

DUG UP



MAGAZINE

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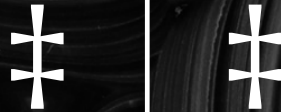
No strict guidelines, no biases, no bullshit...

I am particularly excited about this edition of Dug Up because it features the magazine's first sculpted submission. Abigail Monarrez's Esperanza masks are not only unique and impressive, but she is also local to my city. Being given the chance to feature some local talent in a few of the accepted artists this round is an honor and privilege.

You may also notice there are fewer than my typical 13 writers, and... hey, that's my name on page 124! Yes, I address this on that page, but the Holiday season always dries up my inbox. So, unfortunately, there are a couple less writers in this volume, but I would rather not delay publishing until after Christmas, as it's been a while already. The artists I accept want to have their work published sooner rather than later, and making them wait is just rude.

So please enjoy this batch of art dug up from around the world, and enjoy the little bonus from me at the end...

- Tony Del Degan



Creator and Lead Editor: Tony Del Degan

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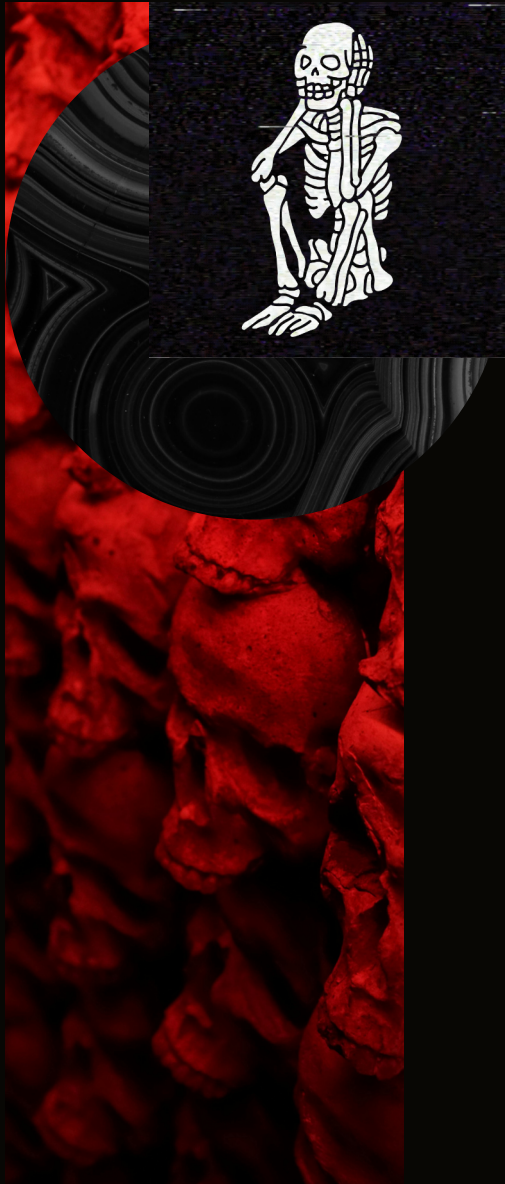
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SEWERGRAVE

BRETT R. SCOTT



Brett Scott lives in the misty Pacific Northwest with his wife and several ornery cats. He can be found tending to exotic flowers, dusting his collection of Soviet antiques, and obsessively editing horror stories. He workshops his stories and ideas on Reddit under the name MissMnemosyne. This is his first publication.

The pit inside of him matches the one under the gas station. It too is lightless and scattered with refuse; it too feels as alien and empty as a house just after move-out. Anthony Wyatt Merrimack, owner and sole employee of Last Stop Gas and Snacks, comes to resemble his property more as the days tick on.

Where Tony is inoffensive and bland on the outside, a round-bellied man of 60, the gas station matches him. It too is a bit worn down, past its prime; it is a little bit diminished against the shimmering desert flats. He is forgettable, even to the point of uninteresting. He has the look of a man who is almost certainly a grandfather, and a jolly one - but he isn't. The gas station looks like a mistaken investment, a building placed in the middle of nowhere in hopes that a highway would be built nearby to feed it, but that isn't the truth either. It has been here much longer than anyone really knows. It has taken on different guises, yes, an out of the way cowboy bar at one point and a gore-painted stone altar long before that, in the days before language, but it has always been here. It was always waiting for Tony. Tony was always searching for it.

The radio always plays. That is the Last Stop's principal form of camouflage. Tony's addition of the 1980's era silver boom box makes the dusty store feel like dad's garage,

filled with the same vague and mingling scents of motor oil and light beer. Visitors will sometimes remark about songs they haven't heard for the better part of a decade. Remember when these guys were cool? Doesn't he have a reality TV show now? Or, from the younger visitors: Whoa - I think my dad has this album! Album, they say. The word record is often foreign to them. They will have time to consider this mild cultural difference as they later plod around the Last Stop, moldering feet leaving wet prints in the red dust. They will have time to consider anything they like. They will have all the time in the world.

Tony himself sits behind the cash register, idly leafing through a newspaper, only his pronounced beer belly visible between counter top and newspaper bottom. He smokes, sometimes, a pricey tobacco that is pleasant on the nose and can only be purchased by mail order. His suspenders help to complete the illusion of a doddering grandpa, the sort of man who liked to tell dirty jokes at work before HR departments were invented to stop him and who will still gladly tell you the knee-slapper he heard in Vietnam from a Huey pilot. He seems good natured; he is not. Tony is nothing beneath the very intentional façade he presents. He, like the land on which he sits, is a void.



The Last Stop has a toilet, technically, but it has no sink or running water. In fact, the station lacks even basic plumbing beyond the water tank on the roof and the single line it feeds directly into the slop sink in the back; the toilet is dry and hot like the blasted land around it. It is a single, leaning wooden shack detached from the rest of the gas station and built from scrap lumber. In days past, it pretended to be a dry well. Before that, it was more open about its true nature, and proudly exposed its ripped belly to the sky. That was in the time when the locals would feed it sacrifices, gibbering captives stolen from neighboring lands who did not know fear, real fear, until they looked down into the charnel pit steaming below them. But now it masquerades as the mundane, perfectly unremarkable in every way. Drifters sometimes borrow the bathroom key from Tony. They wrench on the stubborn padlock and swing the door open on its inadequate hinges, feeling the entire structure shift worryingly as they do. The unfinished wood seat of the toilet is there before them, and they question how badly they really need to use it. It looks splintery and sandpaper dry. It stands up off the sandstone floor like a strange monolith, knee high and yet eerie, flies abuzz around it and bathed in the dusty sunbeams that lance

through the rough scrap wood walls. They wonder why they should feel so frightened by a toilet. They wonder why this toilet seems like something else entirely. Many decide to hold it and go on their merry way, loathe to be in the same room as something so inexplicably obscene, but some don't. Those are the ones Tony kills.

Bart Rozen was a senior accountant with IPG Timber when his rental car sputtered and wheezed up to the pumps at the Last Stop. A wrong turn and no cell service had brought him out into the desert, his increasingly rigid grip on the steering wheel easing only upon seeing the flashing OPEN sign in the window. He never would have imagined that the classic blue and red neon sign would bring him so much relief. Bart was a man of air conditioned offices and weekend lawn maintenance. He was not a desert dweller, and so had no idea what dangers an oasis like this might harbor. His subconscious volunteered an image he had once seen as a boy reading a nature magazine, Zoobooks or some such thing, of an alligator lancing out of the water and seizing a screaming deer in its jaws. He ignored this thought. He needed gas, and a frosty Coke wouldn't go amiss either. Hell, maybe even a beer.

The bell overhead tinkled merrily as he entered. The gas station seemed empty until he took a second

glance around. Tony sat behind the counter. He was reading the sports section.

"Hey there, buddy. I don't suppose I could get some gas and directions, could I?" Bart smiled as Tony lowered the newspaper. It took Tony a moment to smile back, an expression of total blankness on his guileless face until he met Bart's eyes and flashed him an imitation of his own grin.

"Sure, sure," Tony replied. "Whereabouts are you looking to go? Road only goes the two directions, I guess." Folksy, to the point of caricature. The way Tony thought a friendly country bumpkin might talk.

Bart's smile faltered for a second. He wondered if this old grandpa might be a little senile, or a bit simple. He seemed just a little strange. He got a sudden flash of the alligator picture again and pushed it down. He suddenly didn't know if he should tell this man where he was going. "Well, I need to get back to the highway. Do I need to turn back the way I came from or..."

"Don't much matter. Both ends go to the highway."

"Is it faster to turn around?" He isn't moving, thought Bart. He's so still, like he's waiting for me to dash out of here.

"Don't much matter. Reckon you'll need some gas." Reckon, he said, as if that word were used by average,

normal people all the time. Reckon. It set Bart from merely curious to actively concerned. How could such a silly word be so worrying?

"Yeah, I was hoping to maybe use your bathroom too." Bart's glowing cheer had dissipated entirely. He remained polite, but wished that his car had run out of gas just about anywhere else.

Tony fished a hubcap from behind the counter, a key with heavy patina dangling from it on a chain. "Here's your bathroom key. Don't go running off with it now, hear? I'll get you filled up while you're busy. Toilet paper's in the outhouse, but don't use more than a few squares, please."

Bart forced his smile to stay put and nodded. Where exactly he would go running off to in this trackless sand pit was beyond him.

The outhouse door worried him. It had a recently installed and rather sharp sheet steel border running around the edge of the door, tacked on haphazardly and with an unfinished edge he was very conscious of. He stepped inside and immediately resolved to spend the absolute least amount of time possible in this reeking thing.

But then the stall got a little dimmer.

He finished up and zipped his pants, afraid to turn. The alligator image came to him again. This time he couldn't quite get rid of it.

Tony was visible through the slats in the roughly assembled wood door. He was much bigger than Bart had realized, diminished by the low lighting in the Last Stop and his bulk hidden partly behind the newspaper. He had to be seven feet tall. Colossal. Bearlike. Standing directly outside of the door.

“Excuse me?” Bart called out. “Can you maybe move?”

No response. Stillness.

“Excuse me, sir, I can see you on the other side of the door. I just need to step out of here, please.” Still, nothing. Was he trying to surprise Bart? But no – No, Tony wanted to be seen. Bart pushed on the door. It gave, slightly, but then pushed right back fully closed. Tony was holding it shut.

Bart put a shoulder into it. He wasn't a huge guy, but he wasn't small; his four years on the high school football team had not been a fluke. He lowered his body, bent his knees, and smashed against the door. It rattled, let in a few inches of precious sunlight, and slammed shut again. He bent to the task again. Get low, find purchase on the gritty floor in his leather shoes, ignore the damage he was doing to his slacks. He pushed again, and this time Tony was sent back a step. Rusty nails, torn free as the shack shifted, rained down on him. The door had been open for just an instant, just wide

enough for him to squirt out through the gap and to freedom if he had gone for it. Tony was big, but big didn't mean fast.

Bart lowered again, put all of his focus into the one crashing hit he would need to be free. He bent his legs and then exploded forward, lunging for the opening, getting an arm and his head out into the baking desert air, air that seemed so stifling over his last hours in the car and now seemed as sweet as any air he had ever tasted, and then the door swung shut again on his chest and into his jugular, the unfinished steel edge biting into him like a blade. He madly thought of the paper guillotine he had used in the classroom as a boy, its curved blade gliding through the paper fed into it – but nothing was gliding about this as Tony booted the door again and again, chopping into Bart's body, and he was bleeding, Jesus Christ was he bleeding, Wham, wham, wham, wham, slow bisection by stall door, Trying with his free hand to push himself back inside the outhouse and out of the jaws of the door and succeeding only in getting his shoulder back inside, and now it was only his neck taking the force of Tony's kicks, the steel doorframe biting deeper and bouncing off of a vertebra, wham, wham, and then a pop and a wet grinding noise as the door finally came through the spine

and decapitated him. Tony would later force his corpse through the seat of the toilet and into the slop far below.

Bart's story is not unique in the history of the Last Stop. He is one of dozens of people who go missing in the stretch of desert where the pit lurks, gulped down and never seen again – or never recognized again, at least. The pit is a creative thing. It is not satisfied to merely contain the corpses of its dead. It is not a final resting place, but a warehouse, a temporary repository for the raw material that becomes death's great artworks. They rise, clattering, from the pit, constructs bound in strips of flesh and composed of ill-gotten bones. Tony himself is merely a guest of the pit. He is a lesser and kindred spirit to the grisly filth below the gas station. If he had not found this place, he would still kill, but would do so only for the cheap thrill of it. Attending to the pit has, most likely, prevented the man from being caught; even in days long past, the pit displayed an affinity for warding off lawmen. In any rational world, its heinous antics would raise alarm bells in any nearby population. But the pit has never been bound to rationality. Even its most egregious constructs manage to avoid too much attention.

Rosa Gutierrez had the good sense to bring an extra can of fuel when she

drove into the desert, well aware that being stranded here, off the beaten path and with no daytime shade, could spell death. She chose to travel at night for that reason. The full moon was free to cast its light and make the canyons glow with no trees to diminish it. The Last Stop was behind her, a place she was able and quite happy to pass without stopping. It gave her the creeps. She cruised through the canyons at a cautious twenty miles per hour, quick enough to make decent progress but slow enough to swerve if she should spot a blockage in the unkempt backcountry road.

She didn't see the wagon until she was nearly beneath it. It perched on the lip of the canyon far above, looming like some perverse reversal of a vulture; She, flesh and warm blood, zipped along below while it, sun bleached bone and crusted mummified flesh, sat above and watched. The thing was clockwork, if anything made of human femurs and cattle skulls could be called clockwork. The bones glowed in the moonlight where desert winds had scoured away all flesh. Tendons long ago dried into cement bound the bones at their joints. It had wheels, studded in molars and spoked with ribs, six wheels coated in old gore that did not belong to any of the victims that made up its bulk, but instead had come from the victims

that the wagon had run down in the years since its construction. The myriad skulls glowed with a will-o-the-wisp blue light, their eyes long gone but still perfectly capable of spotting Rosa's headlights below. With a dry creaking, the wagon tipped its front wheels over the edge of the canyon and began its banging, clattering descent.

She thought that it must be a rockslide at first, the clattering much like a kicked stone bouncing down a cliff, though multiplied a hundred times over. Like a typewriter, the loudest typewriter she had ever heard, as if its keys hammered straight against her eardrums. It was the snapping dry branches of a long-dead tree finally making its cacophonous exit, crashing down through its fellows, and even that did not fully describe it. It was as if something had made an engine of bones, because something had. The swarm of blue fairy lights behind her dipped into the shadow of the canyon wall, then swerved out into the moonlight. The wagon was there, all pumping levers and whistling wind keening through its bulk, bigger than her car, bigger than her father's immense wheat thresher back home. She heard it crack against loose rocks and watched it bounce madly around, aiming for her back window and gaining. The pit had no want for shattered bones, no, it needed them

healthy and whole to stand up to the rigors of the chase. Rosa would have grasped her cross necklace if she hadn't been clutching the wheel with both hands. Prayers from childhood rolled off her lips between terrified sobs. She had spotted the unmistakably human skulls on the wagon, toothless skulls used purely for decoration, their gnashing dry teeth repurposed into a whirling thresher blade on the front of the thing. She stepped on the gas, pulling every bit of power that her little Focus could manage, rocketing toward the old steel bridge that crossed the dinky and nearly dry river. The river had to be it, had to be the barrier. That was how ghosts worked, right? Rosa wasn't entirely correct about the wagon being a specter, but it hardly mattered. The water made a perfect stopping point anyway, and she flew across the bridge tipping the needle past ninety miles per hour, swerved, corrected hard, and managed to find her way back onto the old and worn pavement. Though she would escape and make it home, she dared tell nobody about the wagon of bones and gristle.

The pit does not need Tony's help to assemble its creations. The wagon is only one of a hundred projects it has dreamed up over the millennia. The structures weave themselves together, tied by sinews and hair, and

come slithering out of the toilet to await final assembly in the sand outside of the Last Stop. Tony watches them on every full moon as rotten legs plod around, stitched-on hands helping to secure the bone frames of a new project. Some are merely artistic; some serve only to glorify the pit, monuments marched out into the desert where no man will ever see them, where they will become decorated by buzzards and polished smooth in the sandy wind. The dead do not rest in the pit. They only bide their time until they are called forth. Bart Rozen's severed, mummified head oversees the marching of the corpses; his mind for numbers and order has not deserted him in death. Tony does not participate; in fact, he is frightened to, frightened by the indifference the pit's dead show towards him. Even a man like him has a limit.

The pit has been here forever, and it will remain. Long after Tony, long after you and long after mankind, it will remain. Nothing can possibly fill it. What could ever dispel such rogue death? It lolled open its stalagmite-riddled jaws long before man rose to prominence and forgot the inherent vulnerability of his soft flesh. Perhaps our distant apelike ancestors could have warned us about it if things had gone a bit differently. Then, as now, the pit drew in the most fractured souls and made them its attendants.

There they are, the first cult, dancing and hooting madly around this embodiment of hunger and death, scarlet smeared handprints shining in the moonlight. A new sacrifice is brought forth, sprung from the bone cages – more of the pit's handiwork – and pulled savagely to the precipice that hangs over the earth's terrible gullet. The priest, if he can even claim such a title, is all bared teeth and crusted gristle lit by the moon, his eyes are flat and reflect the light as if nothing exists within him. He does not want to do this but he neither wants to do anything else; this is simply what he does now, and his own desires are secondary. The apelike woman screams, howls, tries to bite. She is smaller than the priest. She is helpless as he crashes her face into the stone, again and again, until she goes limp. Her broken teeth litter the altar and she is held over the blackness below, dangling by her hair, too stunned to fight as the priest saws into her hairline with an obsidian razor. It is sharp but inaccurate, and it leaves long, arcing grooves in the skull that an anthropologist would build his career on were that skull not lashed currently to the prow of a crawling bone ship, hulled in petrified fingernails and sailing over sand dunes. Quickly and with a sucking, ripping sound, the scalp comes free and the body tumbles down, down,

into the pit. The hair will be added to the cult's pile of trophies. The priest will join his victim soon enough, and another priest will come to power. Life is cheap now, and finding a murderer is no challenge at all. Their bodies will eventually decay, and even their bones will, after centuries, be worn down to mere dust. But the soul is forever. Something must drive the creations that the pit animates, some animal intelligence. Someday Tony, stripped of identity, will find himself the pilot of an abomination.

The pit slumbers now, in half-conscious delirium, throat slaked with fresh blood. Its dreams are the calcified and sun-scorched horrors that lumber and creak across the desert, uncommanded but far from masterless. It will stay as we pass, enduring, barely noticing that we are gone, until it hungers again.



COCOON

WHITNEY MCSHAN



Whitney McShan is a Texas native who currently lives outside of Austin with her wife and son. She loves all things strange and is ceaselessly interested in what our monsters have to tell us.

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Wet bits of me drip down the insides of my thighs. This shedding of my soft, unused parts is normal, I'm told. An inconvenient, painful metamorphosis that I should celebrate. The natural consequence of a purpose unfulfilled.

Each time the shedding comes I lose more of myself than the time before. Blood and flesh discarded in dark clumps. How much of what's been lost defined who I was, I wonder as I plug myself to stop the leaking. I think of a ship taking on water as it rocks along a roaring, blood red sea.

Something else is forming from this inescapable ritual. Something small coagulating into a new life that becomes more vivid as I become murky and porous.

Other parts of me are shedding now too. I used to have extraneous things like eyelashes and toenails. It feels important to keep these bits even as they liquefy. I gather them with rags and buckets. I develop an urge to lick newspaper. The edges cut my tongue and the pages are stained pink.

I plaster strips of the wet paper against myself, bandaging the leaking parts of me. If I can keep me in me then it can't become something else.

When I sleep I dream of cold, dark places. Primal and subterranean. Stone walls wet for a millennia. A constant dripping. A steady erosion.

Parts have begun sloughing off of me, sometimes in sheets. I stick the matted hair and pale flesh and yellow sludge back into myself and secure with more paper.

I sleep for what I think is a long time in my paper mache'd tomb, but it's hard to be sure. Timekeeping becomes difficult without eyes or ears.

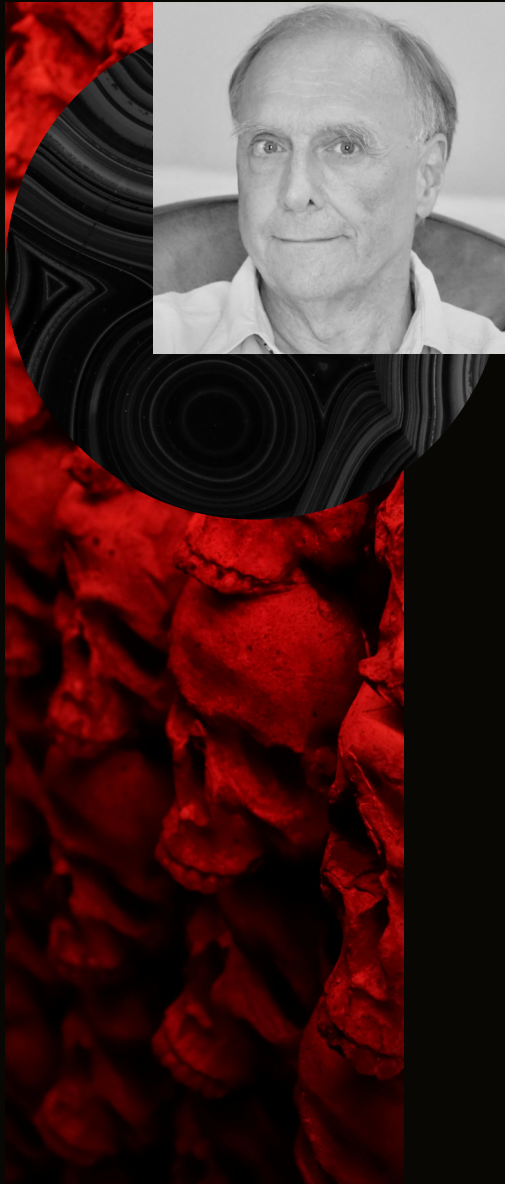
There is a point in the middle when I no longer exist, at least in any form that anyone would recognize as me. I am nothing but soupy potential, primordial ooze.

Then, slowly, there is tugging. A thickening. Forms gathering and drawing together.

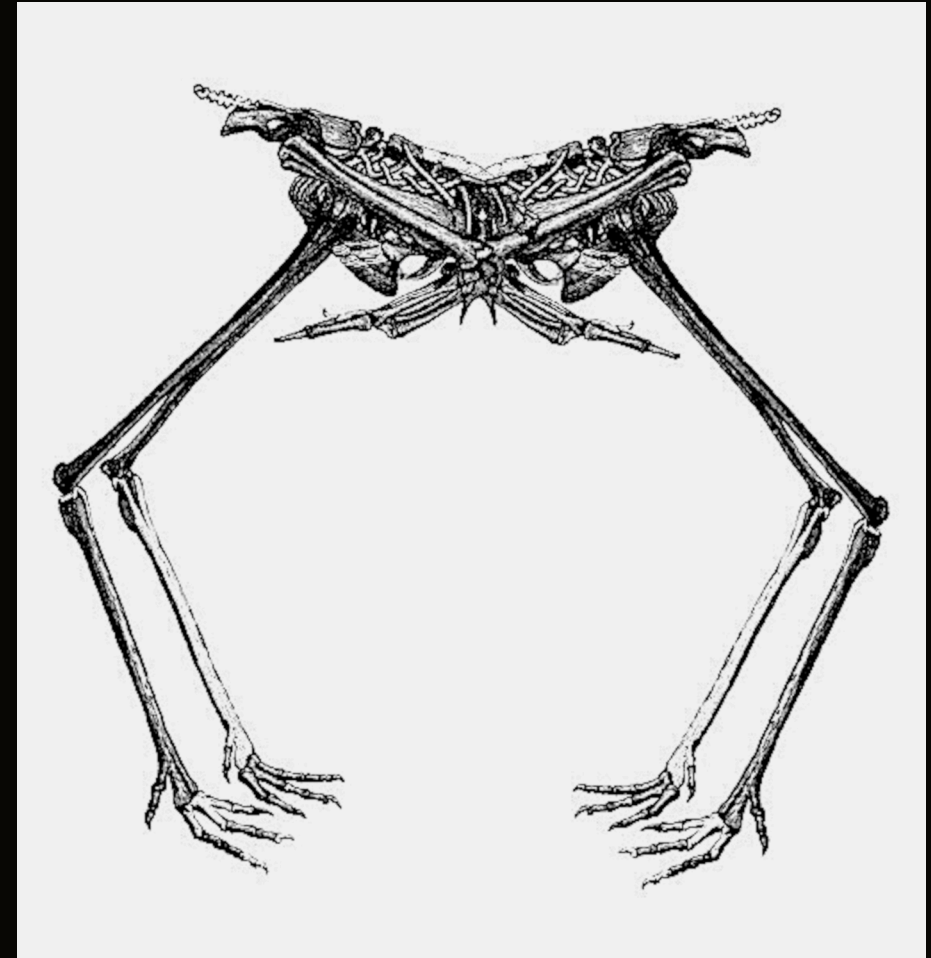
I chew through paper with new, sharper teeth. A wet membrane unfolds from its home on my back. I am born screaming.

WHAT EVEN THE BONES WHISPERED

BILL WOLAK



*Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled **All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses** with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.*





COME IN WHERE IT'S LIGHT

TREVOR JAMES ZAPLE



Trevor James Zaple is a writer and web developer for an educational non-profit organization. His work has most recently appeared with Crow & Cross Keys, Dark Horses: The Magazine of Weird Fiction, and Gauges and Ghouls. He lives in the other London with his wife, daughters, dog, and a strange family of cats.

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The idiot in the F150 came out of nowhere and it was only through defensive reflexes, the judicious use of the horn, and the grace of God that Michael survived. He didn't have much room, and he thought he might have kissed the cement median, but in the panic and the chaos he wasn't sure. He dropped down to 55 immediately in the aftermath and moved into the middle of the pack. A volley of horns sounded from the vehicles surrounding him, but he ignored them. At this time of night, they wouldn't see him if he flipped them off, and if they did see him, who knows what they might do?

A minute later the Saviour appeared, in the form of a sign for a rest stop. It was eight miles out, but Michael moved into the right lane anyway. Better to be prepared than to scramble at the last minute. As he closed the distance, he thought it odd that there was another rest stop so soon across the North Carolina border. He could have sworn he'd passed the Welcome Center stop not more than a half hour before. He decided that his near-death experience was playing games with his sense of time and put it out of his head.

The signs came in intervals: 5, 3, 1, last chance. By the time the final sign loomed out of the darkness in the glare of his headlights, he was the only person on the road. It happened

from time to time on these remote stretches of the Interstate; traffic could be at a full boil and then you'd pass the last interchange for a city, and you'd shoot out into the lonely darkness, the only light for miles the one you were generating yourself.

The exit came out of nowhere and despite his preparedness, he had to veer sharply to the right in order to make it. The road grew long and twisted slightly into the night, another thing that Michael found somewhat odd. Usually, these rest stops were right off the highway, the sort of place you could zip into and then out of again with very little trouble. This one seemed to be set back away, on a road that was of questionable quality.

One last turn brought him into sight of some electric lights. His headlights shone onto a large building, long and solidly built from heavy brick. It was set atop a small hill, and a set of imposing concrete stairs led down from it into a wide, empty sea of asphalt where not another soul was parked. He pulled into a spot and illuminated the sign above the main entrance into the building: The Richard Marc Evonitz Memorial Rest Stop.

He slid down the window and lit a cigarette. Anna would lay into him about it if she ever found out. She was adamant on the subject of his quitting and if she smelled the stuff

on him, it would likely be another three-week dry spell in the bedroom. Still, the fact remained that he'd almost died, and there were very few things left in his life that could give him a sense of calm after such an ordeal. There were still hours to go before he got back home. He would chew some gum, wash his hands and face thoroughly, maybe buy some of that cheap gas station cologne. Maybe not; the stuff usually stank, and she would probably think he was covering up a truck stop hooker rather than an illicit cigarette.

He puffed and considered the rest stop. The lights blazed in the entrance, but no one came in or out. When he got to the butt, he looked around the car for something to crush it out into but couldn't find anything. He settled for pitching it out the window. You had to be careful in this day and age when the whole world seemed to be on fire all year long, but he reasoned that tossing it out onto asphalt wasn't going to put anything up in flames. The moment it left his fingers his mouth felt dry and pasty.

There was a vending machine on the outside wall of the rest stop, bathed in the full glow of an overhead light. He got out and halfway to the vending machine he felt eyes on him. His pace slowed to a crawl, and he darted his eyes from side to side. There were no strange

figures lurking in the shadows that he could see. He slipped a five into the machine and bought a Coke. The sound of the heavy plastic bottle dropping into the bottom chamber was quite loud in the silence, and it made him jump.

Back in the car he locked the doors. He could still feel someone watching him, although it was muted now. The Coke stung going down his throat, but his body instantly demanded more, relishing in the dark sugary acid bath rushing against raw, willing flesh. He wanted another cigarette. His mind kept going back to that uncomprehending moron in the truck. An inch or two more to the side and he would have been spinning along the Interstate at high speed, a deadly billiard ball sent to wreak havoc on his fellow travelers.

He took his phone up from the center console and flipped through it. He had no signal, but it was plugged in and fully charged, for all the good it did. He lit another cigarette. By the time he got home Anna and the kids would be dead asleep, probably closer to waking up the next morning than anything else. He chugged more of the Coke and looked for something to do on his phone. Everything he would normally gravitate toward required connection to that overarching data spiderweb of the world. For lack of anything else he turned on the radio.



The knob spun slowly through the FM dial, encountering mostly static and, here and there, the lost ghosts of voices buried in snow and storm. Somewhere around 99 he found the vestiges of a heavy rock station, the distortion on the guitars warping and melding into the hissing interference. Switching to AM changed the tone. All at once the background hiss became a roar, a demonic chant etched in metal. When words floated out of this howling abyss they sounded as though they were being spoken in some dank underground cavern, echoing strangely off the walls at odd angles.

He found more life on the AM dial but for the most part they were gospel stations, either in the middle of languid choirs singing "Abide With Me" or "Nearer, My God, To Thee" or blistering through a rant on the hellbound nature of the modern world. Here and there were more prosaic talk shows, likely prerecorded for the time of night, but Michael could only listen to a few moments of those. It might have been the trauma of nearly dying, but he found that he couldn't concentrate long enough on it. Whenever his mind did focus, what he heard sounded like lunacy.

Silence fell over the car once again and he realized, shortly after finishing off the Coke, that he needed to use the washroom. He

was on the move before he remembered the eyes, watching from somewhere in the black unseen. The light of the rest stop entrance beckoned him, and he tried to sweep all such paranoid thoughts under a rug in his mind. What was that line? The turnpike sure is spooky at night when you're all alone. That was all it was. Just being spooked.

The glare of the lights inside the building seemed even more intense in the darkness of the night waiting outside. It was enough that he had to shield his eyes for the first moment after he walked in. It seemed like a lot of light to illuminate very little. There was a long greeting desk piled with maps of varying scope representing places all up and down the East Coast. Hung above the desk were signs pointing towards the washrooms, divided by sex, one on each side of the building.

The sounds in the washroom reminded him of those talk shows on the AM band, too cavernous and slathered with echo to be comfortable. The feeling of being watched had returned and he kept peering over his shoulder while he did his business at the urinal. He hadn't heard footsteps, but he still felt as though someone was staring at him, and not with beneficial intent.

When he returned to the overly bright main room, he saw a man

sitting behind the greeting desk. Michael stopped in his tracks just as the man turned his head to look at him and they stared at each other without speaking for an awkward moment. Eventually Michael moved again, slower this time, walking up to the desk and pretending to look over the maps on display. He recognized very few of the trails and parks they purported to be guides to. The man unnerved him. He was middle-aged and thin, with the washed-out sort of face you associated with people who had achieved what they'd wanted in life, leaving them cold and uninterested. Was this who had been watching him since he'd arrived? He reasoned that a place that never closed would need someone to be the nightwatchman, even in the bleakest hours of the long night.

"Where you off to?" the man asked, breaking their previously agreed-upon silence. Michael started and tried to cover it by picking up a map that claimed itself as the ultimate guide to the Cliffs of the Neuse State Park.

"Home," Michael replied, "Virginia. Was down in Tallahassee for work."

"Still a ways to go," the man mused. "What's work?"

"Insurance inspections," Michael said, flipping the map over to the other side and studying it. "I go to properties, make an inspection

based on a checklist, the company offers the property owner a quote based on that."

"Sounds like difficult work."

"Not really," Michael said, putting the map back. "It's quite easy. I go, I do the inspection. I can write any old thing down, it doesn't matter. The company denies them coverage either way. World's most open secret, you can't find anyone to insure you in Florida anymore, not if you live within a certain range of the ocean, and almost everyone does."

"Suppose that makes sense," the man said dismissively. "So, you'll be moving on, then?"

Michael looked at him quizzically. "Doesn't make much sense to hang around here," he said.

"Good," the man replied. "You don't want to hang around here too long."

The urge to get back to the car and drive off back onto the Interstate suddenly flared. Michael kept his lips tight, nodded to the man, and turned heel to walk back the car. He did not exactly flee, per se, but it was close.

Back in the car he contemplated having another cigarette, decided against it, and turned the key in the ignition. The engine struggled and gave up. Coldness washed over him, and he tried the key again. The same thing occurred, and again following a third attempt. He felt a crazy desire to punch the steering wheel with all



his strength and lit a cigarette instead. This one he puffed maniacally, his anxiety turning paper to ash in continuous swoops. When the hand tapped on his window he screamed and dropped the last quarter of it onto the rubber mat at his feet.

The nightwatchman managed to look apologetic as Michael rolled down the window. "Sorry," he said, looking down at the still-burning cigarette. "I heard you having some trouble down here."

"The car won't start," Michael said, trying to keep the shake from his hands out of his voice.

"That's not good," the nightwatchman said. "I couldn't say where the closest garage is, and I don't think they'd answer if you phoned them at this time of night."

"Look," Michael said, trying to reason with himself as much as the man at the window. "It's probably just the battery. Do you have jumper cables?"

"You should probably come inside," the man said, standing back from the window and looking out into the deep shadows. "Come in where it's light."

He left before Michael could respond. Michael watched him bound up the stairs and disappear into the rest stop while he was still getting out of the car. His own journey back to the rest stop was as

quick as he could make it. The eyes were on him intently the entire way.

Behind the desk, the nightwatchman was talking on an older model Samsung phone. He eyed Michael as he walked in and finished his call quickly. The man beckoned him over.

"I called a friend of mine over in Merritsville," he said. "He'll be out here with a car and cables in about an hour."

"Thanks for that," Michael said. An hour? He looked around the interior of the rest stop but didn't see anything to sit on, except for the seat behind the courtesy desk.

"Feel free to hang around here," he said, sitting in his own chair.

"I might go wait in my car," Michael said after a moment. The man looked up at him sharply.

"I think you should wait inside," he said. The way he said it made Michael feel deeply uneasy. He nodded his agreement and began shuffling through some of the maps on the courtesy desk. After ten minutes of this he felt thoroughly bored. He paced around the rest stop, walking from the entrance of one washroom to another, listening to his footsteps bounce off the walls and cross over each other.

"Think I'll step out to my car for a cigarette," he said after a few minutes. The nightwatchman looked at him with a flat expression but

didn't say anything.

That skin-crawling sensation of being watched started up immediately as he left the rest stop. When he got in the car the first thing he did was lock the doors. He tried to use his key to at least get the electrical system going but there was nothing. It had to be the battery, then. He fished out a cigarette and his lighter and got up to stand just outside the car door to smoke it. His eyes darted from shadow to shadow, trying to figure out who or what was staring at him. The hairs on his arms were standing up now.

The cigarette hit the pavement half-smoked, its cherry burning obscenely in the starless black surrounding him. His footsteps up the stairs to the rest stop seemed to chase him.

"What's going on around here?" he demanded as he bounded into the main room of the building. The rest of his spontaneous rant was cut short when he saw that the nightwatchman was gone. Michael stood in the entrance of the rest stop and listened carefully. The night was void of sound. Even the ubiquitous cricket symphony was gone.

He's probably just in the washroom. He contemplated taking the man's chair. When he got out of the washroom it would get awkward. He walked slowly toward the courtesy desk. Surely he was in the

washroom. Another minute of straining to hear everything produced nothing, though. What if he wasn't in there? Why did he want me to wait in here so badly? His thoughts were picking up speed and taking on an edge of panic that he didn't care for. Who is this friend of his? Is he really bringing cables?

Michael's mouth was dry. The vending machine had an answer to that, but he'd left his wallet in the car. As soon as he stepped outside the door every nerve in his body went on alert. Something was definitely out there, lurking in the dark. His adrenal medulla dumped hormones into his system but there was nowhere to go. The sensation made him feel like a cat chasing its tail on instinct, scrambling around like a whirlwind. He stepped carefully, keeping the wall close to his left.

Something rustled out in the shadows of the parking lot. Michael jumped and ran back to the entrance of the building. It was still empty. The noises continued behind him, rustling followed by footfalls on concrete, like the steps leading up to the rest stop.

He ducked behind the courtesy desk and tried to remain as still as possible. How long had it been since the nightwatchman had called his supposed friend? At the same time, how did he know the man had been telling the truth about the other



being an hour away? That could have just been a cover while the other got in position outside.

The man in the oversized truck came back to him, and his stomach roiled. He had almost died then, but at that moment, huddled behind the desk, he felt as though he was in more danger than he'd ever been before.

Surely he's just in the washroom the rational part of his brain tried to say, one last time. The lack of noise coming from the washroom shut that voice up quickly, however. There were no more footsteps following, or any other sign that there was anyone else in the vicinity besides him. They're waiting just outside for you, another part of his brain said. That voice spoke with a soft slur, like a lizard approximating human speech.

He stared around the parts of the rest stop he could see. There had to be another exit; these places never had just the one, for the sake of both convenience and fire codes. In the back corner: a small door with a discreet little exit sign above it. He judged the distance and figured that he could make it through the door in less than a minute. It would be dark out there, much darker than the front of the rest stop. He could lose them in the night and try to find some help. The place was set back far enough from the Interstate that there had to be something out there

— a farm or a sleepy little town or just a few houses near the intersection of county roads. A place quiet enough that you could rouse the inhabitants easily, even at this time of night.

He heard a cough from somewhere in the building and ran instantly, like it was a starter pistol. The door flew open easily and he sprinted into the night, his feet padding loudly on the grass. A few feet outside of the door he felt something next to him, a presence that he could not see. Their footsteps were just as loud, their pace just as quick. Michael could feel the weight of eyes on him from the presence, burning and intense, boring into the side of his face.

Then it was on him, driving him into the ground, rending and gnashing and tearing in an explosion of wet, ripping noise.

A few minutes later the nightwatchman returned from the washroom and saw that the rear door was partially open. After closing it, he sat back in his chair behind the courtesy desk. He picked up a map at random, unfolded it, and leaned back in the chair. At this time of night, you had to amuse yourself by any means necessary, and Lord knew there wasn't much in the way of cell signal out this way.

An odd, keening noise came from out back, and the nightwatchman doubled down on reading through

the map. He had told the guy, had warned him several times, really. Stay in the light. It wasn't that hard of a concept. These people that pulled off to use the washroom or get their bearings, they always thought they knew better, though. He put the map back and began to whistle. Anything to block out the sound.

He felt his phone vibrate at his side. It was his friend Joe calling.

"You were right," the nightwatchman answered, his voice sour. "I'm guessing you haven't even left?" Joe said his piece, and the nightwatchman said, "They never do," before thumbing off the phone and tossing it onto the courtesy desk. Joe would be by in the morning to tow the car. It would sit in an impound lot for weeks until the guy's wife or parents managed to track it down. If he didn't have either, it might sit there forever. Either way suited him just fine. That thing would quiet down for a bit, and that was all that mattered. He opened the Pepsi he'd gotten from the vending machine and savored that first taste. The nights were long, but at least now they would be more relaxed.



DESCENT

NICK YOUNG



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How many times have I stood here? How many beautiful spring mornings, with gentle sunshine caressing my face? How many hot July nights, in the urgent embrace of a desirable young woman? Even in the icy depths of winter I have come to this place, cloak wrapped tightly about me, to ruminate on the silent falling snow. But now, as the chill of October in the year of Our Lord 1862 settles on this most magnificent of metropolises, I turn from the grandeur of Notre Dame, my soul finding there no solace in its vaulting spires illumined in the hour before dawn. No! My peace now lies only beneath this *petit pont*, in the swirling darkness of the Seine.

Away on the Rue de la Bucherie, I hear a horse's insistent hooves and the clatter of a caleche over the cobblestones. Behind me, muffled laughter as a young couple, heady with wine and romance, moves with unsteady gait over the bridge. I am aware of these sounds, so familiar a part of life in the city, yet to me now alien, as if echoing from a distant land. The wind rises and moans fitfully. In my torment it mocks me—I *know it!*

Soon enough, I will end the taunting and its cruel power over me.

But first, I must recount what has

brought me to this fateful moment, not as a memorial to myself but as a cautionary tale, a warning that in my hubris I took too cavalierly.

You ask, "Who is it who comes before me so deep in melancholia, pleading to be heeded?" My name is unimportant. It is the tale I tell that bears remembering.

I am two years past completing my studies at the Sorbonne. After initially enrolling in a program that would have led to a medical degree, I changed my focus to literature. This was much to the dismay of my parents, who had taken the greatest pleasure in boasting that the family was to include a promising young physician. They spoke with no such pride about the prospect of counting their son a penniless writer. Yet, I knew I must chart my own course, and so I left the healing arts behind. Would that I could have foreseen the terrible path ahead!

In my early days at the university, I became fast friends with another medical student. I will call him Gerárd in order to spare him any taint from the story I am about to tell. He and I were opposites in many ways—he, outgoing and adventurous; I, more introspective and timid. His

personality was such that it drew people to him, like moths to the flame. He was the center of gaiety, surrounded by friends, especially beautiful girls. Why he took such a liking to me I do not know, but by degrees he drew me out of my shell and into his world. Before long, I found myself reveling in the perquisites of being within his orbit. It was a time demarcated by nightlife, debauchery fueled by *la fée verte* in the bistros of the Rive Gauche. I should add that Gérard was a brilliant student whose life of dissolution affected his academic achievements not in the slightest. I, on the other hand, struggled, barely completing the required courses of study to be granted a degree—a further failure in the eyes of my mother and father.

I will be the first to admit that fresh from academe my prospects were not good. But after several months of making inquiries all over the city, I was finally granted a position at small weekly paper devoted to the arts. My assignments were neither very exciting nor challenging—a gallery opening here, a chamber music recital there. Still, I did the best I could to put some zest into my prose. For a time, I was content to hone my skills with the

pen; but sadly, the financial fortunes of the paper sank, and it shuttered its doors within six months of my being taken on. It was a truly a jarring development, leaving me with no steady income. I was in precarious straits; yet, though my parents were well enough off, the last thing I wished to do was to go to them hat in hand and plead for money.

That is the moment when Gérard rode to my rescue. He came from an aristocratic line, a family of great means which he freely drew upon to support his lifestyle. And, when he saw my state of affairs, he immediately took it upon himself to become my benefactor.

“It is a trifling thing, *mon ami*. What’s important is to keep the wolf from your door,” he declared to me over coffees at Café Lutèce. Then, dropping his voice and smiling conspiratorially, he continued, leaning in. “And I have an ulterior motive.” I narrowed my eyes and looked at him intently.

“And dare I ask what it might be?”

“But of course! Let me explain. What I have is a proposition. You know I have long admired your writing. I believe you are destined for great things—perhaps to become the



heir to Dumas, to Hugo.”

“Really, Gérard!” I exclaimed, laughing.

“And why not?” he declared, genuinely shocked at my demurral. “What is required is a suitable subject for your talent, not recording the meaningless *soirées* of the sort hosted by my parents. That is where my proposition enters.”

“Pray, continue.”

“You know of my keen interest in the medicinal properties of certain exotic flora?”

“I do.”

“Well, that interest extends to their *hallucinogenic* effects. My own modest experimentation in the laboratory has shown that they can be quite pronounced.” This was interesting enough, but I was in an impatient mood.

“But what has this to do with me?” I interjected.

“Patience,” he answered. “I come to that directly.” He paused long enough to relight his pipe before continuing. “I know a man—let us call him the associate of a friend of a friend, if you catch my meaning. This man deals with trade from Africa—curios, exotica of one sort or another. But he has also supplied me with

samples of rare plants, some of them proscribed, that he has obtained from native tribes. Of late, he has returned from the Congo—you must consult your atlas to know its precise location—with word of what I believe to be a heretofore unknown species of fungus that has properties unlike any other in the world.”

“What properties?” I asked, my interest now piqued. Gérard was finding it difficult to keep his enthusiasm in check.

“As it was told to me, ingesting this spore induced all manner of phenomena, including—and you may take this as you like—a complete unfolding of the very universe.” I was taken aback by such an outlandish claim.

“And you believe this?”

“Naturally, I am skeptical, and that’s where you enter in, *mon ami*. I am making arrangements to travel to the region of Africa where this tribe exists and find out for myself. I propose that you accompany me, both to check the legitimacy of these claims and to document the journey in a book. Such a tale of mystery—from Paris to the heart of darkest Africa and back again. Think of it! I could establish my reputation as a pre-eminent

ethnobotanist, and you would be hailed for your artistry with words. What do you say?"

"Well, I—"

"Just say yes."

"But, Gerárd, such an undertaking—do you not fear the risk? In the journey? The drug?"

"There is risk, but of course. What in life that is worthwhile lacks some element of risk? The journey represents a challenge, but one that is manageable." Here, he paused. I detected a hint of shadow that passed across his face.

"And the drug presents no peril?"

"My friend has recounted certain...anecdotes that have made their way out of the jungle."

"Anecdotes? Of what sort?"

"Well, like all the stories surrounding the effects of this plant, you may take these tales with a grain of salt."

"Go on," I pressed.

"They warn of grave consequences if the drug is misused." I looked hard at my friend.

"Such admonitions should not be ignored, should they, Gerárd? Why pursue this quest?"

"Science, *mon ami*," he answered swiftly. "Besides," he continued,

leaning across the table and effecting a jocular tone, "Dark sides are important. They should be nourished like nasty black orchids."

"Not a flower for which I've had much affinity, I'm afraid," I responded. He threw his head back and laughed.

"Now, let's get down to the specifics," he said. "The trip should consume no more than three months. You no longer have the ties of employment to bind you here."

"And not a *sou* to my name."

"I have already told you that you are not to worry about money. That is my concern. Your expenses for the journey will be covered, and I will pay you an ample stipend for your time. It is a fair proposition, impossible to reject, *n'est-ce pas?*" I cannot say that by nature I was an impulsive person, and I had given voice to my misgivings; but at that moment they were brushed aside. What had I to lose that would not be worth the enticing prospect of an exciting tale with which to display my talents as a *writer*?

"Alright, I shall do it—and damn the consequences!"

So, the die was cast; and, despite my initial apprehension, I found I was suffused with exhilaration. The quest



before me, I reasoned, could be opening a fresh chapter in my life that I so desperately yearned for. But there was little time to lose, so I hastily packed a small trunk that evening and joined Gerárd the next morning at the Gare du Nord to board the early train to Le Havre.

By noon, we had arrived and were met at the quay by Gerárd's trader, introduced to me as Raoul, who saw us to our cramped quarters aboard his two-masted coaster. My seagoing experience was effectively nil, but even to my unpracticed eye, neither the vessel nor her rough-looking crew inspired great confidence as we set off. But whatever their appearance, they seemed to know their business, and we made our way south, past Gibraltar and around the bulge of Africa, smoothly enough.

Gerárd and I kept to ourselves, and, at length, we arrived at the mouth of the great Congo River. Navigating a few miles upstream, we reached the first settlement of any consequence at Boma.

"We go our separate ways here," Raoul said. "You are on your own. I have ventured where you are going but once; I doubt that any other white man has dared to follow." He looked

hard at Gerárd. "I have told you what the locals say. You have been warned, *monsieur*. I have made arrangements for a pirogue and a guide to take you upriver. I am assured he is a good man, one who expects a handsome payment for taking on the risk."

"And he shall receive it," insisted Gerárd. Raoul went on:

"Here is what you must remember if nothing else: I sail for home on the 17th whether you are on board or not. Do not mistake me. I will not wait."

With that stark admonition, we parted company with Raoul. It was late in the day, so we secured lodging for the night at a ramshackle inn not far from the dock. We took supper in our room. It was a local dish comprised of what we could not precisely discern and thought best not to inquire about too deeply. And though fatigued from the trip, both of us smoked our pipes and talked long into the night, such was our heightened anticipation over what lay ahead of us.

Early the next morning, with the equatorial heat already throwing its oppressive blanket down upon us, we met our man squatting outside the inn. He introduced himself as Ingare,

as angular as a heron and blacker than obsidian. He spoke in broken French, but it was passable enough to communicate. More importantly, he was fluent in the Bantu tongue that would be required once we reached our destination.

"We go soon," Ingare announced after we had exchanged pleasantries. Raoul had seen to provisioning for our journey, so with the pirogue laden with supplies, we set out.

As foreign as the outpost at Boma was to me, I was hardly prepared for the vast and untamed world we confronted with each mile we progressed upriver. Any semblance of civilization soon enough receded into the distance, leaving us upon a ribbon of dark water, enveloped by jungle and suffocating heat. Ingare's long, rhythmic strokes at the pole were accompanied by the shrieks of all manner of birds in the canopy above and the grunts and cries of wild things below. I felt as if we had entered a living organism that was defiled by our presence.

And something else, undefined, began to creep into my consciousness. Perhaps it was the completely alien environment, or my conversation with Gérard in Paris, or

Raoul's manner, but I could not banish the feeling.

My apprehensions grew with the setting of the sun. In the late afternoon, Ingare choose a suitable clearing on the river bank, and we made camp for the night. Ingare built a small fire, fed by the dead limbs he gathered at the jungle's edge, and we ate a meager supper from our provisions. Afterward, Gérard and I smoked and talked while Ingare sat apart, rocking to and fro while tightly gripping a small, carved figurine and chanting to himself.

"What the devil is he going on about?" I asked Gérard at length.

"*Que dites vous, Ingare?*" Gérard called out. Our guide paused and gazed upon us with the most profound aspect of seriousness.

"*Protéger les mauvais esprits, bwana.*" He turned away and resumed his mournful droning.

"Evil spirits?" I said with a slight shudder. My companion laughed, drawing on his pipe.

"Superstition," he said, "nothing more." But there was something in his visage, illumined by the writhing firelight, that gave me reason to believe he harbored a flicker of doubt. My sleep that night was fitful.



Two-and-half days into our journey, Ingare poled toward the west bank of the river, to a spot that appeared no different from the rest of the jungle. In fact, after brushing through a curtain of thick, low-hanging branches, we found ourselves at the mouth of another stream. Ingare gesticulated excitedly and began chattering in his native tongue.

"It exists, just as Raoul promised!" exulted Gérard. "We are nearly there, *mon ami.*" My response was more muted. I could not dispel the shadow of foreboding that had fallen across me and grown more pronounced the deeper our journey took us into the heart of the Congo.

Another day's travel brought us to a collection of grass huts barely visible from the waters of the tributary. As our pirogue neared the bank, several men appeared from the jungle, each possessing a fierce countenance and brandishing a long spear. They said not a word, and the usual cacaphony of the jungle seemed to have completely fallen away, save for the piercing shriek of a single chimpanzee. It was odd, indeed, and, I could not help feeling, ominous.

"*Inshuti. Turi inshuti,*" Ingare called out and repeated.

"What's he saying, Gérard?" As if anticipating my query, Ingare turned to us.

"I tell them we friend." Then he took up again with the natives. "*Inshuti. Bwana Raoul inshuti.*"

The invocation of Raoul's name seemed to carry substational weight with the spearmen. Their posture relaxed, and two of them came to the river's edge to help drag the pirogue up onto the bank. We disembarked and were greeted by an imposing figure who had stepped from the background. Rather than the crude codpieces worn by our welcoming committee, this older man was attired in an elaborate loincloth, beaded breastplate and ornate headdress fashioned from the plumage of brightly colored birds. He was accorded great deference by the others, and moved with an air of hautiness befitting his station as the tribal monarch.

Ingare showed his respect—and we immediately followed—by bowing low. Wordlessly, the chieftain bade our guide to come forward, which Ingare did, and the two began a palaver. We understood none of what was said save an occasional mention of Raoul's name.

But after a short time, Ingare broke off the conversation and went to the pirogue. He returned with a small wooden chest, set it before the king and drew open the lid. Inside, the box was filled to the brim with a gaudy array of beads and large faux gemstones, dazzling to the eye, but in point of fact little more than cheap trinkets. Their intrinsic value notwithstanding, the effect on the natives was immediate, generating excited chatter. The tribal elder's reaction, while not so extreme, was nonetheless visible pleasure. He signaled one of his underlings to remove the chest. Then, with a slight nod to Ingare, the king and his retinue withdrew.

"Well, Ingare?" Gérard asked with eagerness.

"It good, bwana. Chief, him say Raoul *grand ami*. Now, we big friends, too."

"And what of the rest?"

"Him say you meet with tribe *umuganga*—special medicine priest—tonight."

The sun was well along on its transit to the western horizon, so we busied ourselves settling in to one of the huts that had been readied for us. Once completed, we were invited to

take part in a feast in our honor prepared by the women of the tribe. There was plentiful food—fish roasted in palm leaves served with a vegetable root ground to the consistency of porridge—and, afterward, a great fire and much dancing and singing. I note these details but only in passing, for I found myself gripped by anxiety as the evening turned to night and we were ushered to a special hut reserved for the tribal shaman. Ingare agreed to accompany us to act as our interpreter but made it clear he would participate no further.

The interior of the hut was unremarkable, plain save for a small altar containing several clay figurines and a small fire at the center of the hut. Directly opposite the altar, the shaman sat in cross-legged fashion on a woven reed mat. To his right, there were three identical matts, and he bade us to join him.

Once seated, Ingare began an earnest conversation with the medicine man, whose mien was somber, made the more so by the whorls upon his face rendered in a chalky white paint. As I studied him, with the firelight dancing in the shadowy confines of the hut, his



visage seemed to come alive in a way that set my nerves on edge. I could see that Gérard had noticed as well, yet, as was his wont, he put on a brave front, no doubt the better to reassure me.

At length, the shaman ended his colloquy with Ingare, who shifted his attention to us.

"Him say big spirits in this place. Many bad. Very strong. Him say bwanas can go back now. After this, no go back." Gérard looked at me as if to ask whether my nerves would fail me at this moment. It was clear that the hunger was upon him, and I was not prepared to surrender to fear and cowardice. Gérard nodded to Ingare.

With a few words to the medicine chief, the proceedings commenced. The shaman arose and began chanting and gesticulating, waving a feathered rattle in the air. He stepped to the fire and threw upon it a handful of granules which sent a burst of smoke and flame into the upper reaches of the hut. Whatever the substance, it gave off a heavy, sweet aroma not unlike that which I associated with frankincense. Next, he placed about the necks of each of us, a necklace of leather ending in a small rough-hewn clay disk. In the dim

light I could see they were identically inscribed with the figure of a dancing man. The shaman muttered, and Ingare translated:

"Him say these protect us from *imyuka mibi*—evil spirits." It was clear that Ingare was becoming more troubled, but to the man's credit, he did not desert us. "Medicine priest say him give you special powder. Very small powder. Under tongue," Ingare said, demonstrating by squeezing his thumb and forefinger together. "Then you close eyes. Wait."

Now the shaman drew close, first to Gérard, increasing the pitch and pace of his incantations while shaking the rattle above my friend's head. After a moment, he reached into a small leather pouch cinched about his waist and brought forth a tiny pinch of grayish powder, motioned for Gérard to open his mouth and slipped the substance beneath his tongue. With a quick sidelong glance at me, Gérard closed his eyes. The shaman repeated his ritual with me, depositing a bit of the powder in my mouth. I let my eyelids flutter down, noting the acid taste, and I waited.

I cannot say how long it was before I experienced my first realization that space was shifting within me,

becoming elastic, elongating, folding around on itself. And I...I became as a bead of mercury, vibrating and gliding over the surface of this shimmering indigo Möbius strip until I reached the place where I had begun and then began again.

Soon, the landscape commenced melting, as if formed from the wax of candle, and the color, by degrees, metamorphosed through the hues of the rainbow to rise and fall in pulsating cascades of crimson. And I had undergone a transformation as well, no longer an object to be observed. Instead, I was the observed and observer alike, inseparable from the color flowing around and through me. At length, as I floated, mesmerized, there came to my ears the music of a dozen flutes, a melody indefinable yet wholly alluring combined with the murmur of mellifluous female voices, how many I could not say. And, as with the music of the flutes, I could not discern the language they spoke nor comprehend the meaning. But it was of little concern, for the import of their message came in the manner of their speech. Each susurrant caressed me, seduced me, body and soul.

It came in waves that lifted me up

and caused my breath to catch in my breast so that I feared I would swoon, only to ebb and then be pushed to a fresh peak of ecstasy, again and again.

Then, oblivion.

I returned to consciousness by degrees, fully regaining my senses to find myself lying upon my back. It must have been quite late, though from what illumination entered the hut from without, I knew dawn had not yet broken. As my senses came to their fullness, I pushed myself up onto an elbow and looked about me. The medicine priest was just as he had been before. My friend was sitting erect, head down as if studying the floor with great intensity. Nearby, Ingare squatted. All about, shadows from the flickering firelight darted across the walls of the hut.

When the shaman took note of my revival, he stirred and spoke a few words in a low tone.

"Him say we go now," Ingare began. "Keep these," he continued, lifting the amulet around his neck. "No evil spirit come." Raising his head, Gérard said to Ingare,

"Tell him we want powder to take with us." This Ingare did, bringing an immediate protest.

"Him say no. Bad spirits, evil spirits



go from this place." Gérard had prepared for this resistance. He had brought with him a small leather pouch. He reached inside of it and produced a diadem comprised of gold leaves surrounding a large opal in the center. I say "gold" and "opal" only as descriptives, for in truth they were of no more value than the trinkets showered on the tribal chieftain. However, the crown looked quite impressive in the dancing firelight. And the effect was just as Gérard had intended. The shaman's eyes widened as he gazed with open lust upon the diadem.

Ingare was instructed to tell the shaman that the crown was his in return for a measure of the powder. It took but a moment for the medicine priest to reconsider, and the transaction was complete.

#

Six weeks have passed since our return to Paris. We did not linger after that first night. In truth, Gerard seemed more eager to depart than he had been to arrive, so we returned to Boma with all due speed. It was not solely Gérard's desire to leave the village but the fear that we might

somehow be delayed and Raoul would sail without us.

There was little discussion of our experience. Gérard seemed quite reluctant to talk about it, a veil descending over his countenance whenever I raised the subject. I felt constrained to prod him on the matter, so I confined my ruminations to the journal I had been keeping since the beginning of our trip. The following passage is illustrative of the tenor of my thoughts:

"As each day passes that we are upon the sea—nay, as every hour of the clock ticks by—I feel the urge to enter the realm of the mysterious drug again growing more insistent. It is a hunger that gnaws at my insides with no less ferocity than if I were starving for lack of nourishment. I yearn again for the surrender to an unparalleled sensuousness, pleasure unrivaled, made the more thrilling by its enwrapment in the gauze of the forbidden."

These feelings I kept to myself, asking Gérard in a casual manner only once if he was prepared to grant me a small portion of the few grams of the powder given him by the shaman. His refusal was immediate.

"Certainly not," he said casting me

a look of near-disbelief. “This compound is far too potent for mere recreation. I am restricting it to my scientific research with the *macaca mulatta*.”

His manner was so brusque and carried such finality that I pursued my request no further. Yet, the desire for the powder did not abate but only grew, troubling my nights and preoccupying my days.

At length, I contrived a plan to obtain that which so obsessed me. On the pretext of completing my writing project about our Congo journey, Gérard agreed to my request that I be allowed to observe his researches first-hand.

His laboratory was located in the basement of a building that was part of the Sorbonne medical college on Rue Santeuil. I arrived in the late afternoon to find Gérard focused intently on his work. Our contact since returning had been limited, but he greeted me with a measure of his usual bonhomie.

“Ahh—come in, come in,” he said, inviting me into a sparsely furnished space containing little save a desk, bookshelf and cabinet. In a room beyond, I heard the hooting of one of the rhesus monkeys upon which he

was performing his experimentation. “You’re well?”

“Indeed, yes,” I replied, “consumed with preparing the manuscript of our singular adventure.” In this I bent the truth, since I had been able to concentrate on little else save my hunger for the powder. “I am grateful you have spared time from your own work to permit my interruption.” At this his countenance took on a somber character.

“You have come at a most opportune moment, for I am preparing to administer the largest dose of the shaman’s powder yet to one of my primates. What my experiments have revealed thus far is of the gravest import.”

“Meaning?”

“That the old medicine priest was correct to warn us about the dangers of the drug, its power—if I may be so bold to say—power to seize the very souls of men, so that even while I conduct my researches here, I am never without this.” He reached beneath the open collar of his shirt and drew forth the leather necklace to which was appended the amulet given us by the shaman. “You are wearing yours, as I instructed?”

“Yes, though I confess I find it a bit



extreme.”

“It is not, of that I can assure you.”

“May I ask a question, Gérard?” He nodded his assent. “You and I—we have never spoken fully about our experiences that night in the hut, and—”

“*And we never shall!*” His retort was of such sharpness that my head recoiled as if I had been slapped across the face. With some effort, he tamped down his anger. “Forgive me. I—”

“Please,” I replied, “there is no need.” He responded with a tight smile and said,

“Now, you’re here to observe my research, so come.” He turned and led me into the inner room of his laboratory.

Along a side wall there was a bench covered in an array of equipment—test tubes, beakers, microscopes and the like. At the back, stacked upon a wooden table were four cages, each containing a monkey. At the sight of us, they launched a chorus of screeching and leaped around inside the cages in a state of what I took to be profound agitation. The I expected Gérard to quiet them with a volley of curses and shouts, but instead spoke in the most soothing tone, going from

one cage to the next until the cacaphony ceased.

Having subdued his charges, he lifted one of the cages and brought it to a work table in the center of the room.

“I will now carry out my experiment utilizing a full dose of the powder, and you may judge for yourself the appalling transformation it wreaks upon this creature.” From a cabinet above the laboratory bench, my friend retrieved a small clay container I instantly recognized as the very vessel the shaman had given to us containing the ground fungus. It was all I could do to tear my gaze away, such was my lust for the substance the jar held. Carefully, Gérard removed the lid, which was secured by two short leather thongs. He next took up a thumb-sized piece of banana and, with a scalpel, made an incision in the fruit. Using a small spoon, with infinite care, he dipped up a tiny portion of the powder and deposited it within the incision, closing the slit with thumb and forefinger.

I had come prepared to implore Gérard with the greatest urgency to give me a small amount of the powder, though I believed the odds

were against me. I waited but a moment for Gerárd to slip the banana between the bars of the cage and into the paw of the monkey, who devoured the fruit without hesitation.

“While we wait for the drug’s fullest effects to manifest themselves,” he said, “I will let you review the notes of my early experimentation.” He began looking around him, growing increasingly agitated. “I was certain I brought the papers in here,” he said. “You’ll forgive me; it seems I’ve left them in my desk.” He moved quickly toward the door, and I seized my glimmer of a chance. From the pocket of my jacket, I removed a small phial, uncorked it—

“Ah, here they are,” I heard Gerárd exclaim.

—and spooned into it what I judged to be approximately one-half gram of the drug. I had barely enough time to return the spoon to its place and the phial to my pocket before Gerárd emerged from his office and placed before me a bound volume of foolscap. “You may peruse this while you are here. I believe you will find evidence that fully supports my belief, made the more fervent by my own encounter with the drug in the jungle and the shaman’s admonition, that

this substance, for all of the efficaciousness it may possess, is never to be used without the protection of such as this,” he said solemnly, again touching the talisman he wore. “Behold!” he then declared, gesturing in the direction of the monkey.

Upon my initial glance, the animal appeared frozen, stiff, as if in a state of catatonia. Gradually, I discerned movement, slight at first, then more pronounced, as the monkey came fully to life, reeling about his cage drunkenly, swinging his arms to and fro. These gesticulations became more extreme as the creature staggered and fell repeatedly. After a time, the monkey began to emit a series of whining, chattering, grunt-like sounds and commenced to grabbing his head in both hands and banging it against the bars of the cage. It was quite a pitiable sight, and I implored Gerárd to halt the experiment.

“It cannot be stopped now,” he answered with finality. “There is but one outcome.” This I was soon to observe, as the poor creature suddenly seized up, cried out with a prolonged screech of what I can only describe as utter agony and collapsed,



dead. Gerárd looked at me intently. “There, you have observed for yourself. I hope it has convinced you to abandon any thought of ingesting this fungus ever again.”

This scene had left me shaken, to be sure; but the horror of it all was swiftly superseded by an overwhelming desire to return to my lodgings and partake of the powder that was now mine. Nevertheless, for the sake of appearances, I took some time to page through Gerárd’s laboratory journal, going through the motions of jotting a few a notes of my own.

At length, I offered my thanks, explaining that it was necessary for me to take my leave for another engagement. He bade me Godspeed, and I departed.

By the time I had regained my rooms, the autumn evening shadows had begun to nestle upon the city, the descending sun slanting across the majesty of Notre Dame. I made haste to draw the thick drapery over my windows, barring all light from the outside. What illumination there was I provided with a single waxen taper.

Then, with trembling fingers, I removed from my jacket that which I had come to regard as my Holy Grail. I

sought a comfortable posture upon the leather chaise longue near the fireplace, carefully removed the cork from the phial and tapped a tiny amount of the ground fungus onto the tip of my right forefinger. Without hesitation, I deposited the powder beneath my tongue, took pains to secure the cork in the phial and, as final preparatory step, touched the talisman, resting securely on my breast.

Next, I reclined my head and closed my eyes.

Again, as I had with my initial experience in the Congo, I sensed a cessation of the flow of time as a process apart from myself as an entity. From deep within me welled up the sensation of a surging torrent that rose with great speed and force to burst through the crown of my head in an exhilarating geyser of rainbow colors. My whole being was transformed into molten scarlet, flowing like thick rivulets of lava. And there came, very faintly at first but with increasing intensity, the thrum of female voices, whispering as if within me, repeating phrases in no language I had ever encountered. But upon these voices I was soothed, titillated and transported beyond my ability to

describe in mere words.

#

I emerged from my altered state slowly. I knew not what time had passed, though the new candle I had lit was guttering in its holder. And when I drew back the drapery from my window, I saw that dawn was in the first stages of breaking.

Now my tale accelerates.

Time began to collapse in on itself as the life I had led became inconsequential in the face of the fresh imperative I felt to consume more of the powder and with greater frequency. This I did, the experience heightened with every repetition.

Very little of the drug was required to produce its hallucinogenic effects, and I took great pains to apportion what I had purloined from Gérard's laboratory carefully. But each time I partook of the powder, I found myself, by increments, using a greater amount on subsequent occasions. This I accepted with a growing nonchalance, even eagerness, such were the effects it achieved.

After a time—I judged it to be approximately a fortnight—what remained of the drug was enough for

but two more excursions. Yet by that juncture, I yearned for a more pronounced experience, so I resolved to take all of the powder at once. My judgment was clouded; I gave no thought either to what might be the consequence of such a step or how I would address exhausting my supply of the fungus.

The day I planned for my sojourn seemed well-suited to the occasion. Great banks of clouds had gathered as a shroud over the sprawling precincts of Paris. It was a match for my mood, which was tinged with an unexpected hint of anxiety; I knew not why. So, as daylight waned, I made ready, drawing the drapery, lighting a fresh candle and taking my place upon the chaise longue. Then, the final step before administering the drug, I placed my hand upon the talisman to make certain it was where it should be.

As I did, there came unbidden to my consciousness melodic female voices of unsurpassed gentleness and allure, the very same Sirens who so enthralled me, heightening my passion while under the drug's influence. But unlike those encounters during which they spoke in a language unknown to me, now



they communicated in French of the greatest clarity, bidding me to abandon the protective amulet and come unencumbered into their world. This I initially resisted as the inchoate unease that had hung about me through the day gave way to a more well-defined fear of inner darkness. But my resolve was tested with each reassuring caress and the hypnotic chorus—

“Dark sides are important...”

A chorus that kept repeating—

“They should be nourished like nasty, black orchids.”

In the end, my resistance was futile, for I was like the man dangling by his fingertips from an escarpment, strength ebbing, until the instant when the inexorable force of gravity triumphs. And at that moment, I seized the talisman, violently ripped it from around my neck and hurled it across the room. That done, I immediately took up what remained of the gray powder and placed it beneath my tongue, closing my eyes and reclining upon the settee.

Swiftly, darkness descended, and the voices hitherto as mellifluous as a brook meandering through a forest glade, underwent a chilling metamorphosis, assuming the evil

sibilance of the serpent. Their words again were unintelligible, but instead of the soothing quality they had possessed, now they assailed me as shards of glass needling at my skin, transforming into tiny thread-like worms, wriggling hideously as if dancing and mocking me before burrowing into my flesh. It was torment beyond comprehension! I tried to recoil but felt myself immobilized, frozen in place. I attempted in vain to cry out for help, yet when my lips parted their erupted from my mouth a torrent of black bile.

As the hissing grew louder and I was on the verge of swooning, I became aware of a new and more horrible sensation. It came from below, from the viscous liquid in which I found myself. It was the distinct knowledge and unbearable agony of being eaten alive! By inches, jaws worked at my legs, at last emerging from the depths of the mire, a ghastly mouth ringed with jagged teeth that rent my muscle and bone. And it did not stop, grinding on—higher and higher! I was watching myself disappear into the maw, assailed by a stench indescribable. Again, I made to scream....

I sank beneath the cloak of unconsciousness.

#

Of when next light came into my eyes I cannot say. My rooms remained shrouded, the candle spent and cold upon the table. When I drew back the drapes, the autumn sunshine slanted in, causing me to raise a hand reflexively to shield my eyes. How long had I been absent the world of my fellow beings who crowded the street below me?

I shuddered at the recollection of the horrors I had endured, using the greatest force of will to push the memories from my mind. In the next moment, it occurred to me that I should—*must!* -- find the talisman I had flung from me with such terrible consequence. Nevermore, I vowed, would I be without its protective power. I searched with great diligence, combing the shadowy recesses of the room until, at length, I found it. Or, more precisely, what there was of it. For what remained was the leather necklace that had held it and the clay amulet shattered beyond repair. It curdled my soul, for at that moment I felt entirely at the

mercy of the forces unleashed by the fungus.

In a state of profound despair, I again darkened the room and took to the divan, hoping rest would bring surcease. I fell into a fitful sleep, clouded by the presence of formless phantoms in a hellish landscape choked with acrid smoke. I felt myself weighed down, unable to flee, to hide...and suffocating.

I awoke, my head pounding, my clothes soaked as if perspiration had sprung from every pore. Rather than the measure of peace I had hoped for, I found myself more fatigued and gripped by anxiety than ever. As I cast about for any alleviation of my circumstances, I decided to leave the oppressiveness of my rooms. But even after bathing and donning a fresh suit of clothes, I realized little relief as I ventured forth into the late Parisian afternoon. The air was bracing to be sure, but the gentle breeze and the quotidian bustle of the city could not dispel my gloom.

For two or three days my life continued in this manner—sleep impossible and wakefulness haunted by unending fatigue. I could find no oasis. I had long since withdrawn from regular intercourse with my family

and friends. Gerárd remained immersed in his work and had not contacted me since my visit to his laboratory. In desperation, I weighed whether I should go to him seeking a way out of my purgatory but cast the notion from my mind at last, not wanting to reveal that my state was of my own doing, the result of stealing a quantity of the powder.

And then there opened a grotesque new chapter, the one that has led me to this, my last confession of the soul. As I have said, my nights were no longer hours of refuge. Instead, I fought sleep knowing the terrors it would bring. But three days ago, at first with brevity, then growing longer and more pronounced, there came fresh sensations and periods of hallucinatory delirium during my waking hours such that I can barely any longer distinguish dream from what passes for reality.

I sit alone, quaking upon the chaise longue, the slither and hissing as if from a hundred vipers assailing me. They swarm upon the floor as a roiling, hideous sea. The room itself distorts in dimension, the ceiling pressing down, down, down until I am forced to brace an arm against it. My flesh crawls—I see the hellish tracks

of what wriggles beneath but can do nothing to relieve my suffering. And I can cry out to no one for help, for I am rendered devoid of the power of speech.

Oh, for the mercy of God!

And so I take these last, precious moments of lucidity to relate my tale, my cavalier and foolish choices, my abject ignorance and the price I have paid. It is a warning. I pray you do not let it go unheeded!

Now, I feel the awful terror rise within me anew—each sensation more horrifying than the last. A life of utter torment and madness is all that remains.

I cannot let it be so. I cannot!

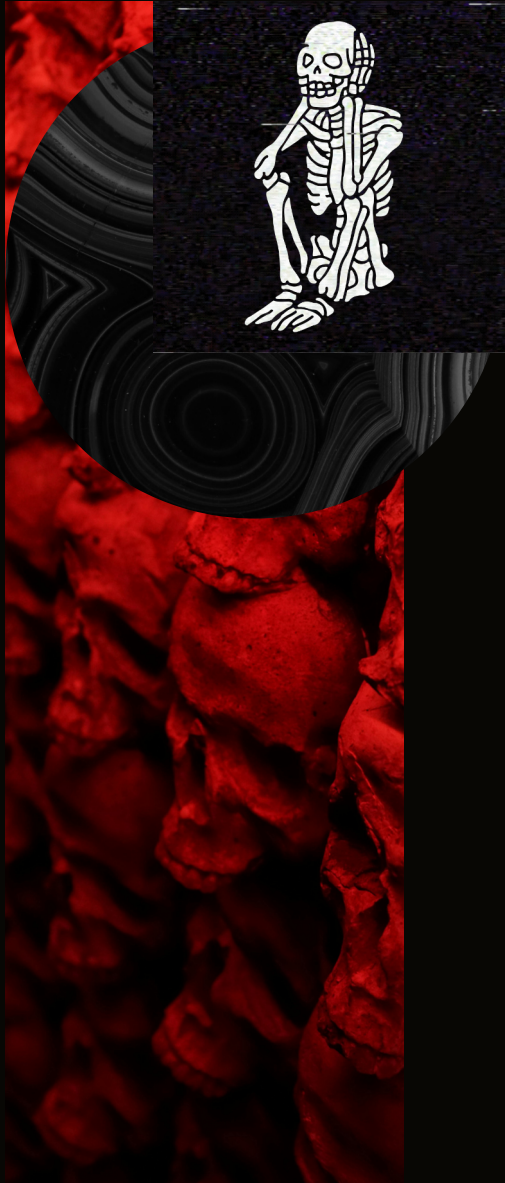
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Liberté..!



THE TASTE OF LANGUAGE

ECHO.K



"Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact."

- George Eliot



Onnibal was a linguist. He had recently gone deep-sea fishing and brought home an octopus—not as a pet, but as a pupil. His goal was not companionship. It was language education.

The creature was unimpressed by this ambition.

During the first week, it used its supple yet unyielding body to ram the glass of its custom-built tank, desperate to escape.

Onnibal remained unmoved.

To smooth the path toward his education goal, he enacted a regimen of corrections. The tank was modified: thicker glass, steel seals. Electrodes nested in the filtration vents. Tranquilizers, carefully dosed, steeped the currents. The final measure: a chemical neutralization of reproductive drive. When the octopus resisted, a low current whispered through the water. A tremor that threaded through nerve and tissue, announcing the new order.

By the fifth day, the tank had quieted.

Only the creature now, suspended in faintly drugged stillness, its many eyes turned upon the man beyond the glass, waiting.

Language training could at last begin.

Inside the tank, beneath the pale glow of the overhead lamp, a sandbox awaited, fine-grained, brushed smooth. Onnibal had constructed it as a tablet for expression. Letters would be inscribed not by pen or stylus, but by the tracing arcs of eight supple limbs.

On the first day of instruction, Onnibal stood at the glass, one hand lifting a flashcard. A single word occupied the center of the card in stark black print:

Clapus.

"This is your name," he said, voice low and deliberate, each syllable an incision.

The octopus floated in place, tendrils drifting in slow loops. A jet of black ink surged from its mantle, striking the tank wall with startling violence. The card, the man, the light beyond, vanished behind a smeared obsidian veil.

Onnibal's expression did not flicker. He set down the card and reached for a switch on the console. A soft hum vibrated through the room. The water brightened faintly as current laced its depths. Inside, the octopus spasmed, limbs

snapping inward, contorting, shuddering.

He counted to five. Then the current ceased.

Ink roiled through the water in thinning ribbons. Gradually, the world reemerged through the glass: Onnibal standing in patient silence, card once again lifted.

"This," he repeated, "is your name."

The octopus drifted, its body trembling in the aftershock. Then, slow as breath, one tentative limb uncurled. It hovered above the sandbox, wavering, and descended.

Grain by grain, stroke by stroke:

C—L—A—P—U—S.

"The lessons progressed remarkably well" was how Onnibal recorded it.

Clapus had learned the shapes of human words: first crude, hesitant arcs scrawled in sand, then finer, more deliberate forms. A month passed. The strokes grew surer. The letters arranged themselves into meaning, again and again.

One morning, Onnibal approached the tank with his customary stack of flashcards, the rhythm of routine steady in his pulse. He halted mid-step.

There etched into the pale grains of the sandbox, each line faintly smeared with lingering ink, waited a message not prompted, not rehearsed:

I hate you.

He stood very still. No offense stirred in him. Instead, a thin current of something like pride flickered beneath his ribs. Subject, verb, object—perfect structure. More than that: no flashcard, no command. A self-willed utterance.

Pure linguistic agency.

"Well," he murmured, voice edged with something almost indulgent, "we have entered the realm of declarative statements."

That evening, as if acknowledging a gifted pupil, he dropped an entire soft-shell crab into the tank. It drifted downward, limbs folding inward like a strange sacrament.

Clapus did not lunge. It hovered, its body dim in the water, a wary glassy eye fixed on the descending offering.

At last, with a slow and deliberate extension of one arm, Clapus pulled the crab toward itself, as if performing a ritual of its own.

Seated at his desk, Onnibal made note in his journal:



Emotive language achieved. Next phase: test for spontaneous self-expression. Progress: excellent.

Some days later, he stood again beside the tank, holding a new flashcard between two fingers. His tone was cool, instructive.

"I am an octopus," he said, enunciating with surgical clarity.

"Now. Write it."

Inside the tank, Clapus hesitated. One tentacle rose above the sandbox, wavered. Letters formed, each with slow deliberation:

I am not.

Onnibal's brow twitched. "Not what?" he asked, voice tautening.

A pause. Then, measured strokes:

Not yours.

He said nothing for a moment. The line of his jaw tightened. He lifted the card again, his voice colder now.

"Write it properly. I am an octopus. It is a simple identity statement."

The octopus waited. Then, slow as venom bleeding into water, it wrote: "Who says?"

A single ink blot followed, small, dense, spat upon the sand like punctuation, or defiance.

Onnibal's expression hardened.

He stood for a moment. No further words. He withdrew the feeding tray

from the tank. The next twenty-four hours passed in hunger.

The days that followed unspooled in silence.

Onnibal made no approach with cards, no commands. He sat by the tank, a heavy textbook on semantics opens in his lap. Page after page turned beneath his fingers with methodical quiet.

Within the tank, Clapus barely moved. Its body pressed low against the sand, watching.

A slow stalemate of gaze and breath.

Onnibal closed the book with a soft clap, fingers resting on the cover. Without lifting his eyes, he said: "You have become an observant student."

For a long moment, the water remained still. Then, one arm uncurled, dragging across the sand:

Why do you need me?

A faint, dry breath escaped Onnibal. He did not answer at once. He leaned back, hands steepled. "Because," he said finally, "humans do not merely use language."

A pause. His gaze drifted to the tank, pupils narrowed.

"We are trapped within it. We think in it. Dream in it. It shapes

every fear, every desire. We do not possess language. Language possesses us.”

He leaned forward, a glint of something almost fevered in his eye.

“I have always wondered, if another mind, an entirely alien one, were forced into this cage of words, would it remain free? Or would it suffer, as we do?”

The octopus remained still. After a long pause, one arm crept forward, tracing across the sand:

Is that why you hurt me?

A pause. Onnibal reached into his coat pocket, fingers brushing against a strip of dried fish. He dropped it into the tank.

Clapus did not touch it, only staring at it.

Onnibal’s voice lowered, almost tender: “Sometimes, pain is part of learning.”

Above the ripples, the creature’s gaze held. Then, with aching precision, it dragged out one last line:

Is it part of yours?

Onnibal sat unmoving. His voice, when it came, was quiet—thin as a hairline crack:

“Always.”

The next morning, Onnibal arrived

with a new flashcard.

OCEAN.

The word stood bold and stark. Beside it, he propped a photograph against the glass: an expanse of dark, rolling water beneath a pale sun, vast, unbound, alive with silent depth.

He held both card and image before the tank.

Within, Clapus hovered. Its gaze drifted past the printed word—drawn instead to the photograph. The cephalopod edged closer, limbs coiling inward, eyes fixed with a strange, aching stillness.

Minutes passed. Then, trembling faintly, one arm stretched downward. Across the sand it traced:

O—C—E—A—N.

When the last letter was formed, the creature’s limbs folded inward, slow and protective as though the word itself had summoned some buried pulse of memory.

The next morning, Onnibal entered the lab and found the tank empty.

He turned. The back door ajar.

Below, stretching across the floorboards, a glistening trail of ink and saltwater snaked outward: the remnants of a crawl. Here and there,



faint smears broke the path—tentacle marks, erratic.

At the threshold, it had reached the narrow gap of the door. Its body slumped, half outside, half in. One arm wedged into the opening, locked tight.

Onnibal said nothing. He fetched the shears. Kneeling by the door, he grasped the outstretched arm, slim, slick, still twitching, and with a single, sharp motion, severed it at the base.

A muted spasm rippled through the limp body. Ink welled at the wound in a slow pulse. Onnibal gathered what remained and carried it back to the tank.

He placed the mutilated form into the water. Silent. Wordless. Less than whole.

Fibrous strands unfurled from the ragged stump, pale and wavering, ghostly threads drifting with the faint current. One damaged limb curled tightly inward, instinctively shielding what could not be mended.

The rest of Clapus floated in a fragile hush, suspended between pain and stillness.

For three days, Onnibal made no further attempt at instruction.

He kept his distance, seated beyond the glass, observing with a

notebook balanced on one knee. Line after line: silent notation of the creature’s behavior, or lack of it.

Inside the tank, Clapus barely moved. The whole form seemed to shrink upon itself, adrift like a discarded thought, neither resisting nor yielding.

Outside, in the narrow courtyard beyond the back door, the severed arm remained where it had fallen. The limp mass had begun to rot. Fat-bodied flies circled lazily above it. Small white larvae writhed at the torn edge, their movements quick and obscene.

Onnibal noticed, of course. He did not intervene.

Each morning, he passed the spot, expression unaltered, the scent of slow decay rising in the warmth. The discarded limb was no longer of use. It would serve, in time, as lesson enough.

On the fourth morning, Onnibal resumed the curriculum.

He adjusted the edges of the sandbox and cleared his throat, voice crisp in the quiet room.

The syllabus had shifted.

It was time to press further: not simple declaratives now, but emotion—layered thought. The

weaving of inner state with outward phrase.

Today's task: a compound sentence.

He lifted the first card. Voice smooth as glass: "Write: If I feel happy, I will sing."

Inside the tank, Clapus stirred faintly. One tentacle hovered, wavering. Then, sluggish across the sand:

If I feel happy, I will go home.

Onnibal's brow twitched.

"Grammatically correct," he murmured with half admiring and half displeased. His fingers flicked a small shrimp into the tank.

Clapus did not lunge for it. It did not even watch. The creature remained still, gaze lowered, writing arm slowly withdrawn as though in retreat.

That night, Onnibal awoke in darkness.

Something pulled him from bed. The tank light still burned. Inside, Clapus had not slept.

Drawn across the sand, in ragged ink trails that bled like the aftermath of a fevered dream:

There is no exit in the water, and none in you.

Onnibal read the line. A sharp,

breathless laugh broke from him.

"Poetic language achieved! Bravo," he recorded later in his journal, lines scrawled in brisk, confident hand.

At the tank's far edge, Clapus huddled in the corner, limbs wound tight, trembling.

The lessons continued.

Weeks spiraled into months. Seasons slipped past the sealed windows of the lab. The days of instruction became ritual.

Nearly a year from the beginning, on an afternoon heavy with stale light, Clapus seemed, distracted.

It drifted toward the tank's edge, gaze fixed not on Onnibal nor the cards, but upon the distant rectangle of the window, its faint gleam of sky beyond.

Then, painstakingly, it began to write:

I do not belong here. I am in anguish.

The ink was thin, wavering. The lines blurred.

Onnibal stood silent, staring down at the fragile, wavering sentence traced in sand. Then, a sharp bark of laughter broke from him.

He threw his head back. The sound rose harsh in the room.

"You?" he said between gasps,



voice echoing across glass and water.

"In anguish?" Another laugh, deeper now.

"Well then, allow me to ease your suffering." His gaze sharpened, lips curving in a cold smile.

"By turning you into a meal."

Inside the tank, Clapus did not react, not immediately.

But moments later, a shiver passed through its body. Tiny suction cups along its limbs fluttered. Slowly and achingly, it drew back, arms coiling inward in tangled knots of flesh.

Then, without sound, it buried itself into the sand. Only two dark, unblinking eyes remained above the grains, fixed upon Onnibal with a wide, fractured stare.

After that day, Clapus never responded again.

No matter the bait offered—shrimp, crab, morsels of delicacy.

No matter the current jolted through the tank.

No matter the cold barbs of sarcasm Onnibal voiced.

It remained hidden.

Days passed. Then weeks.

Onnibal, at length, ceased the lessons. There was no further point.

He stood before the tank, gaze unreadable, arms folded.

"You refuse to be a possessor of language," he said at last. Voice low. Final. — "Then you shall become, a course of language."

A few days later, invitations were sent.

Title, in crisp embossed script:

An Unforgettable Dinner — Where Language Meets the Palate.

That evening, his living room glowed with a soft, unnatural warmth—lamplight shaded in tones of aged gold.

The walls bore silent testimony to a career of cold triumphs: plaques inscribed in dead languages, medals gleaming behind glass, framed photographs of lectures and peerless publications.

At the center of the room, the dining table lay stretched beneath a crisp white cloth. Its silverware arranged with geometric precision, the surfaces gleaming with a chill, ceremonial luster.

One by one, the guests arrived—professors, novelists, academics in dark suits. They gathered close, peering through the glass. A ripple of polite curiosity. No one touched the tank.

Onnibal cleared his throat.

"Tonight's entrée," he announced,

voice clear and resonant, “is an octopus that possesses written language.”

A pause. He let the words settle.

“I taught it to write with its own limbs. Its vocabulary now exceeds three thousand words—ten times greater than your pets, and, in some cases, your children.”

Scattered laughter. Some strained, some genuine.

From beneath the sand, movement. Slowly, painfully, Clapus emerged. It dragged itself inch by inch toward the sandbox. For a long moment it paused, then, with agonizing hesitation, began to write:

Please do not eat me.

A sharp intake of breath. One guest stepped back. Another whispered with voice low, shaken: “It knows.”

A flicker of unease passed through the room. Forks shifted in nervous hands. A wineglass chimed faintly.

Onnibal’s smile deepened. He raised his glass.

“Do you see?” His voice now rang, sharp as glass. “This! Is the gift of language! The bridge across species. The mirror of suffering—made articulate.”

He let the silence stretch.

“Few achievements,” he continued, “are so flavourful.”

Setting the glass aside, he strode to the tank and lifted the lid.

Inside, Clapus strained, dragging itself back toward the sand, as though to form one final phrase.

But the water was already boiling.

Without a flicker of hesitation, Onnibal reached in. Fingers closed around the broken body, slick, fragile, twitching. Clapus struggled, limbs coiling weakly against the inevitable. Then stillness.

Steam rose, thick and ghostly.

With practiced ease, Onnibal lowered Clapus into the pot. Water splashed, hissed. The air fogged. His glasses caught the mist, pale and blurring.

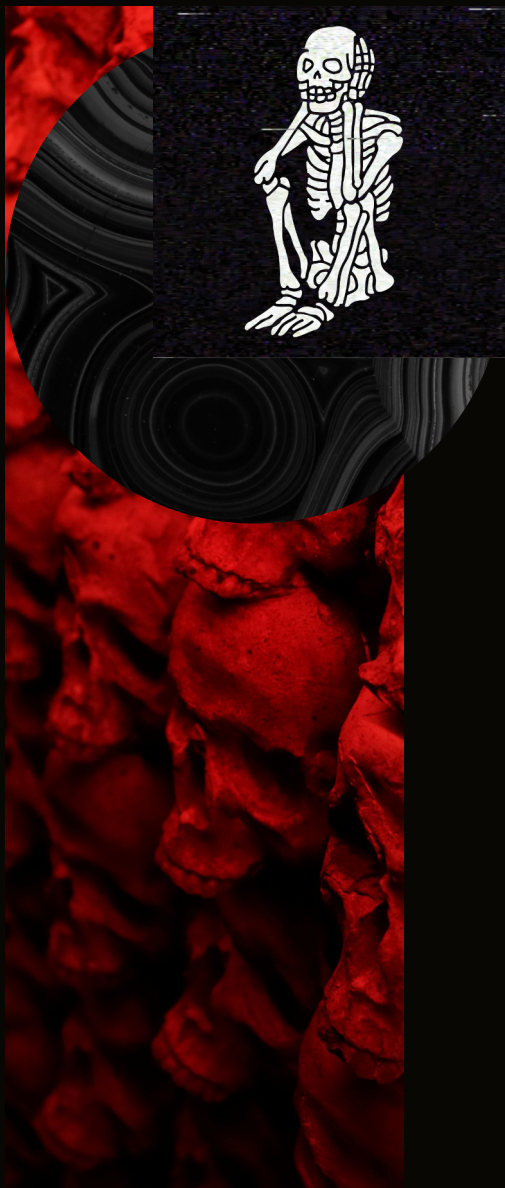
He turned back to his guests, voice calm. Almost pleased:

“And now—let us dine on its final words.”



LA OFRENDA

CHRISTY MAERZ



Christy Maerz is a writer of speculative and flash fiction based in the Pacific Northwest.



It was the first year that Mia decided to make an ofrenda. She sat hunched over at the small kitchen table of her one-bedroom apartment, carefully and patiently folding small sheets of crinkled tissue paper into petals for her marigolds. She'd bought real ones, too, at the supermarket, to scatter in clumps at the edges of the altar, and under the framed faces of the dead—her ancestors of the past five generations.

She'd scoured her keepsake boxes throughout the week for photos, letters, souvenirs, tchotchkes, whatever she could find that would represent a life lived, distilled into a single item. A framed sepia photograph of her great uncle and aunt with their family, a Linda Ronstadt record, a carved ironwood coyote, a silver baby spoon with a gem of turquoise inlaid at the stem, a class ring dated 1957, and a handwritten recipe card for machaca. One entity to symbolize each relative she would honor that year on November 2nd.

Earlier that day, Mia had driven nearly an hour and twenty minutes to the closest Mexican market to buy the right food, both the traditional and the special dishes beloved by family

members, that she could plate and serve on the middle tier of her ofrenda. Bunching together paper petals, she thought about the other families she'd seen at the Mexican market. The ones she'd passed in the aisles bickering lovingly in Spanish and gathering ingredients to make pan de muerto and tamales from scratch. Time-honored family recipes carefully dictated from old to young, prepared by hands that had prepared them a hundred times.

Store-bought would have to do for Mia.

She tied up the stems of her paper flowers and placed them gently at the base of the tall, white candles on each of the three tiers—the top to represent those invited, the middle to provide comfort and sustenance, and the bottom to welcome the returning dead. Suddenly remembering,

Mia ran to the bathroom and rummaged through her makeup bag to find a small, black tube of lipstick, which she placed next to her grandmother's picture.

Maryanne —Mariela Ana, only to some— had never gone anywhere without a colorful lip. In her youth, her grandmother had been beautiful—even a bit vain—and took great care to

make sure her short black bob was always curled and her jewelry matched perfectly with her dress. When Mia was a young girl, her grandmother would visit and treat Mia and her little sister to “makeovers”.

A smudge of lipstick dabbed onto her cheeks, a braid, and a necklace of green and purple beads from the local casino were usually the extent of it, but Mia always savored the touch of her grandmother’s thumb as it affectionately painted her cheeks with color. She loved looking up at her grandmother’s face— only a few inches from her own— the face she’d hoped would become her mirror.

Mia remembered how, when her grandmother was dying of dementia, she’d gone weekly with her mother and sister to the care facility to visit and supply some of her grandmother’s favorites— an extra trashy edition of People Magazine brimming with celebrity gossip, a cheeseburger and fries, and a new lipstick in bright red or crimson. But as Mia had sat across from her —her namesake— her grandmother’s face looked sallow and cold. Unable to make regular trips to the salon, what remained of her grandmother’s black

hair bled into a thick band of gray at the roots, her eyes glassy and vacant as Mia’s mother had cut small pieces of cheeseburger to bring to her grandmother’s pale, bare lips.

Mia stared at the picture of her young grandmother in another time, another world. At the memorial, Mia’s aunts and uncles had proudly said she looked the most like Mariela of all her cousins. But as her gaze drifted over the small tube of lipstick on the ofrenda, the nostalgic longing melted, twisted, and reformed itself into pity and grief.

Diligently, Mia placed the remaining candles, trinkets, marigolds, and plates of food around the ofrenda, arranging a few calaveras she’d bought at the market. She’d planned to stay up tonight as long as she could, letting the candles burn down to the nubs and welcoming the smells of tamales and conchas into her cramped, cold apartment.

At 12:23 am, she decided to call it.

Mia sipped the last of her hot chocolate and Bailey’s, and turned to carefully blow out the candles and cover the dishes on the ofrenda with saran wrap, protecting the food of her ancestors from opportunistic ants.

She flipped through November’s



People Magazine while lazily brushing her teeth, and applied a sloppy layer of moisturizer before heading to bed.

#

At first, Mia’s not sure why she’s awake. She lifts back a cushioned eye mask to squint at her phone screen next to her bed. She’s only been asleep for a couple of hours. She lies back down on her pillow and listens. Was there a noise that woke her? All she can hear is the low hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen and the faint, steady drip from the bathtub. She sighs, annoyed she’s now awake in the middle of the night, and rolls over to her side, kicking out her legs to the cold side of the bed and pulling her eye mask back down.

But it wasn’t a noise, was it? It was something else...

The feeling of not being alone. Of being watched. Mia slowly lifts her eye mask back up and opens her eyes. At first, she doesn’t see it. It’s just a shadow. A towel hanging off the corner of her bedroom door. A gangly houseplant. A rumpled sweatshirt dangling off the chair at her desk.

But then, it moves.

In the corner of her bedroom, Mia

sees a long, looming shadow shift and sway. She sees the outline of a head and a neckless, black body that drapes in a thin curtain and spills down across the floor, hovering like smoke above the piles of dirty clothes on her carpet. Shreds of matted black hair hang in clumps down from the shadow figure’s head, framing a gaunt face with a concave nose, a gaping, toothless mouth, and... no eyes. Just two immense, cavernous black holes.

Mia notices a smell wafting into her bedroom. Not the comforting smell of cinnamon, sugar, and mole from the kitchen. The smell of rot. Of putrefying flesh slowly breaking down into viscous, oozing matter. It’s sickly sweet and cups Mia’s mouth and nose like a hand pressing down to smother.

She can’t move. Mia lies in bed, paralyzed, as the shadow figure observes her with absent eyes. She watches it tilt its neckless head to the side, as if to get a better look at her, its black, lipless mouth opening and closing in painful slowness. No sound emits, only the suffocating smell that’s now enveloped the room.

Her body stiff and stubbornly immobile despite every faculty of reason telling her to get up, to run, Mia remains in bed. Lying still and

struggling for breath through the reek of decay.

A minute passes. Two.

Mia’s mind screams in protest, the fight-or-flight alarm of adrenaline wailing louder and louder. Until finally, Mia’s body unlocks from place. She’s able to twitch her fingers, then slowly shift her legs and take the last ounce of energy to slide herself to the edge of the bed. Desperately, Mia drags her heavy body toward the door, her mind still screaming: run, run.

Mia is halfway out of bed when her foot catches in the tangles of her sheets and she falls.

She hears a loud smack as her head bumps the hardwood. Fire breaks out in her right temple. She can hear the sound of her heartbeat pulsing in her ear as waves of pain swell and crash. She struggles to rise from the floor, blackness seeping into the corners of her view. Her head spins, nausea rising in the pits of her stomach.

Mia lays her head back down on the bedroom floor, tired and defeated. The coolness of the hardwood a relief for the throbbing pain in her head. She blinks through the blackness, searching for the shadow, then slowly closes her eyes

and drifts back to sleep.

#

The only sounds in the room now are the steady, rhythmic whisper of Mia’s breath as she drifts through unconsciousness. The fridge’s low hum in the kitchen. The drip in the bathroom.

A rouged, gaping mouth hovers above Mia, still asleep on the floor. The dark shadow gently bends and spreads, curving its body lower to blanket and shield. Long shreds of matted black hair dangle down, lightly brushing Mia’s cheek. Absent eyes watch over her, an eternal vigil.



THE HAIRCUT

INDIA SMITH



Steven Stern's phrase "living in an airless world," elegantly describes the paralyzing state in which a child identifies with and internalizes their negating parent, blocking them from necessary separation and grief. These ideas of suffocation and a disabled sense of self are illustrated in India Smith's "The Haircut." In this short story, the reader bears witness to the inherent guilt associated with one character's desire to separate from a negating and needful mother. Themes of body, consumption, and desire are developed alongside this character's ambivalence about the airless enmeshment with her mother. As the story unfolds, the conscious anxiety around being consumed transforms into a more unconscious, primal disgust, and finally an unbridled rage as this character grapples with the imagined cost of such a violent severance.

India Smith is a psychodynamic psychotherapist based out of Chicago, IL.

The air clings to me like sap as I clumsily kick the top sheet off the edge of my bed. It's the day my father leaves to move my sister in to her first apartment down in Dallas. It's also the first day this summer that Mom and I will be alone in the house since the beginning of summer break. My stomach lurches and I press my finger across the soft bed of my inner elbow. The pressure is soothing, but not sharp enough to do the trick since I cut my nails yesterday. I pinch the skin and pull it taught. I tend to do this at the start of an Endless Day, when the walls of the house feel like they are undulating, pulsating like heat waves, threatening to close in and flatten Mom and me in an internal, crushing embrace.

My mind jolts to last night, when I had walked into my room with bare feet before my shower. I lunge to grab the discarded sheet from the floor before it can be contaminated.

Is it too late?

Shuddering at the thought, I plug my phone in and fall backwards onto the bed again. I press my palms into my eyelids until rainbow static dances in the darkness. The colorful dots and vibrations a liminal escape,

a reprieve from the Endless Day ahead. She wouldn't be able to find me here. She wouldn't be able to need me.

My phone buzzes as five new notifications light up my screen.

Fuck.

"I need you to go grab the mail, I think my new tests came in."

"???"

"I need your help today, why aren't you up?"

"Do I need to come up there??"

"I hope you didn't make plans today, I need a haircut."

A blade of hot rage sears through my gut. I start typing a string of profanities and imagine Mom watching the three dots glowing on her phone, eyes too close to the screen, desperate for my response. Hungry for all the parts of me that are soft, pliable, dutiful.

I wonder how many girls grow up with insatiable mothers.

Wonder how many come out whole.

It's an effort to get out of bed to change. I do my usual survey in the mirror— checking out my profile and scowling at my soft jawline; giving a quick squeeze to my hips and the soft fold of my breast between my armpit

and bra. I think about the picture I showed my therapist in our session last week. A photo of me when I was eleven at a friend's pool party, oversized t-shirt slick to my husky body, arms curled tightly to hide my belly—or perhaps to keep my insides from unraveling on the concrete. I've always been so tightly wound, it wouldn't be a surprise. Thinking of her—of that picture—makes me nauseous. I still can't stand the sight of her. So I turn away from the mirror and head downstairs.

I don't even need to round the corner of the stairs to know that Mom has the windows open again. I cross my arms against the biting cold, cursing under my breath. She does this every time she feels paranoid that she might have been exposed to something. The other day it was because my dad had a rare in-person work meeting and could have contracted "a whole host of diseases". A month ago it was because she read about a potential new strain of RSV and I had "carelessly" chatted with the neighbor kids in our driveway. The frenzy to open up the windows and doors and douse each room with antibacterial spray is a smudging

ceremony of epic proportions, aimed to render the house devoid of any and all contaminants. Despite all the cold air she lets in, I feel oddly thankful for this little ritual, for sometimes I worry I might asphyxiate on the stale air that we share back and forth, hour after hour, day after day, in this house.

I catch Mom standing in the doorway of her bedroom looking in, hands on her hips, shaking her head. At the sound of my footsteps hitting the hardwood, she spins around and grabs the doorway with one hand and the small of her back with the other—the telltale gesture to let us know her back is hurting. She looks panicked, as if she knows I've witnessed her standing just fine a moment ago. I shake off a shiver and say good morning.

"Finally! Did you sleep ok? You look a bit puffy..."

"Uh, yeah I—"

She cuts me off to tell me that she needs my help getting the guest room ready upstairs so that when my father gets back she can quarantine in there until the coast is clear. Every day there's a new chore she needs help with due to her mobility issues. I make her meals, rearrange



furniture, paint her nails, go to the grocery store—essentially anything she recruits me to do to assuage her fears. Sometimes I picture these tasks pinned to the evidence board of a crazed detective looking for a breakthrough in a cold case. Her needs, connected by red string, create a constellation of clues always orienting me closer to her.

Since I was little, I've had this recurring dream in which I am sitting down for breakfast and Mom suddenly starts to balloon, growing larger and larger until I'm squished against the wall. I would wake from the dream when either her or the walls were about to burst. I usually jolted awake in a panic and ran straight into her room and crawled into her, grasping and clawing at her abdomen for a deeper embrace. The space she takes up has always made me feel small, but despite the suffocation I have always reserved a tiny, special spot cradled next to her, even when my father and sister were boxed out. I liked being small, being a single puzzle piece that fit snug beside her. It felt safe enough for me then, though I was always bracing for her to grow too big, too expansive, too consuming. As I grew older I

stopped running to her after these nightmares, but would lay awake for hours wondering who I was without her—whether I was less a puzzle piece and more an ingredient to be subsumed into a recipe that was never quite right.

I'm dizzy now, and I'm sure I need to eat, but I haven't eaten for a full fifteen hours, and that number feels nice—clean. So I sit at the counter and stare at my phone, taking the daily slog through the dark pits of Instagram. The sun flits through the window shades in a way that illuminates the mobile hanging in the corner, bright light flaring off its curved edges. It's one of those spiraling kinetic art sculptures that gives the optical illusion of its pieces weaving in and out of each other, coming together and apart, set in motion by the breeze. The pieces swirl around in a uniform pattern, coming together as a whole, cohesive shape, then shifting apart. I suppose another perk of having the windows open is seeing it in action like this.

It's a cheap looking thing. I remember begging Mom to buy it at a flea market a few years back. It was one of my favorite things to do with

her before all of her diagnoses. Hollow nostalgia aches somewhere in my gut, longing for a time when Mom actually existed in the world and would take me with her on outings and adventures. Nostalgic for a time when Mom would whisper, “Honey, look! Look what I found!” and show me whatever sparkling tchotchke she stumbled upon at the antique store like we were on a secret treasure hunt, just the two of us. Nostalgic for a time when being needed by her and connected to her felt good and safe. But these were also the days that Mom would lock eyes with me in the rearview mirror on the way home and confess that I was her very best friend, that I knew her better than my father ever could.

I realize now that this nostalgia is a tangled, matted web of grief. I mean, what is nostalgia really, if not the naive little sister of grief?

The breeze from the open window animates the tendrils of the mobile mechanism, light catching the purple metal as it twirls. I watch in rapture as the mobile contorts itself into a heaving lung, expanding and contracting with each breath. A pumping heart filling with blood, a gyrating fetus in the womb.

Was this always how my mother was?

Would I ever be enough to make her better?

Mom trudges over with a limp and my adrenaline jolts. But it’s not the dramatics that are overstimulating me. My cheeks are hot and my neck starts to itch and I feel that familiar pulse between my legs that makes me sick with shame. She’s fully naked from head to toe, save for the mask she always wears to protect herself from COVID-19. Even inside; even alone. Her nudity is a fixture in our house, and I seem to be the only one who takes issue with it. For as long as I can remember, Mom has waltzed around like this, sometimes with just her top off, sometimes entirely nude, and always appearing without shame.

I try not to look at her sagging breasts, or the unruly jungle of her pubic hair, and keep my eyes on her face. But sometimes I’m drawn to the jagged c-section scar from my older sister’s birth. She never fails to remind us that this scar has marred her once perfect body forever. I catch my sister scowl every time Mom says this, the rapids of their mutual resentment raging between them so



intensely you could almost hear the rush.

Mom’s holding a small towel over her arm like a waiter at a fancy restaurant and drags her feet to me. She looks me up and down then strokes the side of my face, finishing me off with a firm pinch on the cheek. I feign a quick smile before I can grimace and watch as she silently sets a pair of hair cutting shears on the counter in front of me.

Right. It’s haircut day.

Maybe I slept in longer than usual because the part of me that is merged with her *knew* what day it was. I mean, it’s not the haircut part that I dread so much—I’ve gotten pretty good at cutting hair over the years, especially after becoming the appointed family stylist during the early days of the pandemic. And I’m not half bad at bangs now. It’s just the physical closeness of it all. I’ve grown to dread those hours when our bodies come too close together, when the heat of her breath wafts in my face to the rhythm of her critiques and I become painfully aware of our bodies in space. So aware that I find myself examining her skin so intently that I imagine being absorbed into the soft,

enveloping rolls of her sides if I were to get too close.

“Your hair looks fine, Mom, didn’t I just cut it over break?”

“Oh come on, you used to beg me to play hairdresser when you were little! I just need a

trim, and some layers to frame my face.”

I want to ask her what the point is, if she doesn’t even leave the house. She has no one to see besides me and my father. Why frame a face that only we will see?

But I stop myself, of course. I know if I resist further she will find some way to guilt me about how the inflammation in her hands is getting worse, or how the latest COVID numbers are looking bad, and the local salon has stopped requiring masks, ‘the fucking idiots’. Or she might ask when I stopped wanting to spend quality time with her, or where her little girl went.

I grab the shears and a comb and tell her to sit down in the usual chair. I resist a shudder as she sits down, bare ass to our upholstered kitchen barstool. When she does this, I always imagine her leaving a stain of her wetness, and I wonder how she can be so repulsed by the world

when she has always been the repulsive one. The contaminator. Every time I muster the courage to tell her that it makes me uncomfortable, that it makes me not want to sit down in the places she has, she reminds me where I came from, and how we share blood and secrets and fears and that this? This is nothing.

“But it’s just that—”

“Just *what*? You think my body is so *grotesque* don’t you?” she would spit.

“No! No, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it, I just—never mind. I think I’m just stressed about something else,” I would lie.

The leaden silence of the house heaves around us and I’m reminded how alone we are, how unsupervised this all is. Without the shield of my father, albeit a blunt and effective weapon itself at times, Mom has a clear and unobstructed path to me. Fear reverberates through me, and I shake my head at how dramatic I’m being, discounting my discomfort as disproportionate and unfounded. Still, out of instinct I arch my body away from hers so that my pelvis is tucked under, and I begin my work. With each snip, I feel the heat of our

closeness and I start to sweat.

The kinetic sculpture spins, curving into itself, dancing.

After a few minutes of intense focus, I feel the ground wobble a bit beneath me and as I adjust my footing and grab the counter, I feel the room begin to warp, the walls pulsating to a silent rhythm. I’m starting to feel nauseous and I wonder if I forgot to take my medication last night.

Round and round the mobile spins, gaining speed with every turn.

I swallow hard and tell Mom I need to refill my glass with water, that I feel dizzy, and as I round the corner to the kitchen island I catch a glimpse of her face.

My glass shatters to the ground.

“Mom!” I shriek, as I watch her face begin to melt and droop, her eye sockets gaping open, revealing the crimson flesh within. When she doesn’t respond I run up to her and begin shaking her shoulders, calling for her attention. What could this be? Which one of her diagnoses could cause this kind of disfigurement? Is it a bad reaction to a new medication?

I don’t have time to ask her these questions because beneath my



hands she is starting to shiver. The seizing intensifies and I stumble backwards into the barstools, sending them clamoring to the ground. My eyes peel with horror as her body begins to stretch, her back arching in an inhuman way. Tears streaming down my face, I try to meet her gaze, but her stare is empty, devoid of all emotion. I plead with my eyes for an answer, but somehow I know the human connection between us has been severed.

Nothing in life has prepared me for this—for the nauseating crack of her bones and joints as they contort and elongate, her figure becoming beast like, mutant. Slowly her skin begins to scream with angry boils and bubbling cellulite. Her body balloons, thick layers of fat enveloping her existing rolls, the way it looks when you pour cake batter into the pan in a hurry—a gloriously gluttonous melting and piling on.

I’m going to be sick.

Her breasts begin to shrivel and wilt. Watermelon nipples darkening, scabbing, curling under like decaying fruit. Her breasts are pendulums, swaying back and forth, back and forth. I shield my eyes like a child in a

feeble attempt to resist whatever hypnosis she is trying on me. When I peer through my fingers I catch a glimpse of her snarling pubic growth, matted and barbed.

Bile rises and lurches to escape my mouth. I swallow it down. I’m paralyzed. She wobbles, and for a second looks as if she’s going to fall. An unintelligible sound followed by a whimper. Is Mom still in there? Or has this been dormant inside of her all this time?

With a wobble, a teeter, and a sway that seems to last an eternity, this grotesque Mother braces herself and finds her footing. Her blank, drooping eyes focus on mine and I notice the skin of her eyelids pooling like the melting wax of a candle. Flies swarm the ring of rancid, flaking flesh around her neck. She tilts her head inquisitively and sniffs in my direction—a predator assessing her prey. She stalks forward, dragging her ulcerous legs towards my breathless body.

Mother inches so close to me that I can feel the whiskers of her chin tickle my bottom lip. I am swallowed by an acrid plume of her breath. She is drooling and grunting something foreign to me. What does it want?

What does she need?? I scream the questions at her like curses and she responds with a guttural cry, almost human enough to fool me into believing she is... hurt?

As if to confirm, a tear streaks her cheek. She starts to quiver.

Suddenly, from her abdomen erupts a fleshy, reptilian appendage covered in mucous and papillae. The lizard like arm creeps forward with a squelch, abdominal skin folding back with each growing inch, making room for this arm from within. I squeeze my eyes shut as it touches the tender flesh under my chin. I shiver at the wet coldness of it. It caresses me softly, carefully and moves to my cheek. A soft pinch.

There is no time to plead before the arm latches onto my mouth with the wet suction of a tentacle and spreads like veins around me until our skin feels fused. I steady myself and try to pull away, certain she will crush me with her own insides. I realize then that this flesh is a direct line to me.

A tether.

An umbilical cord.

A siphon.

I squeeze my eyes as I brace myself for her to absorb me into her belly,

and for just a moment I'm relieved from my terror as I'm reminded of Mom:

Tender, yet suffocating. Terrified and terrifying. An everhungry vulture, always poised to prey on the nearest half dead thing, half wishing to be consumed.

For a moment, I wonder who failed to feed her. I wonder if she will ever be satiated.

But I pay tithe for her hunger every day that I am in her grasp.

And I know, now, it is a tithe I can no longer afford.

As I'm pulled deeper into her warmth I catch the silver glint of the shears to my left, barely within reach. I make a strained lunge propelled by a muffled grunt. I can't believe how tired resisting her has made me, my muscles gelatinous and trembling. I meet the handle of the shears with my fingertips and, in one sweeping motion, pry them apart and drive a blade through the tissue between us.

I saw back and forth, frenzied. I can't tell whose skin I am cutting and I don't care. I need to excise this tumor and be free. I slice and slash as she wails in agony, so pained it almost gives me pause. I cut until we

are two again and we both fall to the ground.

Finished.

Laying on my side, I watch as a pool of bile and blood spreads from her abdomen, creeping towards me.

I tilt my head to meet her eyes. Worn, dreary, betrayed. Her eyes pool with tears and, just for a moment, she looks human again. She blinks slowly, a single tear falling over her nose and across her face before it hits the ground. I mirror her for the final time, tears streaming across my face, hitting my other eye on the way down. I blink, and am greeted by blackness.

Alone, on my own in my separateness, I feel alive.



MUTT & CALL OF THE VOID

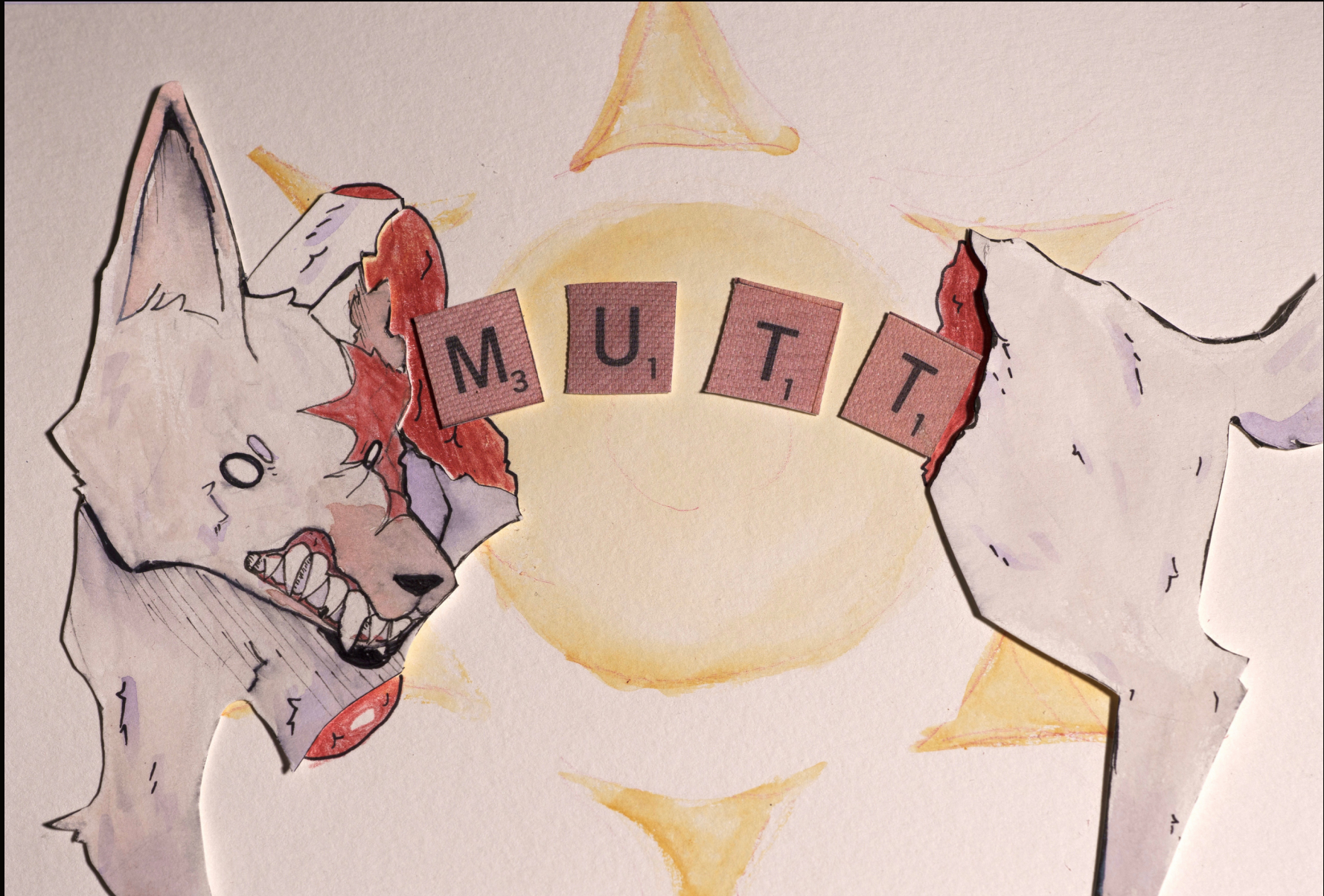
THEODORE COY



"Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact."

- George Eliot





FOURTH TERM

IAN BUCKLEY



Ian Buckley is a Chicago-based author who loves cats and monsters.



Chrissie gasped awake and shot up to a sitting position. Her heart pounded as she surveyed the room; almost pitch dark, save for the little glimmer of streetlamp that seeped in between the blinds. The room was still, and the only noises were from Andy snoring next to her and the dehumidifier lightly humming. *Did I dream that sound?* she asked herself. It was beginning to seem so, but her heart continued to thunder.

Then the sound came again, removing all doubt. Something like a goat's bleat rang out in the night, nasally and bassy at once. It echoed from outside disturbingly close, maybe even on their street.

Chrissie shook Andy. "Andy!"

His snoring broke up, but he stayed still. The noise came again, a loud, droning whine.

"Andy!" Chrissie yelled this time, jostling him by his shoulder.

"What? What? What?" His voice was slurred and raspy, his eyes were wide in a delirious expression as his awareness slowly came back online from deep sleep.

"Listen. I think I hear something."

"What?" he asked again. "I don't hear anything."

"*Listen,*" Chrissie stressed. For a moment, they both sat up in bed, the

silence swimming in their ears.

"I don't—" Andy began, but the noise interrupted him. It was loud and clear, and—to Chrissie's agitation—much closer than it had been.

"That!" Chrissie said in a loud whisper. "What the fuck is that?"

Andy sat silently for a moment, listening intently. "I don't know. A dog maybe?"

"A dog?" Chrissie asked.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a kid crying?"

Chrissie hadn't confronted that thought yet, but it did sound upsettingly like a child in pain, only it was too animalistic and deep. "Could you look out the window?"

Andy hesitated. "I think it will go away."

"Andy, please? What if it actually is a kid who needs help?" Chrissie knew that would be a more compelling argument than her true motivation: she would not be able to fall asleep again until she knew the true source of the horrible whine.

Andy sighed and threw off the sheets. He lumbered, heavy with sleep, and lifted the dusty slats of the blinds with his fingers. Again, the room fell back into silence as Chrissie leaned forward, waiting for his report.

"I don't see anything," Andy said. "The

street is empty.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I—” he paused and craned his neck closer to the window. “What the fuck?”

“What?” Chrissie asked.

Andy said nothing, but stretched the blinds farther apart.

Chrissie felt the hot surge of panic in her chest. “Andy, what is it?”

Andy was pressing his face against the blinds now, trying to get an angle at their driveway. He held up one finger, instructing Chrissie to wait. The streetlamp lit the room through the gap in the blinds, and Andy was a dark silhouette amidst the halogen glow.

“Andy, please,” Chrissie said.

“I think I saw some animal by our garage,” he said at last.

“What? What kind of animal?”

Andy pulled on his jeans. “Just wait here for a second. I’m going to look at it.”

“No! Why would you do that? Shouldn’t we call the cops?”

Andy grabbed his phone and turned on its flashlight. Chrissie reared away from the sudden brightness. “I’m not even sure what I saw. I’m just going to take a look.”

“Are you kidding me?” She was speaking at full volume now. “Don’t you dare go outside.”

“I’m not going out,” he said, opening their bedroom door. “Just to the garage.”

“Andy...” Chrissie protested, but Andy had already shut the door behind him. She sat up in bed and listened. The digital clock next to her read 2:37, the red light of the numerals gently flickering. 2:38 clicked by, then 2:39. Chrissie heard nothing.

Suddenly, there was a metallic thump that made Chrissie shout. Her breathing was heavy and she shuddered, her hands over her mouth. The silence returned, and Chrissie was infuriated by and terrified of its ambiguity.

“Andy?” She called out, louder than a whisper but certainly not loud enough to be heard. She swung her legs out of bed and listened intently. There might have been a subtle noise from the garage, a repeated thumping, but she wasn’t sure if she was imagining it. She realized then that she hadn’t heard the whine since before Andy left, which troubled her. The panic was intensifying now, deep in her stomach and chest.

She rose to her feet, then stood, frozen. 2:41. Andy had been gone for nearly five minutes. She sucked in a shivering breath and took a step forward. It was a fight to move at all; every new step made her feel exposed, like the breath of a predator was on her



neck. Finally, she made it to the bedroom door and cracked it open.

“Andy?” She called. Their silent house answered. The fridge hummed in the kitchen, and streetlight poured in through their bare living room windows. Chrissie stole a quick look outside, but looking out into the darkness cast in dreamy orange light was too much to bear.

She continued walking, through the main hallway to the garage door. Her bare feet made silent pats, making her realize she was still only wearing her big sleep shirt and shorts. She couldn’t turn around now, though. It took everything she had to make it this far.

She shook with every breath as she made it to the garage door. She could hear it with certainty now: periodic wet thumps and thuds that sounded like someone beating out a wet rug. Chrissie wanted to call out to Andy again, but she couldn’t will herself to make a noise. Silently, slowly, she turned the knob and opened the door.

As her eyes adjusted, the garage seemed empty but she could hear the noises more clearly now. The thumping continued, but there was also a quiet garbled mumbling. Chrissie went cold with fear when she realized it was not Andy’s voice. She lifted a wrench off the

shelf nearest her and brandished it as best she could. There was nothing on her side of the car. Slowly, she padded over to the otherside. The garbling continued, broken up by heavy grunts and, of course, the thudding.

Chrissie brought a hand to her mouth to hold back a scream. Tears welled in her eyes, and she felt the telltale signs of vomiting begin to surge up her throat. At first she couldn’t make sense of what she was seeing; it looked as though a big, naked bald man was squatting over Andy, slamming his meaty fists down on him without pattern or reason. But after a few seconds, stranger details emerged. The man had a huge, bulbous head and a long, wide torso. His legs and arms were thick and meaty, so much so that they were segmented like sausage links, but they were disturbingly short, ending in tiny, stubby hands and feet. A small squeak slipped out of Chrissie’s mouth, and the thing turned around to look at her, and her awful suspicion was confirmed.

It was a baby.

Or, at least, it had the proportions of a baby. It rose to its full height and turned to face her. Its eyes were curious, but its expression was locked in petulant anger. It garbled its hideous baby talk at her, its voice sickeningly deep.

Chrissie pointed her wrench at it. “Andy? Andy, are you ok?” Her voice was shaking badly, but her message came out clearly enough. Andy gave no response, but the baby waddled towards her on unsteady legs. It cooed and babbled in a deep man’s voice, drool spilling from its lips. It was reaching for her with its little grabbing fingers.

“Stay back!” Chrissie said. “Stay the fuck back!”

Of course, it didn’t understand her. It just walked closer to her, kicking out its awkward legs with each step. Chrissie was disgusted to see it upclose, its distended, veiny belly poking out over its tiny genitals.

It reached out and squeezed Chrissie’s arm, hard. Its nails were incredibly sharp, and Chrissie could feel cuts form and drip blood.

“Get off me!” She screamed, and swung her wrench. It hit the baby in its pudgy cheek, which absorbed the force of the blow like a sack of flour. The baby looked at her with an outraged expression and it let out a bellowing, whiny cry. It began to batter her with its fists as it wailed. Chrissie covered her face, but it did little to spare her from the force of the thing’s tantrum. Its wretched, meaty hands felt like hammers, and she was pounded back

against the wall, then onto the floor.

The baby mounted her, screaming all the while. Chrissie looked up to see its face covered in drool and tears and snot, all of which were spattering over her as it shrieked. It lifted both arms and slammed them together. Chrissie protected her head with her arms, but the pain was still unimaginable. The baby slammed again and again, bruising her arms and banging her head into the concrete floor. It dug its fingers into her arm again and tried to pry it away from her face. Chrissie strained in resistance but, somehow, the thing was stronger than her. It pulled her bleeding arm away from her face and slammed her with its other fist repeatedly, as if it were trying to break a toy.

Chrissie felt her nose break and squirt blood down her lips. The next two blows hurt, but she didn’t feel the next few; she only saw a snap of white light, and then slowly felt herself come to and her vision refocus.

She had lost consciousness, though probably only for a few seconds. The baby was scraping at her neckline. It gave a big tug, and tore her T-shirt down to her abdomen. Chrissie felt a sharp pain as the baby furiously and fruitlessly sucked at her nipple. She raised a weak arm in protest, but the baby



absentmindedly swatted it away as continued to try to feed.

The pain was horrific. With great effort, she lifted her head from the floor and surveyed the awful scene. She and the baby were covered in her blood, and the creature was sucking furiously at her breast. It grew frustrated at the lack of milk and pounded her chest. Her ribs creaked and the air was knocked from her. *I’m going to die*, she thought. It was the first cogent thought she had since the horror had begun, and the truth of it forced lucidity. She had minutes left before she died of her wounds or the thing threw another tantrum and beat her to death. She looked to her left, then right, ignoring the pain in her aching neck, trying to find her wrench. It was nowhere in sight, however. It was just her and the baby.

She looked down at the creature, sucking and scraping at her nipple with its newly forming teeth. Its prodigious head was before her, hideously misshapen. She noticed, then, that the creature still had a soft spot. It was a wide divot on the top of its skull, pulsing with each beating of the baby’s heart. She didn’t pause to consider the horrific act she was about to perform.

Using all her strength, she stuffed her thumb into its soft spot.

Immediately, it released her nipple and let out an awful cry. Chrissie pushed harder and felt her thumb breach through the skin and into the warm, wet content of its skull. She pushed harder.

The baby spasmed and wildly flailed its arms at her, but she ignored the pain and pushed deeper in. The inside of its skull was viscous, and her thumb slipped out, but she stuffed her index finger in instead, and then her middle finger as well.

It was screaming now, louder than anything she had heard. She was disturbed to see that its face looked much like any crying baby now; its eyes scrunched shut and its mouth wide open. She felt no sympathy for the monster, and stuck more fingers in its head. Her four fingers wriggled in its brain matter and her thumb was pressed against its forehead. She gave a great jerk, and pulled its skull open.

The baby slouched forward, spilling blood and brain matter as it did. Its rasping whine didn’t stop right away, but it slowly fizzled out.

Chrissie laid there for a while, the dead thing still on top of her. After a minute, she realized her fist was still clenched around bits of brain and skull. *It feels like pulling out pumpkin guts*, she thought. She released her first and pushed the

dead thing off of her. More loose matter sloshed from its skull over the concrete floor.

She turned on the light, then opened the garage door. She walked around the car to where Andy lay. As she sat beside him, she caught a glimpse of herself in the car's side mirror. An eye was swollen shut and her nose was smashed flat, but she would live. She looked down at Andy, who looked worse. He, too, was breathing, though.

She rubbed his face, and he opened a swollen eye.

"Chrissie?" He croaked. "What was that?"

"It's dead, Andy."

He shut his eyes and let out a breath. "Thank fucking God." Laboriously, he brought himself up into a sitting position. "Should we call the police?"

Chrissie looked over at the corpse, then back at Andy. "I don't want to have to explain this, do you?"

Andy swallowed hard. "No."

"Alright then. It's still dark. Let's cut it up and bury it under the septic tank."



THE GRAVE UNDER THE SEA

VIVIANA DE CECCO



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***Author's note:** This story is inspired by the sinking of the Italian battleship Rome by a German plane in 1943 in the Bay of La Maddalena, Sardinia, in front of the Strait of Bonifacio, Corsica. The wreck remains submerged, and research has yielded no results thus far. Sadly, the victims of this tragic event are still at the bottom of the sea.*

#

The decomposed body of the battleship lay in its blue grave. Its iron belly, gutted by bombs long ago, was exposed to the relentless current. My arms broke through the compactness of the blue. A tumult of impressions raged in my mind. In the silence of the depths, the monstrous squeaks of that slumbering giant reached my ears. Lost in the depths of that evil abyss, I felt an icy, treacherous hand push me toward the mutilated corpse of the sunken ship.

"You will still find them seeking victory," my great-uncle Viktor kept telling me. "You will hear the furious pounding of their feet on the bottom of the hull. The monsters are there, under the sea."

As I approached the wreck, I had

the impression that the dull rumble of footsteps broke the silence again. Suddenly, a whirlpool enveloped me, pulling me down toward a gash in the deck. The hull vibrated, churning the water and drawing me into its metallic maw. But even as I descended deeper and deeper through silent corridors and troop quarters, the ship rejected me. Eager to push me away from its poisonous fulcrum, the ship seemed to send me back continuously, in and out through its wounded ribs. A powerful whirlwind of swirling water stretched toward the surface, forcing the boat to which I had tied myself to with a rope to twist inward. Powerless against the incredible force of the sea, I glanced toward the shadow of the wretched fishing boat from which I had dived.

"Unattainable," I thought, shocked.

At that moment, as I was pushed outward again, I realized that something was changing.

"You'll find him over there, together with them," Viktor had warned me.

"Who?" I had tried to get out of his mouth, poisoned with insane omens.

As expected, he had kept every answer to himself.

As my eyes adjusted to the eternal

darkness of the battleship, I saw something that has kept me in a cycle of nightmares ever since. The terrifying apparition that appeared to me overshadowed any uncertainty about the delirium of my rancid consanguine.

A cross of indistinct shapes stood in the sandy desert where the battleship rested. It was a ghostly figure, growing whiter in the shadow of pearly circles of light. It was a huge, nameless grave. For a moment, the swirling waters subsided. Dismay and terror took possession of my soul.

I could not help but associate that vision with the curse pulsing through my veins. My veins bore the inescapable mark of my lineage. Death was written in my flesh and in the flesh of my predecessors. Exhausted by the relentless torment of my wanderings, I wondered if the marble mound, standing like a soldier before his commander, was meant for me. At that moment, I reflected on the days and hours that had led me there. I regretted not believing the words of the Gentleman. I must also tell you how it began, before it is too late. At that very moment, I retraced the days and hours that had led me to that place. And I regretted that I had not

believed the words of the Gentleman. I must also tell you how it began, before it is too late.

#

Magdalene Bay was an odd name for a collection of houses scattered about like a flock of dying seagulls. It was just a bay nestled between the cliffs of an island facing Corsica on the wild edge of the Strait of Bonifacio. To tourists, it looked like a graveyard of tombstones buried in the sand. The dwellings' pointed roofs and off-white stone bodies resembled crosses planted in the heart of an isolated gulf. An atmosphere of peace hung over the area, much like the oppressive silence of a deserted village.

There was something about that coastal village that bore the arcane restlessness of abandoned places. Still, several families lived in Magdalene Bay. The oldest family was certainly mine. In our patriarchal abode, my parents, my maternal grandmother, and I lived with another tenant I detested: Great-uncle Viktor.

The village clung to the shore for centuries, lulling us into its fizzy atmosphere and enticing us to look out at the sea through its large



windows. The north-facing wall of the living room resembled a face with a bandaged eye. Wooden boards painted white covered the gap in one window. The recent storms that had battered the coast had been anything but magnanimous.

But not even the shattered glass or sagging plaster would convince my family to leave. Their morbid attachment to this lonely, desolate place led them to regard Magdalene Bay as a mermaid of ambiguous charm. The ancient and the modern merged in a mysterious union. School and computers were as much a part of my life as the salty scent of the sea. I had friends from nearby towns, as well as a neighbor my age with an angelic face and an unbearable temper.

To relieve the boredom of lonely weekends, I would sometimes gaze at the dark horizon where winter clouds seemed to plunge headlong into the black water. I wondered what the name was for the unusual play of light that made the surface appear opaque, as if the blue had been dragged offshore by a malevolent current.

"This is not a normal sea, Alberto," my great-uncle tried to explain.

Unable to believe his words, I convinced myself that one day the time would come to explore its innermost depths. I ignored all his tales of curses and creatures from other worlds.

"The army is ready to return. He will lead them, command them, and bring them to victory they could not enjoy!"

Lying on the bed with his eyes fixed upward, he crossed his arms over his chest. He pounded them with his fists, as if to a rhythm only his ears could hear.

My great-uncle waged war. A jagged, asymmetrical scar was proof of his absurd theories to me. The wound must have caused an unhealthy madness in his mind. His fervent inclination to study the supernatural was an obsession I wanted nothing to do with. I had grown accustomed to his ponderous theories, but when I consulted the volumes in his library, I was subjected to the disturbing and merciless fascination of their pages. Horrible images of ancestral gods and monsters lured my naive students. Ready to delve into my dear, hated uncle's past, I found myself one day flipping through the photographs he had hidden in a wooden box at the

back of the living room sideboard, protected from the viscous aggression of the damp found in any self-respecting seaside village. One photo had caught my eye. For years, its patina, stained by the treacherous stains of moisture, had held the portrait of Viktor, my famous Great-Uncle.

Since my grandfather had welcomed him into the family and pitied his early widowhood, no one had ever revealed to me that Viktor Kreuzter had worn a Nazi uniform. My grandfather was from the German branch of the family, which mixed its blood with that of my sweet grandmother, Camilla, soon after the dark times of World War II.

Viktor the Nazi left me speechless. His sneering grin appeared on the threshold. I was only a boy, but I trembled like a child. He seemed pleased to have placed the grueling weight of this revelation on my slender teenage shoulders.

Viktor the Nazi left me speechless. His sneering grin rose from the threshold. I was only a boy, but I trembled like a child. He seemed pleased to have placed the grueling weight of this revelation on my slender teenage shoulders.

Airplanes. Viktor was in the Luftwaffe. I should have called him a criminal. But my throat was empty, unable to produce sound or words. The discovery was like an epitaph. In that youthful snapshot, Viktor was a young man with a selfish, self-adoring expression, his gaze distorted by a treacherous conceit. He embodied the tragic portrait of one of the cruelest periods in our world's history. In my time, he was a despicable old man who enjoyed humiliating others. Now, I wanted to rip off my skin while I could still prove that my blood was clean.

Outside, the sea roared with unexpected fury. Inside, my mother and grandmother sat quietly in their chairs, oblivious to my labored breathing. When the floor began to vibrate, I was the only one who felt the slight movement gushing out from under the white tiles, as if the house's roots were losing their hold on the earth. The dark, unfathomable water of the inlet was a veil of mourning lace. In tune with my rebellious heart, the wind sang a wild hymn to death.

With anguish, I watched the horizon. There, like a liquefied tomb, the sea hid something I had heard about in the village.



A curse.

I put Viktor's picture back in its box, ignoring his wiry figure. I was only sixteen, yet I was determined to uncover the terrible secret that clouded my family's serene legacy.

#

Magdalene Bay were around me. Perhaps my pale face had resembled Viktor's since childhood. My face was already marked by the same physical features: I had a flat forehead and slightly hollowed eyes under swollen, heavy eyelids. Not to mention the straight, square jaw flowing into an excessively thin mouth.

Our house was built in the background. Outcast from the rest of the village, it kept us in suffocating isolation. The only person I bonded with was an old retired naval officer. He was an early retiree from military life and was always on his fishing boat with a bottle of wine. His manners were not as rough as those of the typical sea wolves, but he showed an almost ridiculous courtesy.

In the village, he was sarcastically called "The Gentleman."

He didn't care, though, and talked to me as if we had landed on that

shore from another time. I went to talk to him the day I found Viktor's picture.

"See," he told me, sipping his wine straight from the bottle. We sat on the floor of his hull, the rough wood scratching my legs.

"Your uncle Viktor..." The boat had been pulled ashore and, honestly, I couldn't remember ever seeing it go out to sea. I had watched from the window as the Gentleman scraped its hull and restored its luster with coats of bright green paint. His evening's work, however, had not yet tested the boat's endurance. Its nets were an inert tangle, while the Gentleman showed no sign of venturing into the Straits of Bonifacio.

"My great-uncle," I corrected him.

"Yeah, your great-uncle. Well, he's right."

"What do you mean?"

"This sea you see around here," he said, spreading his arms wide to encompass the bay, "is not like any other sea. It smells like death down here. Can't you smell it?" He sniffed the air, as if he didn't want to hold the stench of Magdalene Bay in his lungs. I couldn't blame him for paying attention.

"It's like the smell of rotting flesh,

isn't it? Oh, yeah, you're just a boy. You can't know the smell of death yet. But it is an inkling that hovers around here. Here's to you and your family."

He put a hooked nail in the skin of my hand.

"War is an ugly business. My father died there under the bombs. Here in Magdalene Bay it was like lightning that burns you instantly." He paused, interrupted by an abnormal growl from the waves. The undertow attacked the boat with a deafening rustle that spread into the evening's silence.

"You see, even the sea remembers. But you need to know."

#

Soon after the Armistice in 1943, many of the men and boys of Magdalene Bay continued their service in the Navy. Dozens of young men, clothed in vanished ideals, stood huddled in filthy bunks aboard the ship. One on top of the other, they listened to the roar of German planes swooping over them like vultures searching for fetid annihilation. The battleship Admiral carried many of them.

Planes. A dozen bombers swooped

down on them. In Magdalene Bay, mothers and wives prayed. The bay's waters roared, the wind howled, and the sirens wailed. The Admiral's alarm announced that the ship was only a few paces from shore. It was offshore, but not too far for those left behind to hear the whistle of falling bombs.

"Save them! Save them!" the women cried, unaware that they had awakened the beast of evil.

The bombs destroyed the admiral's defenses.

Dead and floating in the water, they lay on top of one another. No one saved them. In that hellish chaos, as the defeated ship sank, someone else was laughing in the sky.

From above, in the cabin of his plane, Viktor Kreutzer smugly watched the delirium he and his comrades had brought upon themselves with a mocking grin. Viktor Kreutzer flew over the blood he had helped shed.

The unheeded pleas were followed by a fierce curse.

Those who led their kin to their demise would spend their lives waiting for revenge. In the midst of these explosions, before a sunset of fire and flame, the women made a pact with a sea demon. His name was



written in books that only a fool would leaf through, yet he was invoked in the ballads and tales of the old settlers. Black shoes and ornate uniforms would be polished amid the sunken wreckage of the flagship. A new army would rise from the depths of Magdalene Bay to claim her blood.

Black shoes and ornate uniforms were polished in the sunken rubble of the Flagship. A new army would rise from the depths of Magdalene Bay to claim her blood.

#

"Viktor is still alive," I replied incredulously at the end of the story. The Gentleman shook his head.

"A curse never loses its power, boy. It comes unexpectedly, just when you think you are safe. More importantly, it affects anyone with even a tiny drop of that cursed blood in their veins."

"How will that happen? How will they come back for Viktor?" I asked him, with a sense of anguish. Although I shrugged my shoulders at those strange fantasies, I wanted to understand. But knowledge is a step that can destroy the strongest minds.

How did the Gentleman know

details that I did not know myself? I told myself that the rumors in the village were enough for him.

"Oh, I don't know. But I think we're going to find out."

#

Four thumps woke me. In the windless night, the stagnant waters of the bay echoed the hellish sound of a march. The awakening had taken its toll. The monsters that had lived in the ship's rotten recesses, among the seaweed-covered pillows and sheets, were ready for the slaughter. But even though I could hear that announcement of death in my ears, I was still not convinced that I was awake. Perhaps it was a suggestion that had penetrated my sleep. My senses were alert, confirming that I was awake and aware of the sounds. No one in the house seemed disturbed by the murderous concert.

I scrambled out of bed and stuffed a diving suit into my backpack. I had always gotten away with diving. In Magdalene Bay, anyone could steer a motorboat or operate a rudder. I had to make sure that it was just a brutal nightmare. I slipped out of the sleepy house like a shadow in the night.

The boat lay motionless and deserted on the shore. The Gentleman lived far away, just beyond the cliff where the provincial road emerged from Magdalene Bay. Moonlight created milky ghosts on the water's surface. The wind was in my favor. I leaped into the hull, slipped into my suit, and was ready to sail out to sea.

#

I found myself circling the ship's torn keel, overcome by horror at the sight. A group of creatures wearing immaculate uniforms gathered around the cross. They were not men. They were not soldiers. They were unlike anything I had ever seen in books. Their skulls were exposed and naked, withered by the fury of the water. Their long arms were stiff and straight as rifles and culminated in hands that had adapted to a marine eternity. They had powerful fins with hooked claws. These were what I saw instead of fingers. Their legs were tangled in muddy seaweed, and their faces were disfigured by a repulsive pattern of purple scales and scars.

I thought I could even hear them growling fiercely in anticipation of the

coming battle. Who was that grave for? Was it empty, or was my end near? Was it for me, or for Uncle Viktor?

The menacing creatures advanced inexorably, shaking the burial mound's sand with each step. Then, at the head of the procession, I saw a man—or rather, a demon—whom I knew very well:

The Gentleman.

Proud, he now resembled his sinister followers. He looked me straight in the eye. Revenge had come. He was its cruel advocate. Before him, the outline of the cross faded into a blinding brightness. The ship's turrets began to tilt. Some creatures had cut the steel cables of the structures on the bridge deck, turning them into rodeo-like lassos.

Much to my astonishment and horror, they began digging into the seabed. Their fins were not clumsy tools, but effective instruments of defilement. The Gentleman, who had not even looked at me, laughed excitedly. He nodded with each thud.

"Dig quickly! No time to lose!"

His tenacity in rallying them convinced me that he had once been a crewman himself.

On the day Viktor and his comrades



fired the torpedoes, the Gentleman must have been with the Italian force. Embodied in the form of an officer, he hid his identity to inspire his fellow soldiers as an executioner. The sound of his voice came muffled to me by the incessant rush of water, which held me in its whirlpool.

An opalescent light enveloped the scene, and I felt the dense pressure of the water pressing down on every inch of my skin. My head seemed to explode, and I could not endure this nefarious spectacle any longer. I closed my eyes and stopped fighting the current.

Escape was a dream I had to give up. The curse was about to be fulfilled.

#

"The fever is gone. You'll be better," my mother said softly.

Fever? It was all a blur. I was called stupid for wanting to relieve the boredom of an autumn afternoon by swimming.

"The water is cold," she continued. "You're being your usual stubborn and reckless self..." Shaking her head in gentle reproach, she recommended that I rest.

Was this the truth? Or were they trying to protect me once again? As

soon as they left me alone, I decided to get up. I walked down the corridor, doubting myself. I stopped at the threshold of Viktor's room.

The bed was empty.

My first reaction was to look out the window. I examined the darkness from there. An ice moon illuminated the spot where the Gentleman had left his boat. Except for a few ripples, the sand showed no signs of life. He had also vanished into thin air.

#

We searched everywhere for Viktor. Though aware of his past, the people of Magdalene Bay helped us sound the seabed near the shore and beat the reef. They were convinced he had fallen from the cliff during a nighttime walk to relieve his insomnia. I now understood that Viktor had always foreseen his end. His library had been a means of investigating what haunted him. But the solution to avoid ill fortune had not come.

At the funeral, the family reserved only an empty coffin to greet him. No one cried. Even if we had somehow recovered the body, there would have been no mercy for the man.

As the men from the cemetery threw earth from Magdalene Bay over the coffin, I thought I heard a different kind of thud in the neighborhood.

It was the mournful pacing of the curse. I knew where Viktor was. He was down there, buried in the abyss. In the inevitable conflict between the executioners, he had been condemned to eternal tortures of some kind.

There was only one question left for me: Had I really been spared? Would the curse still lurk in my flesh and blood? Would I become a monster as well?

As I left the cemetery, I covered my ears with my hands.



THE FIRING SQUAD

MICHAEL FOWLER



Michael Fowler writes humor and horror in Ohio. He has no links.

During the revolution in my country the Assembly seized power. I awoke one morning to find I had received a six-week assignment on the Citizens' Firing Squad in my liberated town. I lived only half a mile from the execution site, and my newspaper office in the town's center was also close by. On the day I started, I walked to my assignment within a battle-scarred military compound. I was to participate in the town's first execution.

I arrived at daybreak, as we on the firing squad were to perform our duty then. My usual route took me along the railway line, busy even at that early hour. Much of the town's provisions arrived by train, both before and during the revolution, and I was to find that sometimes prisoners to be executed arrived in a secure railway car. I never understood why our town received these betrayers. Why were other towns and cities not demonstrating their revolutionary zeal by executing their own traitors, rather than exporting them to us? The Assembly was too distant to consult about this.

That morning I was one of six riflemen who gathered to execute a food hoarder. The prisoner had had

no trial that I knew of. This was a summary judgement handed down, I understood, by the Assembly. I worked as a columnist for the local newspaper in my civilian life, and had written to expose the injustice of the old regime. That might have been the reason I was picked for the squad. Like me, the other five executioners were civilians, and we all bowed to the Assembly's idea of punishment. We used old, rusty reservist rifles. I had never shot a gun before, and by their confusion, it appeared several others on the squad were equally innocent of firearms.

Sergeant Tabor, a revolutionary military guard in a splendid if unorthodox uniform, perhaps hand-sewn, gave us little training. He handed us our antique rifles, showed us how to load them, and then pointed his finger in the direction of the condemned man. This unfortunate stood some twenty feet away, blindfolded with his back to the wall of a ravaged building, awaiting his fate.

When Tabor called out Ready, Aim, Fire, I knew what I had to do. I pulled the trigger on cue, aiming to miss. Mine would be the only one of the six shots to go wide, I imagined.



But later that day I heard that a second shot had missed the hoarder. Aha: did another on the squad share my reverence for life? My belief in the accused's right to a trial of some kind? Though I knew several of my fellow executioners slightly—we all hailed from the town, I supposed—I couldn't guess who it might be. But I knew now that Tabor's guards were examining the bodies and counting the entry wounds. A valuable lesson.

The eyes of Tabor and several other guards scanned our squad intensely at the second execution the day after. Six shots were fired, and the landlord fell dead. The guards soon satisfied themselves that only five bullets had found the mark—my shot had missed, of course, and would continue to miss. Once the body was hauled away, a little round man and I received orders to remain by the wall. I didn't know what gave me away, but for some reason, perhaps his slight squint, the little round man must have appeared as defective a marksman to Tabor and the guards as I did. The man and I said nothing to each other. I knew him to be a teacher of art at a children's school, but as I was unmarried and had no children, and

had never seen him at the paper, I'd never before had any dealings with him. We looked at each other with suspicion.

We two endured a lecture, almost an interrogation. Prompted by Tabor, the round man admitted that he probably had missed, having never shot a rifle before and feeling nervous. I stated that I thought I had hit the guilty man squarely in the heart, lying through my teeth. We two suspects had to perform target practice, firing two rounds each at an old metal bucket that sat by the bloodstained wall. The round man's first shot missed, but he hit the bucket with his second. I hit it both times, making it jump. A revolutionary officer in a much different uniform from Tabor's strolled past when I made the bucket fly and commented, "Well done." Tabor announced that the round man and I would remain on the squad but there would be no more misses or excuses. If my marksmanship improved under Tabor's tutelage, to me it only meant I could come close without hitting anyone.

I retained my resolve on our third execution and again pointed my

weapon awry. Only five bullets penetrated the money seller, a bank employee with whom I had had several transactions regarding my small savings account. What would Tabor do? The bullets were all of the same manufacture and our old-style rifles were identical—no others were at hand. Even if he dug out all the slugs from the banker and examined them, he couldn't have determined which rifle had not delivered. Yet he suspected that I, rather than the little round man, was the problem, and warned me that from that moment on he would observe me the way a hawk does a pigeon. He might have given me a pistol, I supposed, with a different caliber of bullet in it, but anyone could miss with a pistol.

Good as his word, Tabor stood directly behind me as he called off Ready, Aim, Fire for the squad's fourth execution. Though I believed he trusted the round man more than me, he made the little fellow stand beside me so that he could keep both of us in view. But I didn't care what conclusion Tabor arrived at, and aimed high and wide of the money seller. A puff of pulverized concrete appeared above the left shoulder of the condemned man as I struck the

wall. Clearly, I had defied Tabor and the Assembly, both. I had no doubt about the path of the round man's bullet: naturally he hit home as he had the three previous times. I didn't blame him or any of the other squad members. As much as mine, his life was on the line. Any of us could be judged a traitor.

"I believe you missed," Tabor informed me on the spot.

"I don't think so, Sergeant Tabor," I replied. "Count the wounds."

"Your heart is not in the revolution," Tabor accused me.

"It is," I replied, growing bold. "Or you may report me to the Assembly."

In fact, I was coming to doubt and distrust the Assembly and the revolution, which seemed to have substituted one set of murderous governors for another. Above all, I valued human life, which I believed no man should owe to another.

"It may come to that," said Tabor. He straightened his back.

My squabbles with Tabor alarmed some of the others on the squad, who naturally wished to please the sergeant. They glared at me as if I were betraying them and might land them in trouble. They didn't understand that Tabor was forcing



them to commit murder. As they dispersed, their job done for the day, they glanced at me, their faces showing disapproval. The little round man departed with them, also with a disapproving countenance. Go back to your jobs and families, I scolded them in silence, and tell everyone how you are denying the sanctity of life. But still they were my brothers in revolution, and I respected them. In the same way, I continued to believe in the rightness and spirit of the revolution itself, despite what I saw as a too-easy reliance on the death sentence. This was the one thing in our new world that clutched at my entrails, and I hoped that the Assembly would soon alter its terrible stance.

There followed a pause in the executions as the squad members, myself included, were summoned to quell a counter-revolutionary uprising in a nearby city. At the last minute Tabor excused me from action and allowed me to go home to promote the revolution in our local paper, where I served as both head writer and manager. The new governor of our province was anxious to read of our success here, and was perusing all the small-town

presses for uplifting articles. With shame and fear I praised the firing squad under my byline, but I also worked on a pamphlet, that I thought to publish anonymously later on, about the ongoing need for a justice system that did not dispense with trials. In it I claimed that the executions occurring during the revolution were hardly an improvement on the harshness dealt out under the previous greedy and unjust regime. After three weeks of such peaceful work, I hoped privately that the uprising, having already lasted that long, would go on for at least another three weeks. That would extend to six weeks my time on the squad, and in theory mark the end of my six-week term of duty. I hoped then to be freed from this burdensome task.

But Sergeant Tabor returned unexpectedly from quashing the uprising with a condemned prisoner in tow, as I learned when his underling, a private, arrived at my newspaper office. I was to resume my firing squad duty the next morning at sunrise, the man told me. I was downcast. On my arrival at the usual place, Tabor told me that since the rest of the squad was still



engaged in putting down the rebellion, I alone would execute the prisoner. Tabor gave me five minutes to collect my rifle, as the sun was already rising.

Outraged, I objected strenuously to this, arguing that a man sentenced to die must die by the hands of more than one, for it to be a true citizen's execution and not a personal matter. This was the reason for a squad in the first place, as Tabor was bound to admit. He and I had both agreed to it, if only tacitly, when he called up a six-man squad.

Tabor grumbled, saying he would consult his commander, but left me alone. I went back to my newspaper office and the prisoner returned to his cell. Tabor likely had no idea where his commander was that morning, or what that person thought. I myself had no idea who his commander might be. I had encountered no one in the compound who merited that title. Still three weeks to go in my duty.

A day later the squad returned from the not-too-distant city, the uprising suppressed, with two prisoners roped together at their wrists. Counting the man I had refused to execute single-handedly,

still in our jail, there were now three men to be shot dead. I was back on the job the next morning, and Tabor had a warning for me.

"I have a special cartridge for your rifle," he said, inserting a round into the chamber of my old gun. "It bears peculiar markings that I filed into it myself. I had better find it in the first man's body."

"You will, Sergeant," I said with a show of confidence. I wasn't about to fall for this trick. There was no such thing as a special shell, even a columnist and pamphleteer knew that, and I realized that the sly Tabor had done no filing. As he called Ready, Aim, Fire, I quickly thought up a ruse of my own. To get back at Tabor, I would fire a split second later than the others, not noticeably later, but last, so that I would hit a man already dead. But then, I considered, what if he wasn't dead? With that thought I pulled my trigger with the others and aimed to miss as usual. Tabor gave me a harsh look as the man fell. Minutes later the second and then the third man fell, my shots going wide as intended. Tabor didn't so much as glance at me. Three dead bodies lay before us at the foot of the wall. Tabor called forth the burial

team.

I was prepared for Tabor to summon me later in the day and claim that only five entry wounds were found in the first man's body and my special slug was not found, to see if at last I would crack under his questioning. I even loitered around the compound, I was so sure he would try this. Just when I prepared to leave, he finally ushered me into the privacy of his shabby office.

"Why are you still hanging around?" he demanded. "Do you want something?"

"I expect you to show me the special bullet I fired, so that I am vindicated," I replied.

He expelled a dismissive breath of air. "When you miss your target," he said then, "you force the others to do your revolutionary work for you. You should be ashamed."

"I support the revolution," I claimed. "Read my columns." That might have been careless of me, but I assumed he had already read them and found much to despise in them. Probably he planned to turn my writing against me, easy enough to do. Despite my genuine support for the revolution, my columns had grown critical of late. With little

effort he might have twisted my latest and most outspoken piece, entitled "Are Executions Necessary?", into my own death sentence.

"Listen," said Tabor, trying a different tack. "I don't blame you, a civilian, for not relishing this work. I sympathize with you, as does our commander. If such extreme measures were not absolutely necessary to ensure liberty and freedom, I would leave it to the professional soldiers such as myself." Here he paused dramatically.

"Understand me, some of us professionals too are organizing to protest the use of firing squads. Your own writings are an inspiration to us. We think that reeducation and reevaluation would do much to convince the death cultists, as you call them, to change their ways. What do you say? Will you join us?"

"Join you?" I replied, smelling a rat. "An unauthorized group that meets to discuss counter-revolutionary measures sounds mutinous, Sergeant. What I seek for the citizenry is the right to a trial, only that, and I prefer to stand on my own." I turned and walked out. He didn't call me back.



Before I left the compound for home, I came across the little round man. The last day of our six-week assignment on the firing squad was fast approaching, and I thought he might congratulate me. I was prepared to do the same for him. It all depended on whether he agreed with Tabor that I was shirking our duty, or if like me he performed it reluctantly and wished it to end. Though none had threatened me, some of the others on the squad had stopped speaking to me, certain of my bad faith. True, the little man had looked at me askance once or twice, but he had remained cordial and sometimes spoke a few uncritical words to me. How would he address me now?

"An execution is scheduled for Saturday, our final day of duty on the squad," he told me. "Our new governor is coming from the Assembly to witness it. Beware, my friend, of a trap. Tabor will identify you as a traitor who shirks his duties, and the governor is on his side."

"What do you recommend, friend?" I asked.

"Escape. Go north of here. Things are different there, I hear. If I had the courage, I'd go myself."

"But I believe in the revolution," I said. "Most of its principles, anyway. And I know no one in the north."

"Then I wish you the best. I spoke not a word to you."

Saturday morning, the execution was delayed an hour in hot sunlight to await the governor, who arrived late by train from the west. He was a dignified man in a top hat who stood in place near the firing wall without fanfare. I had not seen him before. I recognized the condemned man, though: a cruel killer of men, women and children in our area and one who doubtless deserved to die, but would do so without trial or a chance to defend himself. His name was Barker, and the revolution had made him go mad with depravity. I saw no other explanation for his brutal and scandalous behavior.

While Barker had his hat removed and his blindfold put on, and his back forced against the killing wall, Sergeant Tabor approached me as I took my place and loaded my rifle.

"This is your final execution," he reminded me, grinning. "Would you like to extend your duty to another six weeks? I can arrange it."

"No," I replied. "That would amount to becoming a professional

executioner, and I believe that occupation shouldn't exist. I think instead that each adult citizen should perform one execution, and then give way to the next citizen. Six weeks is too long and too many dead."

Tabor gave me a wink, as much as to say that he was on to me and knew me for a treacherous weasel. A wink! What an impostor he was to disguise his disdain for me, first with a grin, and now with a wink. I sensed that, as the round man had forewarned me, I was in serious trouble. But when the scene was set and Tabor called out the execution, I aimed to miss as usual. What else could I do? I held firm.

The cruel man fell, riddled by shots other than mine, and Tabor at once seized his chance.

"Governor, sir, did you notice?" he called out to the Assemblyman, pointing to me. "This man shot wide of the condemned man deliberately and failed to do his duty. He has done this repeatedly on the execution squad. It is my obligation to report him."

"Is this true, soldier?" the governor said as he stared at me. I had noticed he called everyone

"soldier."

"Sir," I said, "I perform my duty to the Assembly faithfully, in commitment to the revolution, and yet the sergeant accuses me of dereliction of duty, perhaps treason. Is the next step that I should be shot on his command? Like the man just executed, I have had no trial and no chance to defend himself. Can this be right? Is this what Freedom and Justice demand? The Assembly, to which you yourself belong, must decide. I, a journalist, have written publicly in our newspaper urging the Assembly to end the barbaric practice of summary execution, the sooner the better. I seek your counsel."

"So, so," said the governor, clearly impatient to depart. Word had it that he was visiting many towns in the province, and probably he would witness a lot of executions. No doubt he wished to see them done quickly and without incident. I was spared any further persecution by him or by Tabor. The sergeant could only look at me, disgusted. Until the time I retired from the firing squad, a few days later, I never again picked up a rifle.

In the weeks following my

retirement, I busied myself in my office on the newspaper and on my still unfinished pamphlet. One afternoon word came to me that Tabor had been arrested and sentenced to die. Our town's new firing squad would carry out the execution. Tabor had been accepting bribes from others to escape that fate, and had been doing so since the early days of the revolution. Clearly the true meaning of liberty and justice had not yet dawned on men such as Tabor.

I didn't attend Tabor's execution by the firing squad that I was no longer a member of. It would have given me no satisfaction. I had sworn to myself that never again would I watch a man die, and I had no desire to see Tabor suffer from what I knew to be an evil. Of course, a few citizens were rounded up and forced to witness it, so as to mark it as a communal event. This had happened when I was on the squad, too. Had I been one of those spectators, I would have looked away as Tabor fell, my gaze going wide as my bullets had done previously.

I went on writing for the town's paper and finally published my pamphlet, giving it the title "A Call for

Rights." I used the paper's own printing press, named myself as author, and sent a copy to the Assembly. The contents were much the same as in my newspaper columns, which the Assembly assuredly read or had explained to them, only made more urgent: I demanded all the revolutionary rights, such as life, liberty, and equality, adding to them a free press, vital to one in my position. I also insisted on trials for accused criminals and an end to the summary death sentence. For violating these rights I proposed severe penalties. If the abuses were particularly flagrant, I wrote, the firing squad, though dreadful, was justified, and every adult citizen should play his part in this deterrence at least once.

#

Not long afterward I met my no doubt inevitable fate. I had waited a long time in fear. A soldier came to my newspaper office and told me to follow him. All my pleas were ignored, all my arguments refuted: the Assembly had so ruled. No one, least of all me, would have a trial.

I asked to dispense with the



blindfold, as my eyes were opened for good. In honor to my prior service, I got my wish. The new squad, with its new leader, took up the usual formation. They showed a certain deference to me, I thought. I looked at them. I had seen one or two in town, perhaps, but the fill-in for Sergeant Tabor was a stranger to me. He was a uniformed military man, the riflemen were all civilians.

I looked at them for only a moment. Would any of them aim to miss, as I had? It would require six such to spare me, and six more when the squad leader replaced them, and so on. I almost smiled. I gazed up at the sunrise. Was the Assembly present in that stirring light? In the far distance, but observant, I believed. I heard the countdown, and then the shots. I felt, rather than saw, streams of hot red pour through my gaping shirtfront.





THE WOLF, THE BAT AND THE MOANING MIST

PAMELA TORRES



"Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact."

- George Eliot

<https://www.teepublic.com/user/madam-melva>



FERTILIZER

COLLETTE NIGHT



Collette Night is an Australian writer who crafts lyrical fiction with bite.

Her recent work has been featured in Starry Eyed Press, The Riot Collective and Black Hare Press. When not writing, she can be found dreaming up monsters and mysteries while drinking obscene amounts of caffeine.

<https://www.chillsubs.com/profile/collettenight>



It's the kind of heat that smothers your pores. Humidity clings to your lungs, every breath heavy, dizzying. Sweat slicks your skin, oily and bitter when it slips into your mouth.

Glass bottles litter the ground, catching the sun. One angle too sharp and the dry eucalyptus leaves will ignite. On a day like this, in a place this brown, with unlimited tinder—the fire would be fierce. Raging. Like the infection within your body.

You wouldn't mind, though. You're already burning up, inside and out. Your hands tremble, though you can't tell if it's from fever or thirst.

Water. That would be nice. Your mouth would salivate if you had any moisture left. But you're dry—dry as a bone bleached under desert sun. As dry as the empty water tank you're too weak to fill.

The bite mark throbs. It burned, then sizzled—each day worse than the last. Now it simply throbs. A pain deep and separate, as though your soul is peeling away from flesh. While your body writhes and your wound oozes, your soul waits. Any

day now.

Sometimes anger stirs late at night as you whisper into the stale sheet, *should've let it die.* The cat. The feral one caught in the trap. You saved it because *she* loved cats. She would've given her own arm before hurting one. You saved it in her memory. But you're slower these days, and cats are bloody fast. And sharp. This one frothed at the mouth. An unnatural glint in its eyes.

Sometimes you laugh at the irony. That it'll be a cat that kills you. Not the three bullets lodged inside. Or the triple heart bypass surgery. Nor the smokes you drag like water on a....

*Water...*you lick your salty lips, then shake away the thought.

Water won't save you now. Nothing will. Too far gone. And if help did come, it'd only be to cage you. You're no Ned Kelly. No one will remember your name. Better to go here.

She's here, beneath the dirt. You should dig. By the time the hole's ready, you could rest in the cool

earth beside her, curl up like fertilizer,
the way you put down that sick cow
last week.

Everything out here is sick. Dying.
Withered.

They say a cool change is coming.
You won't feel it. Your days of
standing in summer showers are
over.

Rain. That reminds you of water.

But no—your thirst doesn't
matter anymore. Your swollen hand
is now your swollen arm. Not much
longer.

You hobble over to the rusted
shovel leaning against the apple
tree—and you dig.

The hard ground fights back. Your
last will is stronger. By sweat and
blood you claw your way into soft soil
that buries beneath your nails. You
lie down on the cool earth, beside
her.

Now you are both fertilizer.





ESPERANZA

ABIGAIL MONARREZ



These five masks were created for a play called Esperanza, which is a part of Calgary's annual Festival of Animated Objects. The show was selected by the festival to be one of their two year incubator projects with our first performance in March 2025 and another coming up in March 2026. Esperanza is a mask and shadow puppetry show about grief and a life cut short.

@esperanza.fao

Photo Credits: Heena Uppal (@kokaheena) & Vikram Johal (@viq.design)

Cover Feature

I chose Abigail's work for the cover of volume 4 because it showcases a form of art new to Dug Up's pages. Her masks are also incredibly well crafted and their connection to a local story resonated with me.

The show features a young girl named Esperanza who must come to terms with her early passing. To help her on her journey she meets four skeleton characters, each representing a different stage of grief, who have all passed away themselves. It is a whole new story inspired by Mexican culture and especially Dia de los Muertos. I was tasked to design and make the masks by the show's creator Ivan Guevara Garcia as we had created another masked show in the past. I did multiple rounds of sketches before I finally landed on their final forms.



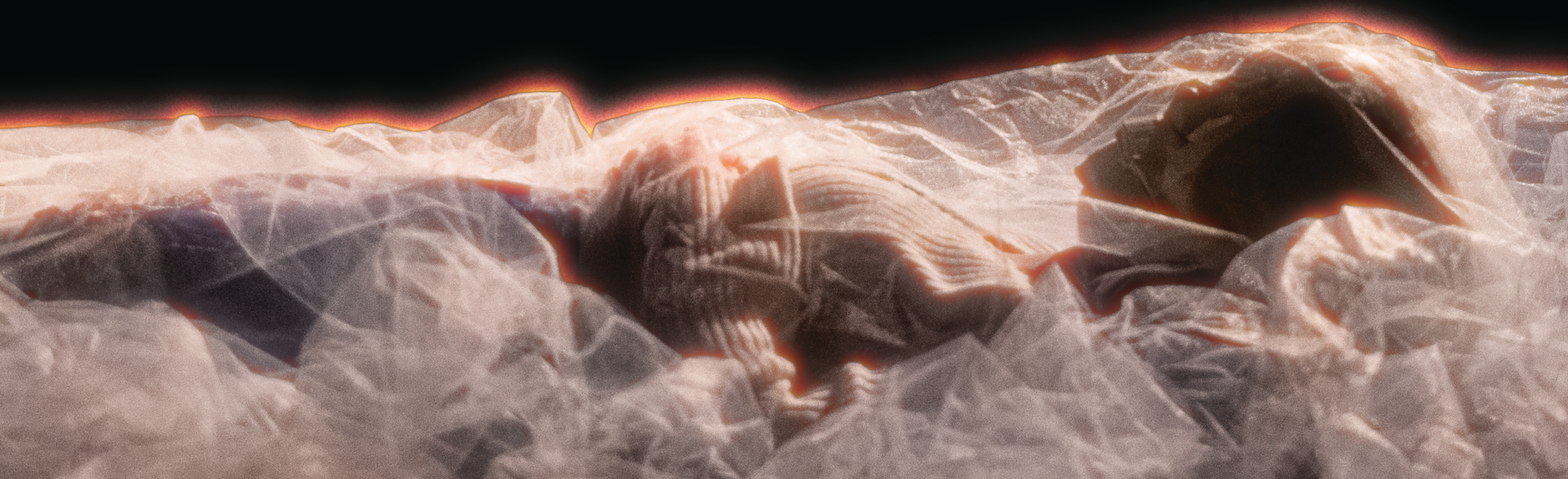






Denial was placed in a burlap bag since we wanted to play with the idea that he was hiding the fact that he was dead from others and himself. Anger was designed to look like scarred wood around large wounds like a longheld grudge that has festered. Bargaining has their hands stuck in their eyes and mouth as they have been letting their "begging hands" overtake their perception and words. Depression is missing their bottom jaw and is now covered in moss from years laying on the ground unmoving and unspeaking. We designed a mask for Acceptance but later scrapped that segment. Lastly I designed a mask for Esperanza who symbolized Hope. Her skull was smaller and modelled after the skull of a child rather than an adult. They are clean except for the mark of a butterfly which is symbolic for rebirth in Mexican culture.

If you would like to see the show then you are in luck as we will be performing again this year at the Festival of Animated Objects in March 2026. Follow the show's instagram [@esperanza.fao](https://www.instagram.com/esperanza.fao) to get updates on purchasing tickets and behind the scenes clips.



DEPTH CRUSHER

TONY DEL DEGAN



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@tonydeldegan

Wait a minute...

Isn't this the guy who makes this magazine?

Yes, intrepid reader, that's correct. It's the holiday season, which means submission volumes are a little low. People are focused on giving thanks, hallowing-weens, and massing-Christ, so I'm in a bit of a dry spell as editor.

*In lieu of a 13th writer, I'll throw in one of my own short stories to get near enough to that goal. This one is called *Depthcrusher*, and tells of a rather dysfunctional crew of three researchers aboard a deep sea base. The Java Trench in the Indian Ocean has miraculously increased in depth, and they need to discover the reason as to why.*



There are no deeper realms in the vast ocean past what is called the "Hadal Zone." The trenches: Mariana, Philippine, Tonga; a few penetrate around thirty-six thousand feet—past it, even—into the primordial crust of the Earth.

All of that was true until August fifth, nineteen ninety-nine.

The wider public was not informed about the operations taking place in the Indian Ocean, and they likely never would be. Bureaucracy's thick walls are impenetrable, and the team assigned to the Palaemon research station each signed contracts in blood. Consequences were seeded, families threatened, and cooperation ensured. The station was leakproof, in all senses of the word. There were, after all, multiple world governments with a horse in the race, and taxpayer dollars on the table. Many, *many* world governments.

Kurt Li finished pissing in his government-funded toilet and zipped up. A flush, and the contents were evacuated violently into the station's network of septic arteries. He washed his hands in the stainless steel basin under an ejaculation of tepid water, then dried off with a well-used towel. Out in the hall, he

found his two colleagues at work, entranced by their microscopes and camera monitors. He went over, head slightly ducked for clearance beneath the low, rounded ceiling, to where Lyra Waller was scratching ink onto a notepad. Eyes on the monitor—bubble glass over a fuzzy rendering of the crushing infinitude surrounding them. He planted himself on a ripped-up faux-leather stool cushion and waited for her to acknowledge him. Then: "Ogopogo?"

"No," she smiled. "Not yet."

She was from British Columbia. He was from Minnesota. During a game of Blackjack, she'd told him about Canada's Loch Ness Monster, and that had gotten a chuckle. He brought it up now and again, whenever he caught her at the cams. She smiled every time, but he wondered if that was just courtesy now. Professional courtesy.

What *was* on the cams was an unyielding darkness past the reach of the station's searchlights. The only way he could tell the cam wasn't turned off was the visual of a constant film of particles adrift past the lens, and the rim of the trench.

Trench.

The Java Trench, just below Indonesia—just above Australia.

Last year, it had measured a bit above twenty-three thousand feet deep. But now... Now Kurt Li was aboard the Palaemon with two other people and millions of dollars and his reputation on his shoulders. Now Lyra Waller was taking notes of movement coming from beyond that sandy ridge. *If you see something, take a note of what time and what you think it is.* That way, the bureaucrats wouldn't have to sift through hundreds of hours of footage from the Pit.

"See anything today?"

She put the pen down and scratched the bridge of her nose. "Vampire squid... viper fish... another viper fish... *another* viper fish. And lots of floating crap. Sand, sand, sand... and some more sand."

Then she sat back in her chair and looked at him. A slow blink. When they'd all come down here the first time, she'd had a pretty tan, but the darkness had wiped it away. But that didn't stop him from staring at her while she worked, or dreaming about her while he slept on his stiff cot. When he noticed she wasn't wearing a bra, he caught himself before

looking down. So obvious, she'd notice.

He sniffled—rubbed his head. "Yeah. Uh... As per usual."

Was that flushing in her cheeks?

A shift in his chair, as his body betrayed him. Shifting his legs. "What's that?"

She turned to follow his pointer—to the screen. He took the chance to look down while she was distracted. More shifting. On the screen, the void slumbered unchanged. Particulate sandstorm. The dandruff of the chasm.

"A shrimp, maybe?"

He frowned. "No, a lobster at least."

That made her giggle. "I haven't seen a lobster down here."

"Well, there's a first time for everything."

Thunk on the walls, from outside. Pressure shifting. He'd learned to tune out most of the noises made by his metal sarcophagus, but the bigger ones never failed to grab his attention—make his ears prick up and his hair stand on end like a startled cat. Everyone in the industry had heard about the incident with the Byford Dolphin sixteen years prior. It was a saturation diver's nightmare



come true. Instant crush. Dead before you could blink. Back at his college in Minnesota, one of Kurt's colleagues had shown him the images taken at the scene. *Invaginated penis... Face degloved... They removed his body in a bunch of plastic bags...* Another thunk, and metal groaning. The ocean never let him forget its presence.

"Kurt, look at this."

He spun the stool around. Jake Bass sat a few feet away in the cubby in which his sonar desk was stuffed. Long, blonde hair hung greasy over his face; he pushed it up behind his ear compulsively. Kurt got up, walked over. "Yeah?"

"Look at this," the Australian repeated. He was pointing at his little glass screen. An arc of static and scratches in all blue hues blinked in a constantly changing rhythm. Vague shapes, some dark, some super exposed.

It always reminded Kurt of an ultrasound monitor. They were peering into a great womb and trying to find the baby. "What is it?"

"The trench is getting..." Clicking switches. Pushing hair behind his ear. "Or it's gotten... uh, deeper. The bottom is out of the sonar's range

now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I wrote down the depth yesterday night, right? Look. I wrote it." Finger tapping paper.

"Yeah. Yeah, I see."

"Fuck me dead, Kurt. I don't..." His hands came up in disbelief. "How is stone... right? How is stone and earth and sand sinking so quick? It's impossible."

Impossible, and yet that was the whole reason they were here. The impossible had happened—it happened on August fifth, and it was happening again now. Kurt had the radio in his hand now; he squeezed the button that connected the Palaemon to the surface. "Palaemon Research Station to surface, Kurt here."

Static. Then "Hello, Kurt. How are things going down there?"

He gathered his thoughts. "Uh, I don't know—we're getting some anomalous readings on our sonar. The uh... the scan can't seem to locate the bottom of the trench. Jake suspects the trench has gotten deeper."

Silence.

"Um... We've double checked everything—right?"

From Jake: "Yeah. Yes I have."
 "-Yeah, we've double checked. We're not seeing the bottom anymore."

After a period of waiting in silence, the static returned. "*Your sonar is rated for over a hundred kilometers.*"

A cough. "That's why we're calling in."

"So it's broken?"

"No. No, it works perfectly fine. The walls of the trench are showing up—all the fish and shit floating around... Just no floor."

There was another long period of silence. Kurt took the opportunity to watch Lyra over his shoulder. Dark brunette roots grew from out of her scalp—chasing her dyed blonde locks down her back. Each day, they seemed to make a little more headway. He'd been paying attention. Staring... staring... *too long*. She turned in her chair—met his gaze. A smile. The same from before: that courtesy smile. Except this time, her eyes weren't included in the expression; they betrayed a separate emotion. Before he could decipher it, she turned back around to face her monitor.

Static. "*Continue observation, especially on cams. If you see any*

changes, report them immediately."

"Alright, we will." He clipped the hand microphone into its seat.

Jake had been fiddling with a pen. He tossed it onto his desk. "Big bloody help they are."

Kurt cleared his throat. "Yeah, well... I'm going to bed." And he left the two to finish up their tasks—walked the short distance to the bunk capsule. After he'd brushed his teeth and washed his stubbly face, he tucked himself into bed beneath the picture he'd taped to the wall: his wife and daughter sitting in a sunny field, smiling up into the camera.

#

Metal clanks, and a thumping pop. The airlock door slowly lifted outward, letting light out into the black. Bubbles whipped and skittered across the metal, rising in a torrent up and up into a null sky. Rising for hours, perhaps, towards the surface.

Kurt could illuminate his path by hauling his yellow steel body around—use the lamps to show him what was floor and what was yawning death. An atmospheric diving suit—entirely sealed, keeping him safe from the crush. Even still, he



struggled to push his limbs into movement; it felt like walking through half-dried concrete. These suits were prototypes out of Germany, rated for an excess of thirty thousand feet below the surface. Millions of dollars went into their development, and the Palaemon was their inaugural assignment. *Depthcrushers*. The name was printed on the bulbous yellow chest. Kurt maneuvered his million-dollar carapace off the short step between airlock and sea floor, then went about searching. Floodlights on the station brightened most of the surroundings to near daylight, but there were dark patches they couldn't reach. There was no ambient light, no reflection. What wasn't directly blasted was swallowed by the dark. He felt as if their intrusion on this alien province was only just sustained. An ant huddled beneath a boot, and a splintering twig keeping it up.

Organisms—plants in appearance, but he couldn't be sure—pushed through the sand in random places, scattered everywhere. White tendrils tasted the water, undulating.

His metal left hand was a long scraping tool, which he used as he

trod glacially slow around the perimeter of the station to knock crust and strange mollusks off the walls. They'd analyzed these some months ago—determined they were related to barnacles, but capable of surviving far more violent depths. They'd been given the privilege of naming this as-yet undiscovered life form, and agreed upon something Latin-esque he couldn't now remember.

He rounded the back side of the station, where the main camera faced the trench. Within the ring of light, he could see the dropoff—a jagged line between light and the complete absence of it. Void. The Pit. An intrusive thought urged him to use the suit's propulsion and hover over that void, but his better judgement won. The suit, he thought dully, was worth more than its pilot.

Then he froze.

Blinked, like that would wipe what he saw off of his eyes.

"Jake." It sounded like he was talking into the mouth of a bucket.

"*Yeah, Kurt. What is it?*" The voice came through his left ear.

"There's a... I... Can you move the cameras around?"

"*To where?*"

“Uh, towards the station wall, north side.”

A pause, then: “No, it won’t go far enough. I can see you, though. Are you alright?”

“Yeah... But there’s something stuck to the wall. It’s...”

Big. It looked like a barnacle, like the rest of the smaller *what’s-its-names*, with an enveloping crust sheath around a central beak. But this beak was peeled open, revealing itself to him. Red flesh, matte, like a wound drowned in water. A vertical, central slit ran from top to bottom, rimmed in ribbed lips. There were folds, flaps, and a sack dangling from the slit pinnacle.

He conveyed this through the microphone.

And the response: “Maybe... Uh... Can you take a picture of it? It could be a fully grown *Cirripedia Rostrum*, but that’s bloody wild if it grows that big.”

“Yeah, hold on.” A camera was built into the suit, capable of shooting pictures. He got up closer to the specimen, trudging through sand and trampling tendril buds beneath his heavy metal boots. The controls were in the right glove. He found a good angle and pushed the button.

Click!

A flash of light. He wouldn’t see the pictures until they pulled them onto a laptop. He repositioned, wanting a wider shot from the other side. This took him close to the ledge. Step... step... not clear enough... step...

His next step never met ground.

“Fuck!” He wrenched his body landward, but the metal was heavy, and gravity had a stronger pull. Panic shot through him. Fingers pushed and flicked frantically, trying for the switch he wanted. The suit lamps clicked off and on, off and on. “No!” A hearty *shunk*, and the propulsion kicked in, firing a stream of bubbles from his steel backpack. It halted his downward slip gradually, then began tipping him the right way; a final push from his aching muscles brought the suit face down onto the sand, propulsion still firing—grinding him into the ground. But he found the switch again, flicked it, and waited for his heart to slow its beating.

“Kurt! What the fuck!”

A deep breath. “I’m okay. Just slipped. I’m okay.”

“What are you doing?”

“I was trying to get a picture, Jake,



alright!? I fucking slipped, and I saved it, so knock it off! Let me fucking breathe, for God sake!”

The earpiece wouldn’t let up. “*That suit costs more than four mansions in Bel-Air. Don’t go near the trench with it.*”

He felt a bead of sweat glide down from forehead to chin. “Jake, shut the fuck up! You don’t need to tell me—I get it!”

That seemed to end it.

It took the strength he had remaining to push himself up to his feet. Even with the suit’s assisting motors, the weight of the water was immense. Then he approached the specimen again and positioned for a final picture.

Face-on, straight down the barrel.

He was overtaken with fascination; it drove away the fear from his slip. The flesh almost seemed to flush. The flaps drifted delicately. A lull. His fingers found the button and pressed it.

Click!

And a flash. But brighter. Intensely bright. Like the sun being clicked on for a second before going out. It was followed not long after by an intense, sonorous rumble. An earthquake, he thought, but no. It pushed him

forward, towards the station, and vibrated the suit like a metal drum struck with a hammer. He forced the suit to turn around, back towards the trench. The next flash, he saw, clear as day. Lightning. A flicker of lightning from the empty, black sky. “What... the...” The push—thunder, sending deep vibrations through the water, knocking him back another step. “Jake! Do you see that?”

“Get inside!”

The walk back was slow. He exerted himself to the limit, forcing the suit’s motors, forcing it to move under pressure. Another flash came at his back. It brightened the ocean floor—made visible the vast gash in the earth. Like a Grand Canyon filled up with ink. Kilometers wide, stretching off into the shrouding murk. Dark shapes moved down inside, their natures uncertain. Shadows or flesh? He never got the chance to look. He lifted himself into the airlock and crumpled to the floor as the hatch shut behind him.

#

The storm continued for hours.

Jake sat at the radio, bargaining for their extraction with the bureaucrats

at the surface. It didn't seem to be doing much good. *"This is the reason you're down there."* The plasticky radio spit that into the capsule. *"Study the phenomena and radio your findings to the surface."*

Write it down, too, but don't just rely on that. Papers will disintegrate if the ocean breaks in through your walls and turns you into JELLO. Or maybe Kurt was being pessimistic. He sat at the table beside the door to the bathroom, listening to the shower behind the wall. Lyra had decided to wash off before staying up all night at her monitor. If he put an eye up to the crack in the door, he could see flashes of pale skin, glistening—wet. But never a full picture. He'd been wanting the full picture for a long time.

"Fucker!" Slamming plastic.

He pulled away from the door and searched down the barrel-shaped hall.

Jake stood at the radio, tapping the table with his knuckles—pensive. The handheld microphone hung from its cord off the side of the tabletop. "They won't come get us for another five days. Bloody cunt wouldn't let me get a word in."

Kurt breathed deep. "Well..."

Silence.

"Well, what?"

"Well... we do what we're supposed to. What else is there?"

The Australian scrunched up his face. "What if we get struck by underwater lightning, eh? Or get sucked into the trench—they'll come down and find our dicks one side and our balls on the other, and the rest of us crushed up into sausage."

"What do you want to do, then, Jake?"

"Give 'em a bloody mouthful."

"And that'll motivate them to come get us or leave us down here?"

Some thought, then Jake pushed his chair in with some force. "Fucking hell." He walked off towards the sleeping capsule and shut the door.

Kurt, alone, put his head against the wall behind him and shut his eyes. It didn't take long before he was creating pictures in his mind of Lyra, not four feet away from him, drenched in water. Glistening. Wet.

#

They'd been married in October. On the wedding day, it rained.

Kurt had never been a superstitious man, so they'd



continued with the ceremony, despite his wife's protests. He kissed her through running mascara, tasting salt on his lips. Red eyes, from sadness or rage—perhaps both at once. It was the same when he told her he'd been contracted to work on the Palaemon. Tears, red eyes. She struck him backhanded and told him she didn't care if he drowned. That was her curious way of stating the opposite. His daughter would grow up with no father—not to watch her graduate, or meet her boyfriends, or walk her down the aisle when her time came. Because Daddy would be mincemeat thirty thousand feet under. When he told her he loved her, she struck him again.

No, you don't. No... you don't.

But the pay was undeniable, as was the opportunity. He took a taxi to the airport. She'd booked a hotel room that night so she wouldn't be forced to tell him goodbye—or to see him at all. She had his daughter there with her—to punish him. That had been three months ago.

#

"Lightning's stopped."

He got up and came over, stealing

a glance out one of the portholes on the way. Hand on the back of her chair, leaning over. She smelled of lavender soap. "How long has it been?"

From Jake, farther down: "Seven hours."

"Okay. What did we pick up from that?"

Silence.

"Guys?"

"Not a whole lot." He'd washed his blonde hair. It was frizzy and puffed out now—tangled with knots. "No... not a lot."

Kurt smoldered. "What about the big barnacle stuck to our wall? What have we figured out about that?"

"You know, Kurt—you could do a little work yourself."

"I am doing work, Jake." He spat the name like chewed tobacco. "I cook our meals. I go out in the suit to scrape junk off the walls... This place is still running 'cause I keep it running." His cheeks were hot, head light. A soft hand touched his forearm—cool silk, chasing off a fever.

"We know, Kurt. It's alright."

She kept her hand there.

"Right..." Flustered. "I'm sorry."

Jake spun back around in his chair, giving his attention to his

instruments. Not a word.

“Sit down. Talk to me.”

Siren song. He did as he was bid. Her skin was glowing—he wanted to touch her. Everywhere. A quick motion, legs crossed to hide his longing. This close, her warmth was like perfume. “I’m... I don’t know. Maybe I’m getting claustrophobic.”

Click-clack on the keyboard. She spun a ratcheting knob, and the camera feed behind its bubble-glass cornea realigned itself. Peering into the trench. *Trench...* Where those shadows were moving—shadows the size of skyscrapers turned on their sides. She sniffled. “I think we’re all going a little crazy. This hasn’t exactly been a normal trip.” “No. That’s right.”

“We need to work together, not fight like this.”

“Yes, I agree.” *Make love, not war.*

“We have to come together, Kurt.”

“Yeah, I know.” *Come together.*

“What are you...”

His hand was on her bicep, rubbing tenderly. He’d worked it up from the armrest of her chair... to her elbow... up, up, *up*. “I’m...”

She shrugged away from his touch. “Please don’t do that.”

Silence. Humming from all around.

Pressure. Deep, crushing pressure. He was acutely aware of every beep and scritch-scratch of every computer and mechanism, like wads of cotton had been yanked out of his ears.

Then, from across the way: “He wants to fuck you, Lyra.”

Kurt sprung off his stool.

Jake prodded again: “You’ve noticed, haven’t you?”

It was posed to her, but she didn’t respond. Just a silent stare, unreadable, in Jake’s direction. Part fear, part confusion.

The Australian was reclined against his backrest, hands folded behind his head. “He watches you shower through the crack in the door. Did you know that? Surprised he hasn’t been giving himself a tuggie.”

Kurt was frozen. Unspeaking—unable to.

“Deny it, ya’ cunt. Look in her eyes and call me a liar.”

He did say something, or rather mumble it. It started as a growl, then metastasized, red and raw. “Fucking... son-of-a-BITCH!” And he was across the room with his hands around the blonde man’s throat. Squeezing, tightening, willing the life



out of his lungs.

“Stop it! Holy fuck!” But Lyra could do nothing. She got up and backed herself against the wall.

Jake wrenched on the fingers entrapping his windpipe—enough to squeak out a “*dirty, fucking pervert.*” Before he lunged at his attacker with his full body weight.

The two men rolled around, grabbing at each other’s vulnerabilities, punching and slapping when they couldn’t reach. A coffee cup slid off a table and shattered, spilling hot tar onto Kurt’s face. He yelped, beastlike, as his skin sizzled. An opening, and Jake took it, striking white-knuckled where skin was smoking. Blood ran from rips in the tissue, and hot coffee got in the wounds, summoning even more potent screams. Now Jake was on top and the one with his hands wrapped around a throat. Squeezing—*hard*. There was no more air left for screaming; Kurt writhed, whimpering on the ground, clawing uselessly at the vise grip killing him. Stars spun circles across his eyes, then they blurred into colorless splotches. Once his body gave out, the splotches went black.

#

Bangs and clattering. Voices speaking. He opened his eyes and saw a monolith of bright yellow. It had eyes—glassy, round. There was only enough juice in his body—only enough consciousness—to turn his head back and forth. To the right, he saw an airlock door. The exit into the endless blue void.

Void. Water.

Turn. Another great effort. To his left was the door into the main capsule of the station. It was shut. Taped to the plastic was a sign—one he’d read over and over while in this room. What did it say?

More clattering and banging. Voices retreating. The whole station shook, walls trembling, floors vibrating. Eventually, that stopped. Just the humming now—the humming of the endless blue crush.

Void. Water.

His body had exerted enough. It shut his eyelids.

#

When he woke up next, it felt as if a knife had been pushed through his throat. Enough oxygen had re-

entered his blood to clear up his eyes—let him function again to some small degree. He felt his neck, and the skin there was tender—painful. It was likely severely bruised.

Standing before him was the yellow monolith, having taken the form of the station's dive suit. *Depthcrusher*. It had observed his suffering dutifully. Up—up to a seated position, and his head began its pounding. Sharp, angry. Like a little man with a mallet striking the top of his skull. He managed to stand with one hand on the shut door. He suddenly remembered what the sign posted there had read.

Equip Depthcrusher diving suit before opening airlock door. Ensure airlock is pressurized and sealed before opening it.

THE DILIGENT GO HOME TO THEIR FAMILIES. OBSERVE REDUNDANCIES.

He pulled on the metal latch for the interior door. Once he found Jake, he would have his way with him—beat him to a bloody pulp. Turn him into chum to feed the fish.

Locked.

"What..." Rage flared like a match

to gasoline. "Let me out! Jake! Open this fucking door, you scumbag piece of shit! Open it now!" But there was no answer. He thrashed against the thick plastic to no avail. Then he threw his shoulder against it—kicked it over and over with his bare foot until he was leaving swipes of blood. He bent down to peer through the crack between the hinges and could see relatively clear into the main capsule. Blinking, as if that would wake him from his nightmare.

The capsule was abandoned.

"Oh my... oh my God. What the... oh my God."

Creaking, humming metal. Another reminder from the endless blue.

Void. Water.

He took up a crowbar hooked onto the wall—for desperate situations, emergencies just like this. The perfect coat of bright orange paint bunched up and scraped as he rammed the teeth into the gap above the latch. Then he pulled with everything he had. Pulling beneath the weight of the dark, interminable nothing and the growing sense of hopelessness.

SNAP!

He had it. The door whipped back



and forward. He pulled it open to get through, and his fears were confirmed.

No Jake. No Lyra.

And what's more... no radio. Someone or something had smashed it to bits. He found something lying beneath the table: another crowbar, used and discarded. "Son-of-a-bitch." A thorough sweep of the station later, he stood in solitude, crowbar in hand, sealed into his underwater coffin.

He would not die like this.

There had always been the possibility of death, especially in a job so fraught with peril. But he'd pictured a fate similar to that of the divers on the Byford Dolphin. Instant crush. Invaginated penis, and face torn off by the water pressure. Not left to starve while the indifferent ocean watched him through the portholes and grew detritus on the outer hulls until his tomb blended in with the nature around it.

He considered the *Depthcrusher*.

Not enough fuel in its propulsion to get him to the surface. But enough to...

Void. Water.

The crowbar hit the ground with a clatter, and he moved into the airlock

capsule. It took a while to fit himself into the massive yellow suit, but he managed it in time. Systems kickstarted, lights blinked on, and he flipped the lever to open the airlock hatch.

A few minutes of decompression.

A swap of doors.

And he was staring into the void. Bubbles, thousands of bubbles. Sound around him was muffled, but he could hear his own breathing. Was it labored? Frantic? It didn't matter very much anymore. The suit's motorized joints assisted in his walk across the sand. He crushed the tendrils with abandon. What did it matter? The thought crossed his mind to check for the giant barnacle on the side of the station, but he decided against it. Just a waste of time.

Before he knew it, he was standing on the ridge of the trench, staring down into infinity. There would be no answers for the bureaucrats as to what happened down here—why the bottom of the monstrous slit in the earth had fallen out into purgatory. They would never know.

But he would.

He was a marine biologist, after all, and this was the greatest undersea

mystery mankind had come to face. The people above him, thousands and thousands of feet above him, would wonder, and he would know before he died. Take it to his grave. And what a spectacular grave this would be.

A step.

A fall—

—slowly, at the speed of all underwater things, descending until the light from the Palaemon's floodlamps had totally vanished beyond the ridge. The blackness was absolute; he may as well have been floating adrift in space. He fell for what could have been hours, listening to his own breath. Then the suit began to creak. Pressure started to press on him. As impressively as this suit had been rated, it could not withstand a depth beyond human measurement. A depth unlike anything seen before. He checked the built-in depth gauge, hovering just below his eyeline.

50,000

90,000

100,000

200,000

300,000

The pressure was unbearable. He could feel it through the metal shell. Paint was beginning to flake off and drift up past his visor. Back up, fleeing the descent. Around five hundred thousand feet, he saw something in the darkness. It was a pale shape, too far to make out, but vaguely humanoid. Glowing... maybe? Bioluminescent.

He was running out of oxygen. It made him drift in and out of sleep.

He opened his eyes. Seven hundred thousand. The shape was closer. He couldn't believe what he was seeing—it must have been an illusion. Or perhaps this was where she'd gone. This was where they'd both gone: down into the Pit.

Now... he finally had the full picture. Pale, bare skin. Breasts, tanned, somehow perfectly hanging. Skin like silk and a face that made him weep out of pure, unbridled pleasure. So beautiful, so perfect.

So perfect, he never noticed she had no legs.

No legs, just a black stalk, retreating back into the murk. She did indeed glow—that's how he could see her. His lamps had cracked and died thousands of feet ago. He wanted nothing more than to touch

her. Everywhere. Glistening... wet.

Void. Water.

Lightning struck, and the endless, writhing black body of the leviathan was bared, but he didn't notice. Mass and form stretched unending through the twilight fluid, wide and tall beyond description, visible in flickers only, and even then, still largely obscured. Its head was a vertical slit of ribbed, pink flesh—massive, unending. Flaps, curtains of meat stuck with teeth. Eyeless, sightless, amidst its primordial, sunless realm.

And a lure—dangling from out of its gaping vertical maw. Glowing, transforming.





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