

Cold Metal Wings

By Robert Klein Engler

Again, in the elevator, there is the odor of piss and Pinesol. I notice it every time I visit my mother at Westhaven Nursing Home. Mother's health had been going from bad to worse, so my sister and I reluctantly put her in this nursing home six months ago. Now, I go visit her once a week and try to talk to her about what she used to do. I try to give back to her the memories that sickness and old age day by day take away. I feel like I'm doing the work of Penelope in reverse. What the days unravel, I try to weave back together on weekends.

It was at Westhaven that I first asked my mother about the man by the window who sat alone looking at the sky.

"Oh, that's Sergeant Rockwell," she said indifferently. She then advised me to stay away from him.

"He's always angry," she added.

I looked over to Rockwell and told mother he did not look angry to me, just old.

"That, too," she said.

When it was time to take my mother back to her room, I made a point of rolling her by the window where Rockwell sat. I stopped her wheelchair in front of the window and turned her so she looked out at the sky as well. Rockwell wore the light blue pajamas supplied by the nursing home and a darker blue robe with a few food stains on the front. His hair was thin and gray with a trace of being blond once, and his eyes glinted when I looked into them and nodded. There was a flash of recognition between us. I said "Hello," and he said the same. I noticed he had a small pink triangle pinned to the left lapel of his robe. I wondered where he got that pin and if my mother knew what it meant.

When I got back to my mother's room I asked about the pink triangle. "I don't know," she said, "I think it's something to do with the war. He was in the Pacific during the war, just like your uncle. I heard him talking to one of the nurses about flying or something. I think he

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worked on airplanes. I didn't know they let people like him in the Navy.”

All during the Second World War people listened to the radio for news of the battles, and for music to take their minds off the battles. They were wooden radios. Some were shaped like the vaults of a Gothic cathedral and sat atop a table under an embroidered doily. Others were large as cabinets and filled the corner of a room. They had names like "RCA Victor" and "Zenith." I liked the way the word "Zenith" began with a big letter "Z" that looked like a bolt of lightning. In those days nobody even imagined a radio or a TV could be made in Japan.

Then, as now, people mostly liked love songs. Lawrence Welk and his Champagne Music Makers got their start in Minnesota and eventually broadcast love songs and dance music all over the country. Sergeant Rockwell remembered the armed forces radio playing the music of Welk along with songs by Kay Kaiser and the College of Musical Knowledge, while he drank beers in the NCO's club at Henderson Field. The love songs on the radio were food for his soul then. They were broadcast from New York City, across the country, to San Francisco and then to the troops in the Pacific. These songs were like ambrosia for gods who were likewise broken hearted but immortal.

After they dropped the atomic bombs on Japan, Sergeant Rockwell told me he was discharged from the service. He couldn't find work at home after that, and stayed in his room in Detroit listening to the radio. Rockwell was twenty-eight, decorated, a veteran, but he had a broken heart and was gay, and thought he might never love again. He would lay on his bed, smoke Lucky Strikes and try to remember his lover Ensign "Splash" Jackson's eyes, his arms, and his warm taste. The problem was there wasn't even a grave to visit. Ensign Jackson went down in flames over the South Pacific and only his wingman knew for sure where his plane entered the water. Sergeant Rockwell hoped Ensign Jackson was transformed instantly to smoke. He hoped the translation from life to death was as easy as a kiss.

The cigarette smoke curled up in the closed air of his bedroom in Detroit like clouds

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over Kansas, or clouds over the Coral Sea. Rockwell would lay back and try to remember this as Lawrence Welk and his Champagne Music Makers played their songs. Then the Andrew Sisters started to sing "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me."

"I made it home, others didn't, Sergeant Rockwell said. "There was no one waiting for me, no apple tree, no direction, nothing I wanted to do except listen to the radio and smoke cigarettes. I decided one day I would move to the West Coast. San Francisco seemed nice when I was there for a week while being discharged."

A few days later, I went to the hobby shop in my old neighborhood to buy a model of a Hellcat. My plan was to give the model plane to Sergeant Rockwell. I remember walking past this very same store as a boy. I would look in the window at all the miniature planes and go home to count my nickels and dimes. Which one would I be able to buy? Which one could I save enough money for? My paper route didn't give me very much to spend.

As I approached the store I noticed the theater and candy store that used to stand on the corner of Sixty-third and Kedzie had been torn down and replaced by a modern, fast food restaurant. It was a bright red building, the type they would build in about a month or two, and most of the lot was given over to parking. There was just enough room for a few outdoor tables with red awnings where people ate their chicken sandwiches, sipped their Cokes, and watched the traffic go by. There also used to be a stationery store where the parking lot sits. My mother worked there as a clerk while I was in college. Now, the wide sky shines over a flat, black parking lot as if this were the only thing the earth under these cars ever held.

Once I enter the hobby shop, I look over boxes of model planes. One box had a picture of the F6F on the ground. The plane was fully armed, with rockets and bombs. Another box, had a wonderful picture of a Hellcat flying with full armament in the red and cloudy dawn of the South Pacific. The cockpit was open and the pilot looked out at you with all the beauty and arrogance of one knowing what he can do best is exactly what he is doing now. His goggles

were raised above his eyes and he smiled as I supposed Ensign Splash Jackson would smile. I bought this one for seven dollars, along with a tube of glue and some small jars of paint.

As I leave the store, I see young men, perhaps as young as Ensign Splash Jackson was those years ago in the South Pacific, walking down the street, holding hands with their girl friends. The sun is bright for early May. I think of the sun reflecting off the sand of a beach on one of the pacific islands. The drone of Hellcats carries overhead. Then I look up and see a silhouette of a bird arching between the alley and the wall of a bank. I think of it arching into a steep bank like a Hellcat. For a second I hear the tick, tick, tick, of the machine guns, see a trail of smoke, wonder at the choking enemy pilot, the rush of wind, the scattering of gray and red metal, but it's just a pigeon landing on the tiled edge of a wall. It is just the blue water of the Pacific catching the sun and tossing it back into your eyes at three thousand feet. It is just a silhouette, just the dark outline of wings. I follow the shape of the bird into the blazing sun. I lose it in the darkness at the heart of noon.

Of the 6,477 Japanese aircraft shot down by U. S. Navy pilots in World War II, 5,156 were accounted for by the F6F Hellcat. Prior to its operational debut in 1943, the old Navy Wildcats were no match for the nimble Japanese Zero-Sen. The Hellcat, with its speed, armor and heavy armament changed all that. It became the dominant fighter aircraft of the era. A total of 12, 275 Hellcats of all varieties were built before production ceased in August 1945. Used in reserve squadrons for many years after 1945, the Hellcats even served in the Korean War as remote controlled flying bombs against North Korean ground targets.

The F6F-5 Hellcat, was produced in larger numbers than any other variant. It had a wing span of 13.05 meters, a length of 10.23 meters and a height of 3.99 meters. Its maximum speed was 380 mph at 23,400 feet. The landing speed was 88 mph. The F6F was armed with six .50 caliber machine guns or four 20 mm canons. Two 1,000 pound bombs could be carried under each wing, along with six air to ground rockets and an external fuel tank. That is a lot of ordinance, and made the men who flew this plane masters of many destinies.

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When I get home I open the box and scatter the molded plastic parts of the model on the table. Once I study their proportions, I realize the Hellcat wasn't a pretty plane as designs go. The pilot sat up high and the wings didn't slope back at the angle we come to associate with modern jet fighters. Nevertheless, they say it had a wonderful engine, and the armor plating around the cockpit saved a lot of lives. It got the job done.

I unfold the instruction sheet and read the first column of text. I turn the page, at the bottom, in small type, are the words, "Made in Japan."

"You ask me if Splash Jackson was a hero. I don't know," Sergeant Rockwell answered. "He flew those planes reluctantly. Sometimes he'd like it, but that was a rare day. There were times when he was flying on a mission and there was an hour or two before they got to their target. Up there alone in the cockpit, between water and sky, sometimes he said it was good. But then he said he always had to think about things like the compass and the fuel gauge. He had to think if the plane was level, if the flaps were right.

Unlike Splash, Captain Collins, his flight leader, never seemed to think about what he was doing in an airplane. Flying came naturally to him. Captain Collins flew a plane as if it were an extension of his body. He was a real pilot. Splash was always preoccupied with his airplane, too engaged with controlling it, to really enjoy flying. He told me he had a ceremony. Each time after landing he would say out loud, "Cheated death again."

Anyway, I thought Splash was a hero. He was a hero for doing something he was afraid to.

One day when we were down on the beach, alone, close to one another after swimming, he asked me about heroes, he asked me about what a hero was.

"Well," I said, "maybe someday Captain Collins will be a hero."

"I don't know," he replied, as he looked into the sky. "I think the real heroes are the ones who do what they don't want to do."

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Some machines are made for the men who work them. Nature, in a furious spewing forth sees to it some men are molded in such a way that they fit perfectly with the machines other men devise. It is as if their hands were shaped to use the tools given to them. One hand holds the hammer, another has fingers for the chisel or piano, yet another sits in a car and holds the steering wheel as if it were an extension of his arms. So it was with Captain Alexander Collins.

Captain Collins flew the Hellcat as if it were an extension of his body. Men marveled at the seamless interaction of his will with the movement of cold metal. Captain Collins was the best flier Splash had ever seen. When it came to flying, Splash was just the opposite. The men at the island base Tango, in the Solomon Islands, called Ensign Sam Jackson "Splash" because they heard he had earned a reputation of not landing well on aircraft carriers. He was a good flyer, had flown ten missions so far, but lost two planes while attempting to land, after shooting down two enemy fighters. That's why he was transferred to the islands. No aircraft carriers to deal with there, just long, smooth runways cut out of sand and jungle. Its not as easy as you think, landing a plane on a carrier. The old Navy guys used to say it wasn't a landing, it was a controlled crash. Splash just couldn't control it.

Splash joined the Navy and became a pilot because he had something to prove. He had to prove to himself he was not afraid, he was not afraid of himself. He had to prove he was a man. War gave men like Splash a perfect opportunity to do it. He conquered his fear and became a Hellcat pilot. He knew it was a machine, but at times it just seemed too powerful for him to control. It was a thing immune to his will, with a life of its own, like a horse that was strong and never quite broken. He felt at times the plane wanted to go out from under him and just fly itself into the clouds, or the dark soil of the earth or the endless blue of the Pacific Ocean. It would do this if Splash did not hold the stick with all his strength, all his will. The same machine in the hands of Captain Collins was another story. It was like a dancer guided and

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timed by its partner.

Fighter pilots will tell you speed is life. Things happen so fast in aerial combat, it is difficult to comprehend how little time there is between life and death. Just think about the theory of it, a Hellcat and a Japanese Zero racing toward each other at a combined speed of more than 450 miles per hour. Thousands of pounds of steel, aluminum, fabric, and flesh all roaring above the tropical waters of the South Pacific. That speed is about one city block per second. See if you can spot a car a mile away as you drive down the highway. What color is it? Do you think you can hit it, if you shoot at it? Even with radar, it's hard to see your target, to gauge its speed and angle of attack. Things happen so fast up there, most of what happens is luck.

That's just the theory of it, the physics of flying. The human truth of combat is different. There is haze, weather, fuel mixture, winds, your morning breakfast, wear and tear on the engine, a thousand and one little things. All the little things add up, and then we are knocking on the door of great theories of history, the clash of destinies, the unfolding of the Hegelian dialectic, the hand of God moving above the waters. That's what it is, too, up there in the wide sky, the plane vibrating with the tension of a tight spring waiting to snap.

Most people don't realize how noisy a plane like the Hellcat is. With the cockpit open you really can't hear a thing but the roar of the engine. While you're flying it's quieter, but even the machine guns only sound like twack, twack, twack, when you fire them. Antiaircraft fire sounds more like coughing than shells exploding around you. Bullets from an enemy fighter sound more like thud, thud, thud, then they do an explosion. Sometimes you can't even hear shrapnel hit. You hope for a silent death, not a fiery one.

You have to spot the enemy to kill him. An airplane really can't be seen by the unaided eye until it's about a mile or less away, and that's on a clear day when you are not flying into the sun. Then you have to bank so you can get off a good shot, get him in your sights, and fire a

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burst. All the while the other guy is straining to do the same thing. Then there are dog fights, looking over your shoulder, your wing mate and buddies in the squadron yelling orders, directions, cries for help, swearing, tight turns, the force of gravity throwing you against the side of the seat, the blind spot you hope your enemy doesn't maneuver into, the ocean racing up at a frightening speed, and the burst of smoke when you hit the motherfucker.

And then you keep firing, and watch his plane catch fire. Maybe there is a chute, maybe not. You follow the plane down in a slow banking curve. You keep firing short bursts. There is another explosion, more smoke. The Zero heads nose first towards the blue ocean. The plane and its shadow grow closer and closer over the water. Bam! Water splashes up and you pull back on the stick, look around, listen. Now maybe you can go home. Maybe there is another one on your tail. If not, you still have to find the base or the aircraft carrier. You check your fuel. You look over to the right wing. You see a row of bullet holes like pimples right through the painted numbers.

Later, in the warm night, with just your T-shirt and shorts on, laying on a cot with the mosquito net tied above, you think it over, play in your mind the scene again. Maybe you are back on the carrier. There is a constant hum of engines, the hiss of air. Maybe you think it all happened so fast. You just squeezed off the rounds, didn't have time to worry about it.

Maybe you think the guy in the other plane was a pilot just like you. He didn't like to fly either. He was up there trying to prove he wasn't afraid, wasn't afraid of himself or the machine the Emperor made him fly. Maybe he had a mother who sent him short letters, or a sister who looked so thin and mysterious in a kimono. Maybe he was just now opening to himself and what he loved. Maybe he was like you, still afraid as the ocean rushed in, as flames burnt away his flight jacket. Maybe he was afraid of the blue darkness that came up to meet him. Maybe it happened so fast he didn't have time to think about it. Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

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“Splash saved my life one day. I don't even know if he knew he did it, but I knew it was he in the plane. I could tell by the sound of the engine. I always knew the sound of the planes I worked on. Besides, it was his time to go up.

My crew was off duty. We were down by the beach, you know, just doing things and taking it easy. All of a sudden, this Japanese Zero, probably on a lone patrol or maybe even lost himself, comes in low. He must have seen us and thought we were important. One of the guys points to it and says, "Look at that, take cover" Well, the pilot started strafing. He pretty much missed us. Machine gun fire kicked up tufts of sand and then went out into the water, smack, smack, smack, like little fountains shooting up. I just stood there and watched it. And then, as the Zero banked away, I heard this sound of one of our Hellcats coming in low over the palm trees. I knew it was one of the planes I worked on. Well, this guy opens up on the Zero as it turns north, away from the island. He opens up on him and drives him off. The Hellcat then turns back and heads over the beach. He flies in, a little wobbly, and lands at Henderson.

I don't know what happened to the Zero, or if anybody got credit for it. There was a trail of smoke coming out of it. Maybe he made it to his base or carrier. We all cheered and went back to doing whatever we were doing. I looked over to the airfield. I didn't see any more smoke or flames. I knew Splash landed safely.

Sergeant Rockwell told me that although he fixed airplanes so that they would fly well, he didn't fly that much himself. "My memories of flying are memories of landscapes," he said. The patchwork pattern of Midwestern fields, mist in the valleys, mountains almost level with the windows of the plane. I was surprised to see how flat the surface of the water looks, with green islands jutting up abruptly. The chain of islands that make up the Solomons are beautiful when seen from the air. From Bougainvillea Island in the north, to San Cristobal Island in the south, they spread out in the Coral Sea like half an oriental fan. Henderson Field was on the north side of Guadalcanal Island.

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The Special Strategic Map of the Solomon Islands prepared for the Navy and War Department gives you a good idea of the mountainous nature of most of the islands. Somebody looking at that map today might think it is a good place to spend a vacation. Maps, however, do not show lines of destiny or whirlpools of fate. For those lines and whirlpools we have to look to history. The men who went there and never came back are the ones who must speak in memory about the patchwork pattern of lives. The Solomon Islands were taken from the Japanese by allied forces in 1943. Ensign Sam Jackson of Kansas was just finishing flight school, then, at the Navel Training Center at Memphis, Tennessee. I was transferred a few months later to be Hellcat ground crew chief at Henderson Field.

Life in the tropics was so very different from my boyhood in Detroit. Nevertheless, the light was similar in both places. I remember those wide spring mornings by the river, and the bright afternoons over the Coral Sea. Sunsets and sunrises, with a profusion of clouds in the tropics, is incomparable. But then there is the boiling sky of a Michigan thunderstorm, lightening cracking, hail stones as big as golf balls. Winter with its white light gleaming like a scalpel, is something we never saw at Henderson Field. It's funny, but that's what I missed most of the time I was stationed with the Navy as part of a flight crew servicing Hellcats. There was no real Christmas there.

I saw Ensign Jackson for the first time when he stepped out of a Hellcat after landing on the airfield. He was just transferred from a carrier off shore. The sun was to his back and he was the most beautiful man I ever laid eyes on. He was just twenty-two. I have to admit it, he did come in a bit wobbling. I had half a mind he wasn't going to land that damn plane. But he did, and it was a bright and glorious afternoon. Everything then seemed acted out under a light that saw all our deeds with a special clarity. Blood was vivid red. The palms were vivid green. The gleam of love in a man's eye cannot be hidden. Even stars had an intensity I don't see any more.

If I had to describe my life in the nursing home I would say it was dark. I can draw for you a map of darkness, where each day the darkness grows deeper. It sucks you down like tar. That's why I'm glad someone comes and talk with me. There is something of light in it. The

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young men I see on television, marching, yelling their protests, seem to have hold of a special light. I wish I could travel with them into that bright future. Who was it that said, "Oh Zeus, if you are going to kill us, kill us in the light?"

Once I foolishly asked Sergeant Rockwell, "How did you guys make love back then?" He looked at me like one who had a wise disregard for machines. "With our bodies," he said. "It's not as hard as you think. It just happens. You figure out ways. It was complicated by the fact Splash was an officer and I was an enlisted man, and we weren't supposed to fraternize, but then I was a bit older than he was, so it made up for some of the difference, at least in my mind.

"Military discipline is a loose thing sometimes, on an island during a war. Dirty jobs have to be done, so people often look the other way. Maybe some of them even knew. We weren't the only ones to have a relationship. I knew a couple of other guys, too. When I got out of the Navy I found out there was even a whole lot more than I ever suspected.

"We had our chance. Even though it wasn't a big island, there were a lot of places for people to be together or alone. I had a good time with him. We talked a lot. After we were together he told me he was no longer afraid of himself, he no longer had to prove himself by flying. Years later it occurred to me maybe our love made him careless. He lost the edge, that split second, and was shot down. But then I found out it wasn't like that. In fact he was going to help another guy in the squadron and just ran out of ammo.

After Splash died I thought there was no beauty left in the world. It was as if a great city of gold and marble had been attacked by barbarians. There was only blood and ashes in the street. War makes a man hide his grief and his love. I got by. It took a while, but I saw a beautiful face again. Nevertheless, the fire of that love shaped my soul into what it is today. I know now I was fortunate to have loved like that. Some men just have their medals from the war. I have something more.

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Sometimes, I wonder why Splash liked me. I think it has to do with me being a bit older. He was from a wealthy family. My dad just worked in a factory. Splash made me want to go to college after the war was over. He was a bright kid. Went to the University of Missouri in Columbia, before he went to flight school. Then he ended up at Henderson Field. War does mix a lot of different kinds of people up. I wonder what kind of life we could have had together if he had lived.

I ended up repairing cars in San Francisco for a while, then back to Detroit to work for G. M. I worked there until I retired--more than twenty-five years. After that I settled in Chicago. It seemed a better place to be, more open and accepting of gays. Damn Japanese, I know we can make better cars if management would just give us half a chance. Now I'm stuck in this nursing home. Odd, isn't it, how growing old turns us all into women?

Our machines of war run on oil. Take the Hellcat, for example. The oil cooler shutter control for the F6F Hellcat is hydraulic and located on the left side of the cockpit, right next to the cowl flaps control. The oil tank has a capacity of 19 US gallons with a three gallon foaming space. The tank is provided with a warm up compartment. The oil cooler, containing an automatic oil temperature control valve, is located in the bottom of the fuselage just aft of the firewall. It was my job to know this and more about the Hellcat.

Yesterday, I asked if they could get me a priest. I want to feel the oil of Extremeunction, the last sacrament before I go unconscious. I've always believed in God. Even during the worst times. I can't say I understand what He means for us, why men go to war and die, why history seems to be working toward something glorious but difficult to define. I can't say I have wisdom enough to explain why fate made Splash and I lovers on an island in the South Pacific, but I do know beauty comes into the world and goes out of it.

I still don't know if holding the bodies of men in love is wrong. I know there is something about loving a particular man, that is good and beautiful in its own way. My hands held his beauty. They also helped repair things, kept the world from falling apart. There is dignity in that work. It was the best I could do.

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I worked as a mechanic, read books, had two lovers after I lost Splash. They are dead now, too. I think I have lived long enough. It is a different world now, younger gays are breaking down doors, forcing their way in where they have every right to be. Can you believe it? The other day they had a Hawaiian Holiday Party for the residents here at Westhaven. The nurses had on grass skirts, and the old ladies wore bright blouses with flowers on them. They even brought up parakeets from the second floor lounge so they'd have an island atmosphere in the cafeteria. I can tell them a thing or two about life on the islands. Where did they ever find that record of the Andrews Sisters singing, "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me?"

In 1991 my mother left the nursing home in an ambulance for the hospital at the University of Illinois. She never left that hospital alive. An infection invaded her foot and they had to amputate it. She recovered, but eventually succumbed to another infection. Born in 1913, ten years after the Wright brothers made their first flight at Kitty Hawk, she was 31 in 1944, the year Splash and Sergeant Rockwell met for the first time at Henderson Field. Rockwell died at age 79, a year after my mother. He passed away in his sleep at Westhaven nursing home.

Sergeant Rockwell told me he found out years after the war that two of the pilots Splash supposedly shot down had daughters in Japan. One of them works at the Sony plant in Tokyo, after spending some years in Korea. The other works for Toyota. I have a Sony VCR. My brother drives a Toyota. In February 1991, Robert L. Hall, who worked for the Grumman Corporation, and designed the F6F Hellcat along with other military and civilian airplanes, died in Newport Hospital. He was eighty-five years old and is survived by his wife, four sons and seven grandchildren. Captain Collins went into politics back in Ohio after he left the Navy. Sergeant Rockwell said he read in the paper Collins had an unhappy marriage. One of his sons was involved in an airport land scandal in Akron. The other joined the marines and was killed in Vietnam.

Even though I never like flying, this summer I'm going to a big airshow in Wisconsin. There are still a few Hellcats around. They're going to fly one in for that airshow. I'm taking the photo I have of Sergeant Rockwell with me. Before he died, Rockwell gave me a brown and cracked picture of him and Splash standing by a Hellcat. You can see the control tower at Henderson Field in the background. They looked so young, almost like boys.

Before I gave Sergeant Rockwell the plastic model I made of a Hellcat, I glued the propeller on so that it wouldn't spin. I thought the plane would last longer at the nursing home that way. The first thing Rockwell did was to try to spin the propeller. After I told him it was glued tight, he looked up at me and smiled. It was the same smile I saw in his old photograph. He told me, then, the natives around Henderson Field never liked to have their pictures taken. They were worried the camera would capture their souls. Maybe the natives were right. Maybe there was something of Sergeant Rockwell's soul in that old photograph. When I got to the airshow in Wisconsin, and realized no one was looking, I pressed the photograph of Rockwell and Splash against the cold metal wings of that Hellcat.

The End

Robert Klein Engler bio: Robert Klein Engler lives in Omaha, Nebraska and sometimes New Orleans. Many of Robert's poems, stories, and paintings are set in the Crescent City. His long poem, "The Accomplishment of Metaphor and the Necessity of Suffering," set partially in New Orleans, is published by Headwaters Press, Medusa, New York, 2004. He has received an Illinois Arts Council award for his "Three Poems for Kabbalah." Link with him at Facebook.com to see examples of his recent work. Some of Mr. Engler's books are available at amazon.com. He is represented by Connect Gallery at 3901 Leavenworth St, Omaha, NE 68105.