking  
31 for Miss Bonnie’s treasures, do you, Sylvanus?”



1       “Did your family lose everything in the stock  
2 market?”

3       “Shoot no! We weren’t rich enough to own no  
4 stocks. But my Pa, before he ran off, said it was the  
5 de—de—deflation what caused him to file for  
6 bankruptcy and lose the farm his granddaddy had  
7 homesteaded in the Great Land Rush. Deflation and  
8 the drought.”

9       Jace sat down on a dry boulder near the torch.  
10 “Are you going to start a campfire?” Jace was still  
11 uneasy having only one torch to keep him from total  
12 inky darkness. The temperature was a little cool and  
13 a fire would feel good.

14       “Yeah, I can do that,” Tick answered. He set  
15 three logs in an ‘A’ shape, two on the bottom and  
16 one across the top. “Hand me some of those twigs  
17 from that pile there,” Tick instructed Jace. Jace  
18 passed him a handful of skinny twigs. Tick  
19 skillfully lined them up along the crossed logs and  
20 put a bit of dried grass beneath them on either side.

21       He held a single match to the torch and,  
22 carefully protecting the tiny flame from the cool  
23 drafts that wafted through the cave, carried it to the  
24 fire.

25       Jace watched in fascination as Tick lit the grass  
26 and then encouraged the flames to take hold on the  
27 twigs. Jace handed more twigs to Tick and then  
28 added larger branches. Finally, the boys placed a  
29 few larger logs on top. Soon they had a roaring fire  
30 going that filled the wide chamber with light and  
31 revealed the pastel-colored walls and majestic

1 hard, flat rock. How did I get in a cave?, he  
2 wondered.

3       “So you ain’t gonna die after all?” said a voice  
4 behind him. Jace struggled to raise himself to a  
5 sitting position. His head pounded with the effort.

6       “Where am I?” he managed to ask.

7       “On the back side of Longhorn Cavern near  
8 Burnet.”

9       “What time is it?”

10       “Don’t know ‘xactly, but by my stomach’s  
11 growlin’, I’d say it’s ‘bout noon.”

12       Jace slowly turned his aching body to face his  
13 yet unseen companion. He stared at a youth of  
14 about sixteen who was wearing a ragged cotton shirt  
15 and faded overalls that had holes in the knees. His  
16 red hair was cut short and stood straight up on his  
17 head. He had freckles all over his face and body.  
18 He smiled at Jace and offered his hand to shake.  
19 With great effort, Jace offered his own hand. The  
20 young man squeezed his hand and pumped his arm  
21 up and down so hard that Jace winced.

22       “Sorry. I don’t mean no harm. I forget how  
23 strong I am even though I ain’t had a full meal in  
24 three weeks. Just got here today. There’s lots of  
25 squirrels in the woods ’round here and I’m a pretty  
26 good shot with my sling. I plan on having meat  
27 tonight.”

28       Jace swallowed hard and asked, “How did I get  
29 here and what happened?”

30       The youth looked puzzled. “You mean you  
31 don’t remember? You must have that amnesty or

1 whatever it's called. I was walking down that game  
2 trail and found you lying flat on your face, out  
3 colder than a blue norther."

4 "I think I was hit by lightning," Jace answered.

5 The stranger hooted. "Lightnin'! There ain't  
6 been a light mist much less a thunderstorm in these  
7 parts for over six months. We're in the Dust Bowl,  
8 kiddo. There's no way you been hit by lightnin' in  
9 the middle of a drought."

10 "I remember there was a storm," Jace said. "I  
11 had that Billie Holliday song, 'Stormy Weather,'  
12 going through my head."

13 "Billy Who?" the boy asked.

14 "Wait," Jace said. "What year is it?"

15 "1933, of course, same as yesterday and the day  
16 before. March 19, 1933 to be exact. And I'm sure  
17 it's gettin' to be lunch time. You got any vittles in  
18 that knapsack?"

19 Jace pulled his backpack to his side. "No," he  
20 answered a little too quickly, worried the stranger  
21 might try to steal the keypad. Then he remembered  
22 what the guy had said about rescuing him. The teen  
23 could have robbed him and left him for dead.

24 He could have ransacked his backpack by now  
25 if he had wanted. Jace opened the zipper and  
26 showed the inside to the disappointed-looking teen.  
27 "No food. Sorry."

28 The young man shrugged. His stomach  
29 growled loudly in anticipation of the lunch that  
30 would not materialize.

1 on the smooth rocks. Limestone made up every  
2 surface of the cave. Tick had assured him he knew  
3 the way even in the dark and that he had another  
4 torch at the camp. After what seemed like hours, but  
5 was really only three minutes, Jace could see the soft  
6 glow of the torch at Tick's camp. Tick told him a  
7 single torch lasted all day. He could even make a  
8 campfire in the enormous underground room.

9 The boys settled down beneath the dim glow  
10 from the torch and tried to ignore the hunger pangs.  
11 Tick began to hum a tune.

12 "Wish I had me a radio. I just love music. We  
13 could hear all the tunes, and the news, too. They  
14 even got suspense thriller stories on the radio."

15 Jace just nodded and tried to mask the rumble  
16 in his stomach with a whistle, but his mouth was too  
17 dry. He was glad Tick was in a talkative mood.

18 "Heard a legend 'bout a bank robber in the  
19 Wild West days that hid out down here. His name  
20 was Sam Bass. Talk down at the tracks is that  
21 Bonnie and Clyde hid a bunch of loot down here  
22 somewhere, too," Tick told Jace as he let Pepper off  
23 the leash.

24 "Tracks? You mean a racetrack?" Jace asked.

25 Tick shook his head, "No, the train tracks.  
26 There's a Hooverville near where the east-west and  
27 north-south train tracks cross."

28 "Hooverville?" Jace repeated.

29 "Yeah, you know, a shantytown. Hoover was  
30 President when the stock market crashed and started  
31 all this mess."

1 farther they walked. Sweat beaded on Jace's  
2 forehead.

3 "What is it, boy?" Tick squatted down close to  
4 Pepper and rubbed his neck. The dog panted and  
5 rested on its haunches. Tick turned back to look  
6 back at Jace.

7 "Looks like we'll have to go back to camp  
8 empty-handed, Jace." Tick pointed to the sky  
9 behind Jace. It looked like a large black  
10 thunderstorm was rapidly approaching. Puffy gray  
11 clouds scurried ahead of the dark mass.

12 "Is it finally going to rain?" Jace questioned. "I  
13 could use something to drink!"

14 "That ain't rain, Jace, That's a dust storm.  
15 Ain't nothin' refreshin' about that." Tick set off at a  
16 trot toward another cave opening with Pepper  
17 running right beside him. Jace followed close  
18 behind as the black dust chased after them.

19

20 \*\*\*\*\*

21  *Now laughing friends deride*

22 *Tears I cannot hide*

23 *So I smile and say*

24 *"when a lovely flame dies*

25 *smoke gets in your eyes"*

26  Kern & Harbach

27  
28 Jace followed Tick as he trekked down the dark  
29 passage leading to his camp deep in the cavern. Jace  
30 kept his right hand against the wall where he could  
31 feel the oily slickness of the groundwater dripping

1 Jace peered down into his backpack. He  
2 wished he had a bag of candy or some gum.  
3 Nothing edible. Jace looked at the keypad. Lying  
4 next to it was a pamphlet about the Lone Star Flag  
5 with the words "1933 Flag Act" across the top. The  
6 scanner in the keypad must have picked up the date  
7 from the pamphlet, Jace thought. Could lightning so  
8 close to him have activated the device, sending him  
9 back in time?

10 "The names's Vernon, but everyone just calls  
11 me 'Tick' on account of my freckles. I'm an Okie  
12 from a dried up farm outside Enid. I heard they's  
13 offering CCC jobs to build state parks here in Texas  
14 so I hopped the ATSF as far as Waco and hitchhiked  
15 my way here."

16 "Hi, I'm Jace and what did you say? The C-  
17 what, AT-what?"

18 "Ain't you ever heard of the CCC, the Civilian  
19 Conservation Corp? It's a life- saver to lots of  
20 young men who don't stand a chance of finding  
21 other work. For room and board, I can learn a skill  
22 and build bridges and parks and roads. Gets you  
23 outta the unemployment lines."

24 "Why can't you find work?" Jace asked. "And  
25 you're just a teenager. Why do you have to work?"

26 "Jace, you really can't remember nothin', can  
27 you?" Tick asked, wide-eyed and incredulous.

28 "We're in the midst of the Great Depression!  
29 Can't nobody find work and I been on my own,  
30 fending for myself for two years, ever since I turned  
31 fourteen. Most o' my friends left for Californ-i-a

1 months ago. Only friend I got left is my old coon  
2 dog, Pepper. He's the one that actually found you.  
3 He's around here somewhere. He ran back farther in  
4 the cave."


5 "What was that AT-thing you mentioned?"  
6 Jace felt like that was something he should  
7 remember.

8 "ATSF is the initials for the Atchison-Topeka-  
9 Santa Fe Railroad."

10 Jace could remember seeing the big letters on  
11 the railway boxcars. He smiled in recognition of  
12 something that tied the two of them together.

13 "So, did you ride the rails too?" Tick asked  
14 with a broad smile that revealed a mouth full of  
15 crooked teeth.

16 "No, but lately I've watched them go by and  
17 wished I was on one," Jace shared as he remembered  
18 the past week of travel. He smiled back at Tick. His  
19 head was feeling better now. "I'd like to meet your  
20 dog and thank him for finding me, Tick."

21  
22 \*\*\*\*\*  
23  *These dusty blues are the dustiest ones I know,*  
24 *These dusty blues are the dustiest ones I know,*  
25 *Buries head over heels in the black old dust, I*  
26 *had to pack up and go.*  
27 *An' I just blowed in, an' I'll soon blow out*  
28 *again.*

29  
30 Woody Guthrie  
31 "Dust Bowl Blues"



1 "Did we just see a skunk beat a coyote in a fight  
2 in broad daylight?" Tick questioned. "If that don't  
3 beat all."

4 Jace shrugged and suggested, "Maybe the  
5 skunk was protecting her young."

6 "How do you know it was female? And I ain't  
7 never seen Pepper stand so still when there's a  
8 skunk around."

9 It was true. Pepper had stood as if frozen while  
10 the coyote and skunk fought.

11 "Maybe he's just tired, or minding you,  
12 or...something."

13 "Yeah, maybe Roosevelt will invite me to the  
14 White House for chicken soup, too." Tick paused  
15 and shook his head. "Must be some venus affecting  
16 the animals."

17 "Don't you mean 'some virus'?" Jace asked  
18 with a grin. "A virus can cause disease. Venus was  
19 the goddess of love."

20 Tick laughed at his malapropism. "Don't know  
21 for sure, but seems like Venus has an effect on some  
22 varmints this time of year. You don't think that  
23 skunk and coyote was doing a love dance, now do  
24 you?"

25 Jace laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Not  
26 likely, Tick."

27 The three started walking into the oak grove  
28 again. Tick scanned the treetops for squirrels.  
29 Pepper began to whimper and pull against the rope  
30 leash. The air was growing thicker and heavier the

1       “Why don’t you just hunt for raccoon then?”  
2       “It’s hard to kill a coon with a slingshot in the  
3 dark. Had to sell my gun a month ago. Work’s been  
4 sparse and the CCC project don’t start till next  
5 month. So it’s squirrel soup till I can save up  
6 enough to buy a new gun.” Tick gave Jace a toothy  
7 grin and started walking deeper into the oak copse.  
8 Jace followed several yards behind Tick. Jace tried  
9 to scan the trees and watch his footing at the same  
10 time, constantly keeping his eyes moving.

11       From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse  
12 of movement. He stopped and watched on his left  
13 along a ridgeline that was dotted with scrubby oak  
14 trees. What he saw made his jaw drop.

15       “Tick!”

16       Tick turned and gave Jace an annoyed look, but  
17 Jace just pointed to the ridgeline. There in plain  
18 view were a coyote and a skunk. What made the  
19 scene even stranger was the fact that the skunk was  
20 attacking the coyote. The coyote yipped at the  
21 skunk and the skunk lunged at the coyote, biting its  
22 tail, its leg, any place it could reach. With its tail  
23 tucked between its legs, the coyote backed away  
24 from the skunk and slipped on the loose rocks of the  
25 ridgeline. The confused creature lost its balance and  
26 plummeted down the steep side of the ravine. The  
27 skunk seemed to rock back and forth as it stood in  
28 place, then turned and ran into some dense brush.

29       Jace and Tick looked at each other silently,  
30 jaws slack, mystified.

1       Jace followed closely behind Tick as he walked  
2 deeper into the cave. Tick whistled and called for  
3 his dog, but no bark returned the greeting. Jace held  
4 his backpack over his head, afraid that a bat might  
5 swoop down and land on him. The smell of guano  
6 was particularly strong in the cave and the only light  
7 came from a small torch that Tick held in front of  
8 him and the green luminescent glow from Jace’s  
9 computer keypad. Tick kept walking and softly  
10 calling his dog’s name as they journeyed deeper into  
11 the cave’s maze of passages.

12       They twisted and turned for at least half an  
13 hour. Eventually the path began to climb and Jace  
14 could see the faint glimmer of an opening.  
15 Suddenly, Tick stopped dead in his tracks. Jace  
16 leaned to one side to see past him.

17       “What is it?” Jace whispered to his guide.

18       “There’s somethin’ running this way,” Tick  
19 whispered breathlessly. “Stay over to the...”

20       Tick’s instructions were cut short by the sudden  
21 arrival of a big, hard-shelled armadillo that came  
22 streaking into the cave through the slender opening  
23 ahead, his sharp claws clacking on the limestone  
24 floor. Close behind him bolted a dark-colored,  
25 floppy-eared coon dog with his tongue hanging out  
26 and slobber dripping down his gray muzzle. Both  
27 animals barreled past Tick and Jace, oblivious to  
28 everything around them.

29       Tick was hollering for Pepper to come back as  
30 he ran back into the cave to catch him. Not too far  
31 down the narrow corridor, the armadillo scurried

1 into a tight fissure in the rock. Pepper stopped and  
2 gave a long low bay that signaled he had cornered  
3 his prey. Tick reached him and grabbed him by the  
4 scruff of his neck.

5 “Leave that nasty ‘dillo alone, you crazy coon  
6 dog! That’s not somethin’ for either one of us to  
7 eat!”

8 Tick dragged the reluctant dog back up to  
9 where Jace stood waiting.

10 “Jace meet Pepper, Pepper meet Jace,” Tick  
11 huffed as he tried to catch his breath. “Let’s get  
12 outside and let that poor creature escape. I’ll leave  
13 the torch here for the next time I come in this way.  
14 There’s lots of openings to this cave system.” Tick  
15 rubbed the orange embers into the wet, crunchy  
16 floor of the cave.

17 The three of them struggled up the steep incline  
18 to the narrow opening and into the bright light of the  
19 midday March sun. Jace surveyed his surroundings  
20 and found the cactus, live oak and limestone very  
21 similar to what he had seen before, but with fewer  
22 Mexican juniper trees. A reddish-brown cow grazed  
23 on the stubbly grass that looked brown and burnt  
24 even though it was spring. Her udder was full and it  
25 looked as if she walked in pain, with stiff, jerky  
26 steps. A hundred yards away, her white-faced  
27 brown calf, small and scrawny, jumped from rock to  
28 rock, slipping and falling, careening from side to  
29 side as if it were drunk.

30 Tick looked at the calf and shook his head.  
31 “Don’t think that one’s gonna make it. And that

1 cow needs to be milked or she’s gonna be in a world  
2 o’ hurt. She’s got them ‘Dust Bowl Blues’ worse’n  
3 any of us. Have you heard that song? I heard a man  
4 singin’ it around a campfire once. Never could get it  
5 out of my head. I wish I was nearer to my camp.  
6 I’d grab a pot and get us some fresh milk for lunch.”  
7 His stomach let out a growl and Jace felt a hunger  
8 pang too.

9 “M-a-a-a-a-a-a!” The calf called plaintively  
10 to its mother who seemed to be ignoring it. The frail  
11 heifer fell to the ground and could not get back up.  
12 Its back legs lay helpless and stiff as it scrambled  
13 with its forelegs. The mother cow kept eating the  
14 stubbly brown grass and walking farther away from  
15 her offspring.

16 “Should we try to help it?” Jace asked.

17 “Don’t think so. There’s somethin’ not right  
18 about that calf. Best let nature take her course.”

19 Tick slipped a piece of rope out of his pocket  
20 and made a crude leash for Pepper.

21 “Come on, Pepper, stay with me. Let’s go  
22 squirrel hunting.” Tick took a small leather  
23 slingshot from his back pocket and began to gather  
24 small flat stones, trying each to see how it fit and  
25 placing some of the stones in his pockets.

26 “Can you really kill a squirrel with that  
27 slingshot?” Jace asked.

28 “Sure thing! Squirrels is easy to pop with a  
29 rock. But the real good eatin’s when Pepper trees a  
30 big fat raccoon and I shoot the bandit-face and make  
31 coon stew.”