

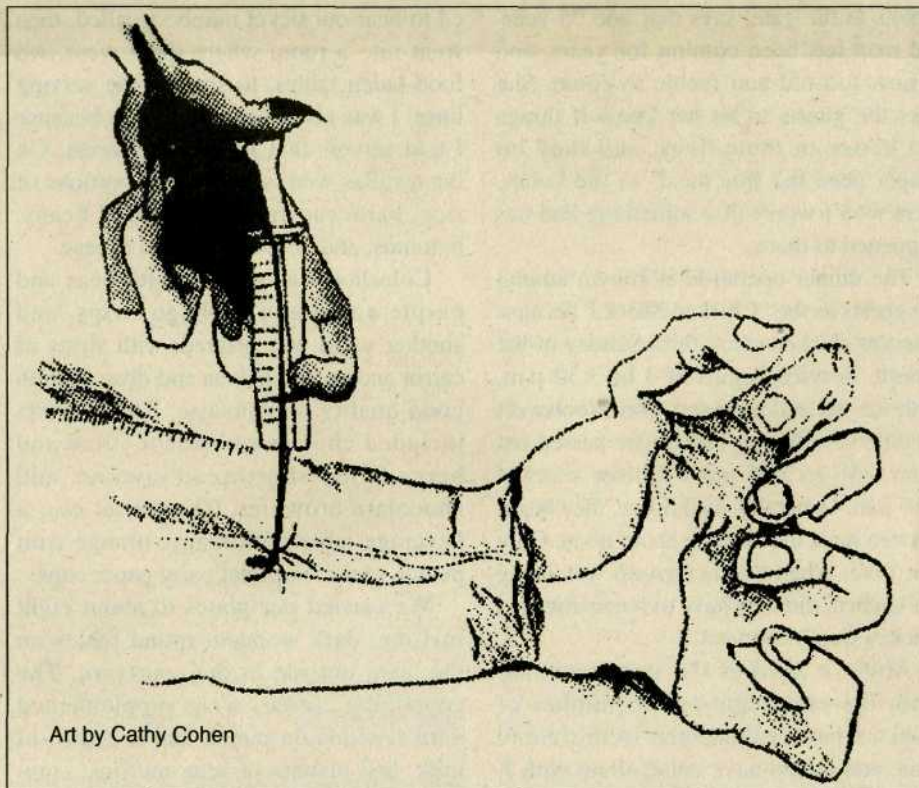
Five Heroin Addicts, The Dog, And Me

by Joy Bright McCorkle

Tiny shadows flickered from the votive candles. Two groups of men crowded around the flames. An old bearded man lay on a warming piece of cardboard, the 40 ounce bottle of Colt 45 clutched tightly in his smooth hands, sporting not one callus.

Sans cardboard, I lay on the smooth flat rocks; the masonry work done well by the Army Corps of Engineers. The hushed speech of my neighbors was indistinguishable to my ears.

No friendship or inclusion forthcoming, I lay alone, frightened and awake. My mind was drawn to the smell of vegetation rotting on the banks of the river. I lay surrounded by cement, rocks, sand and thistles. Silhouettes dancing on the cement walls of my refuge reminded me of better times long gone when I, as a child, made hand shadows on kinder, gentler walls.



Art by Cathy Cohen

Then I became aware of the roaring whish of wind rushing through the cold, damp tunnel of concrete. To comfort myself, I put my arms around my giant

brown dog, thanking God for his gentle protection. My breathing mirrored the timing of quick, shallow canine breaths. I embraced the big dog's neck and chest

passionately, feeling the safety and refuge that only an old lover can give.

No one spoke. Infrequently, a grunt or word could be heard over the screams of the cold roaring wind. I knew better than to look or stare at the men alone now in their chemical euphoria.

My hips screamed in agony on the unforgiving rocks and I fitfully fell asleep. My eyes flew open at dawn, focusing on the gorgeous art work on the walls. I was looking at the brilliant colors and intricate patterns seen by very few, recognizable gang colors and slogans indecipherable to my mind.

I looked around. I was alone, except for the dog. No signs of any humans were left to indict. No garbage, no sleeping bags — even the candles were gone. Was it a dream? No, I knew that when the darkness again fell on the river, the men would creep back, one at a time, to cook their chiva in dirty spoons over tiny votive candles and attempt to find an inviting vein by the dim flickering light.

Into their veins would go the golden fluid — no longer to get high, just to get well so they could sleep through one more night.