

INNSMOUTH

←.....→
FREE PRESS

Fiction Summer Issue

2009

In this issue:

NICK MAMATAS

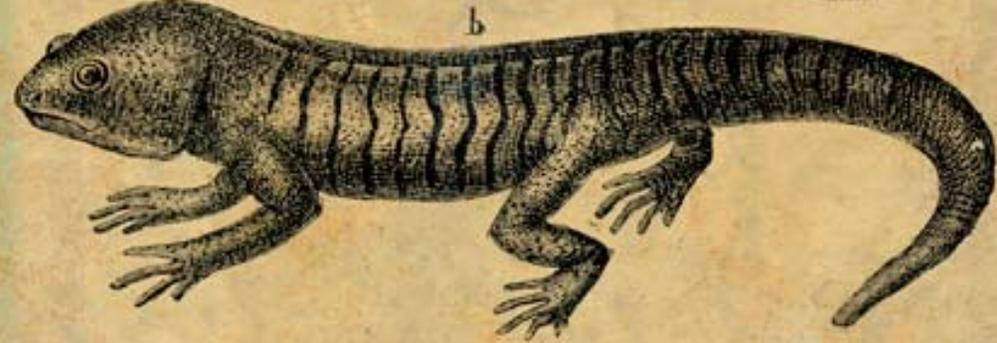
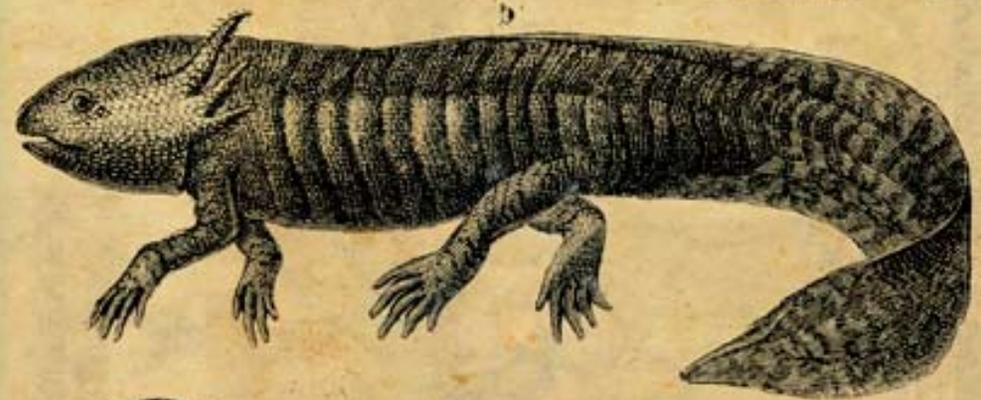
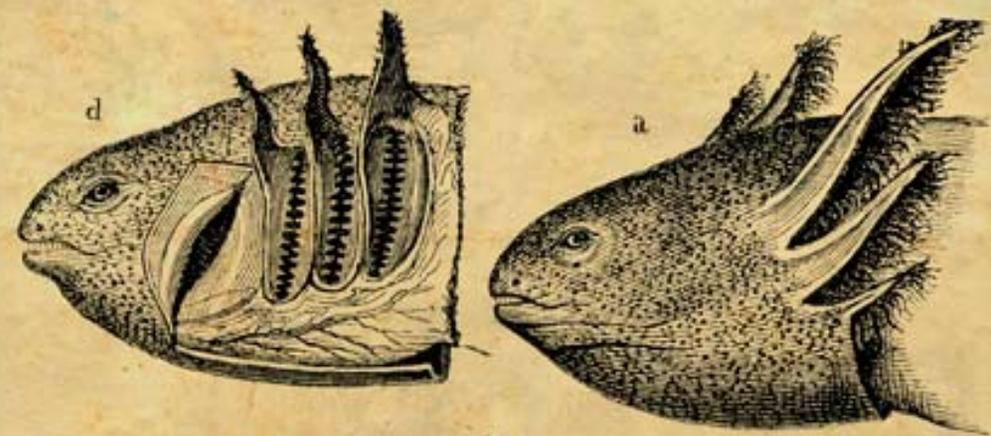
PAMELA K. KINNEY

ROBERT BORSKI

CAROLINE TOTTEN

KIRK BARRETT

PAULA R. STILES



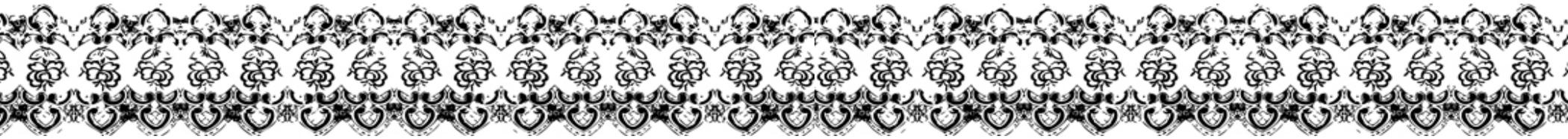


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial	3
Nick Mamatas And Then, And Then, And Then ...	4
Azathoth is Here Pamela K. Kinney	6
Robert Borski The Cthulhu Whisperer	13
Caroline Totten By the Sea, by the Sea	15
Kirk Barrett A Bedtime Story	19
Paula R. Stiles Swimming Lessons Off the North Shore	22



EDITORIAL

Welcome to our inaugural fiction issue of Innsmouth Free Press. This summer, our theme is “water”. Nick Mamatas brings us a hopeful re-imagining of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* in “And Then, And Then, And Then ...”. Pamela K. Kinney takes us briefly back to land and describes a tentacled apocalypse at the grocery store in “Azathoth is Here”. Robert Borski shows us how to gentle a Mythos monster in “The Cthulhu Whisperer”. Caroline Totten tells a gentle, eerie tale about sibling rivalry, Innsmouth-style in “By the Sea, By the Sea”. Kírk Barrett spins a sinister new take on writer’s block in “A Bedtime Story”. Paula R. Stiles dives into a tale about a father struggling with his child’s unusual fascination with the sea in “Swimming Lessons off the North Shore”.

Fall’s theme will be monstrous women and motherhood. We’re still seeking stories for this issue as well as the Spring/Summer 2010 issue.

We hope you enjoy our short fiction offerings at Innsmouth Free Press. And please, do try our tasty Monster Bytes brought to you every week.

Many tentacles,

Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles



AND THEN, AND THEN, AND THEN ...

By Nick Mamatas

I woke up. I ate a banana and a bagel. I turned on the TV and watched the news from Boston. It was going to be cloudy. Someone had a book out about carbohydrates. There was a lot of traffic. I felt good to be home, away from all the commuters and the highways. I almost never leave town. I ate another banana and then a peanut butter sandwich because I was still hungry. I stopped being hungry. The mail came early because I live near the Post Office. It was all junk mail and coupons. Sometimes, I use coupons. Nothing good today though. I go to Ipswich to shop. I take the bus. It comes only six times all morning and afternoon.

I felt cold. The bus is by the waterfront. The waterfront isn't very busy anymore. Just some guys fishing. Lobster traps stacked high. A couple of years ago, one dock crumbled into the bay after a big storm. Sometimes, people come here and say that the waterfront smells. I don't smell the waterfront. I never smell the waterfront. When you've lived here a long time, you can't smell what things smell like to outsiders. It's the same everywhere. I went to Salem State College for a semester and then dropped out. I had a girlfriend there. She had three black cats, sort of as a joke. Her apartment smelled like cats. She said she couldn't smell the cats. Innsmouth is like this. The bus smells sometimes.

Today, the bus smells like a bus. I go to Ipswich. I buy some fruit. I buy some pork chops. The pork chops are on sale because they're about to go bad. They have fish for sale too in Ipswich, but nobody from my town needs to buy fish because we live on the water. Sometimes, I buy fish right off the boat. Sometimes, I go fishing myself, with a reel. Sometimes, I fish with a net. Sometimes, I take a boat with Marsh and we go out to the reef. I like to row the boat, but I get tired. Marsh rows better than I do. I buy Pop-Tarts. The kind that are half-strawberry and half-blueberry. I only ever find that kind

in Ipswich. I run out of money. Thinking about fishing before makes me decide to go fishing. I like to fish in the evenings anyway. In the morning, too many people try to fish. Some people think this is because the fish bite better in the morning. No, it is really because people who want to fish early want to get there before everyone else. Everyone ends up fishing just as the sun comes up. I'm in bed when the sun comes up. I wait till the morning news to get up. When I go fishing in the evening, I am almost always alone.

I go home and put the grocery bags on the counter. I take the stuff that needs to be refrigerated out of the bags and put it in the Frigidaire. Everything else I leave in the bags on the counter and on the range. I see I have plenty of room in the Frigidaire for some fish if I catch any. I get my reel and go fishing. I don't use live bait. At the waterfront, I meet Marsh. Marsh says Hello. I say Hello. He says Fancy Meeting You Here. I laugh and say Yeah. We cast.

Marsh uses tiny eels. He talks to one as he puts it on the hook. I look out to sea. I like the white caps. I like to see how long it takes for the Devil's Reef to disappear from sight as the sun sinks down and the water turns wine-dark. I read that in college. Wine-dark. I brought a banana with me. I start eating it. Marsh says something, but I don't hear him because I thought he was talking to the eel on his hook. The last bus comes and the door opens, but nobody steps out. Marsh repeats himself, but I don't answer because I have a lot of banana in my mouth. Then he asks a third time.

How Old Are You?

Twenty-One Now I say.

Would You Like To Join A Secret Society? Marsh asks me.



I ask him What Do You Mean, A Secret Society? He says Everyone Around Here Is In It. I say Then How Come I Haven't Heard Of It? Then we both say Because It's A Secret and we both laugh. Then I say Is It Communism? Because I Am Not Into That. In College, I Learned That Communism Is Perfect Except For Human Nature. Marsh says Oh, You Don't Have To Worry About Human Nature. It's Not Really Communism. I say That Sounds Fine, Then. He says Great. We Should Get Going.

I didn't catch anything. Marsh says he'll give me one of his. He recommends eel for bluefish. We go to the main drag. We go to the Oddfellows Club. Marsh tells me that the secret society is not an Oddfellows branch. Nobody bothers to take down the sign because everyone is in the secret society. We walk in. The Oddfellows Club smells like brine and salt water. It smells like the waterfront smelled to my old girlfriend when she came that one time to visit after I left school. Marsh says Take Off All Your Clothes. Then he takes off all his clothes. He has a belly on him; the rolls look a little like gills on his flanks. I take off all my clothes and leave them in a heap.

We walk down a hall. I hear chanting and burbling. There is a big double-door like from a castle in a movie. It opens without Marsh or me touching it. Two people I've seen around town, a man and a woman, both naked, have opened the door. Marsh says Well, Here It Is. The room is huge and full of naked people. I see the mayor. I see my mailman, who is a lady. I see my cousin Freddy, who I don't see much even though we're cousins. There is a big pool in the middle of the room. There's light coming from the water, like there was another sun, a white-wine sun, way down deep. Marsh says In You Go and in I do.

I swim down toward the watery sun. It's awesome. There's a thing down there and she loves me. I never want to leave her. I don't need to breathe down here. Then I hear splashing and see feet and hands bubbling up the water and everyone is with me. Thank You, Thank You, Thank You I think to myself. I'm glad to be from here.

THE END

Nick Mamatas is the author of two novels, the Lovecraftian *Move Under Ground* and the satirical *Under My Roof*. His short fiction has appeared in *subTERRAIN*, *Poe's Lighthouse*, *Lovecraft Unbound*, and many other journals, magazines and anthologies. Much of his short fiction was recently collected in *You Might Sleep...* A native New Yorker, Nick now lives in the California Bay Area, but misses Boston and the North Shore more than he thought he would.



AZATHOTH IS HERE

By Pamela K. Kinney

Most days working in a supermarket, the only excitement comes from jars falling off shelves and breaking or when a customer misuses 'the customer is always right' and makes your life hell. But Saturday night, I learned a new definition to the word 'hell'.

My name is Alan Holly and I run one of the registers up-front, and I was trying to get Mrs. Piper checked out. A tiny, elderly lady with blue-tinted, thin hair, she managed to slip into the supermarket, as always, just before closing. She'd loaded up a whole cartload of groceries and paper products, and then rushed to check out at my register. Why me, I don't know. Maybe I reminded her of her dearly departed husband, Joe. He had dark hair and blue eyes like me, plus we both were somewhat plump. And like me, generally he had been a meek and quiet man. I heard she had always liked to irritate him. I sometimes think that's the real reason he died, just to get away from her.

Leaving her to irritate me, of course.

But that night, as she shoved item after item onto the moving conveyor belt of the register, she irritated someone else. A little, meek-looking man that appeared to be in his late twenties, stood behind her with a head of lettuce and a carton of milk. With wire-framed glasses perched just on the tip of his bulbous nose, the slate-gray eyes behind them followed every movement Mrs. Piper made. Kinda creepy. The store had some weirdos in it tonight, that's for sure.

Then the horrible thing happened.

Mrs. Piper grabbed the last item--a package of twenty-four rolls of toilet paper--and lifted it ever so slowly while giving me that

maddening smile that always drove me nuts. I stood there, waiting and trying to remain patient as she did this every time, when suddenly the guy behind her tore the bag of toilet paper rolls out of her hands. An unearthly scream came from his mouth, shattering quite a few glass bottles in people's carts. Ketchup, mustard and other stuff covered the carts, the floor, people, and even my register.

Suddenly, he became silent. He kept his mouth wide open like a chasm and something seem to be trying to crawl out of it. The opening stretched wider and wider until cracks formed in his face like mud drying under a hot sun.

Definitely not your everyday, mundane happening. At least not in a supermarket anyway.

Black and formless, with so many eyes attached to the end of oily stalks of flesh whipping out of it that I lost count, it slipped out of what had been the man's face. It dropped onto Mrs. Piper, who foolishly at that moment had been trying to wrestle her toilet paper out of the stranger's hands. It covered her like a thick, black cloak with tentacles attached to it and undulated as the old woman tried to free herself of the horror.

People began to back away, with either their mouths hanging open like fish trying to breathe out of water, or screaming.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Piper's efforts proved futile. The thing forced her to the floor while the store manager, Bob Erthlaise, and I tried to figure what to do about this. He grabbed a mop and inverted it, using the handle part to slip it under the gelatinous mass, and tried to pry it off the old lady. Or what was left of her anyway. Except, the horror attached



itself to the mop handle and sucked it, the mop head and Bob underneath it, quicker than the frightened customers, as they began to run en masse out of the store.

Suddenly, I knew that it would be stupid of me to even attempt something. So I joined the customers and my fellow workers, as we all forced our bodies through the sliding door held open and out into the muggy heat of the summer night.

Most of the people got into their vehicles and roared out of the parking lot and onto the street, zooming down the street and narrowly missing having an accident. Except for Billy Lee, Mary McCutcheon and me. We stood in the parking lot and stared at the store, watching as the thing grew bigger and bigger.

“Shit,” said Clark, “my cell phone’s still in my locker in the store.”

“So is mine, along with my purse,” said Mary, shaking with fright.

I grinned as I pulled my cell phone out of the pocket in the apron I wore over my work clothes. “I always keep mine in the pocket of my apron.”

Clark stared as I punched in 911. He frowned.

“We were supposed to keep our cell phones or pagers in our lockers while we were on duty.”

“Well, aren’t you glad now that I never follow the rules?”

Cell phone to my left ear, I waited as it rang. One ring. Then a second one. Finally, the other end picked up on the third ring. I waved a hand to shush Clark’s blustery voice as a feminine voice talked into my ear.

“Hello, what’s wrong?” asked the woman, her voice calm and crisp.

I told her about how our store had been invaded by something alien and too terrible to believe. Something that ate Mrs. Piper and the store’s night manager.

“What did you say? 911 is not for playing jokes on. We are for real-life emergencies, not to bust a ghost or a monster from someone’s prank.”

“My name is Alan Holly and I’ll have you know I am not pulling a prank here. I have two co-workers here with me to back me up about the monster in the store.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something: the size of the black, amorphous thing. Soon, it would either burst through the roof, or break all the windows. It had grown that big. Things were not looking too good for the store, us, and the city we lived in. Shoot, to be technical, probably not for the whole planet either!

“Ma’am, just send all the police you can out here--with weapons, of course. If I am pulling your leg, the police can lock me up in jail for the rest of my life. But if I am not joshing, then you might be able to stop something only a madman can dream up from breaking free of the store.”

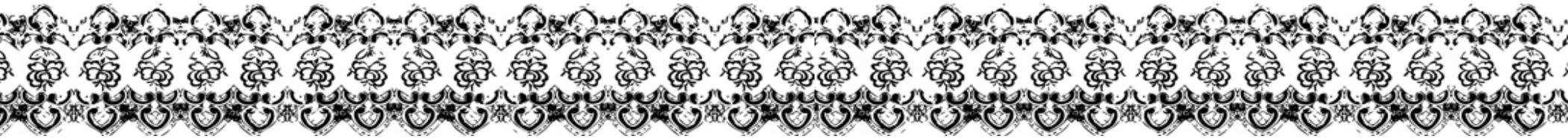
I gave her the address and shut off the cell phone before she said anything else, thrusting it back in the apron pocket.

“The cops are on their way,” I said with more assurance than I felt.

Mary’s face held fear and revulsion as she stared at the growing mass of horror.

“Do you really think all the police this city has can stop that, that . . . what the hell is it?”

Clark snorted. “Who else are we going to call? Do you think we can stop it? Look how easily it ate Bob.”



I edged a few inches closer to the store. Mary had said a key word. Hell. Only a madman or Hell could have caused such a thing to come into existence. Who or more precisely, what had been that man? Was he even human, or merely a costume of flesh to hide that thing's true essence?

A more horrible thought flitted across my mind. Were there more of those things inside others? Something that waited for only the right time to bust free? I shivered, even though the temperature was in the low nineties and muggy.

Something cold and nasty whispered in my brain, circling like a hungry worm trying to find a place to burrow in. I didn't like what it said.

Azathoth is here . . . and he's coming to get you.

I screamed and dropped to my knees. That whispered voiced ripped into my head like a migraine headache.

Mary knelt down beside me. "Oh God, Alan, what's wrong?"

I turned my burning gaze on her and through the blur of tears pouring out of my eyes, thought that she looked distorted and odd. So much in pain, I could barely get the words out.

"A name. A strange and terrible name."

She helped me up off the pavement just as the sound of glass breaking vibrated in the night air. The mass of darkness oozed out of the broken windows, not even deterred by the shards of glass that pierced its flesh. Sounds of sirens wailed in the air as police vehicle after police vehicle streamed into the parking lot, pulling to a halt and surrounding us like the Indians must have around a wagon train.

Uniformed cops, weapons in hand, leaped out of the cars, stopped, and stared at the thing oozing toward us.

Fear fed me and I ran to my car, unlocking it and jumping into the driver's seat. I drove away, ignoring the sharp reports of guns going off repeatedly and the screams of terror. I didn't even glance back to see if Mary and Clark had gotten away.

Azathoth is going to get you, you big coward!

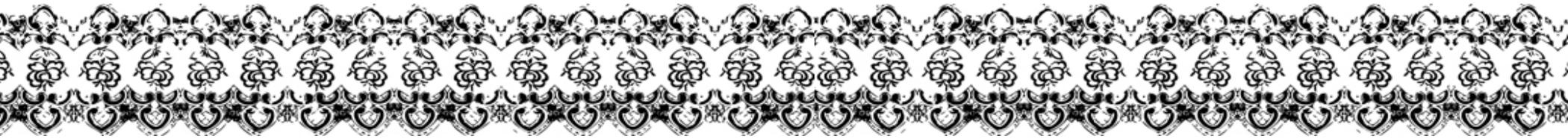
I drove around for hours, afraid even to go home. Then at dawn I pulled into the parking lot of a WaWa gas station and convenience store and bought the Sunday newspaper. I saw splashed on the front page news that the thing from the supermarket had mysteriously vanished. The only evidence that it had been real was the bones found scattered across the parking lot and the destroyed store. The news also reported that the military had been called in, hopefully to find and destroy it.

I sat in the car, munching on a blueberry muffin and sipping coffee. I tossed what was left of the muffin out of the window and placed the empty cup in the holder between the two front bucket seats.

Military? I laughed. What did they think the military could do? It wasn't Godzilla or a giant, mutated spider that could be killed by regular weapons. I remembered the strange, dark words whispered like a promise in my mind last night and I knew that the name I got was ancient and darkly powerful. Something that lived when life first crawled out of primordial waters. A name not natural to this world, maybe not even to this universe. Whether Hell or another dimension or even outer space itself, I couldn't be sure. But I felt sure that monstrous fiend had been hiding underneath the layers of our world, until it knew it was time to reveal itself.

Why now, I can't say. Maybe it was due to the terrorists, or maybe from all those murderers and child molesters coming out of the closet, so to speak, but whatever caused it to reveal itself, it was here now. And for all the evil that filled our world, nothing compared to the evil that it represented.

Could it be possible to stop it?



I laughed. Here I was, a cashier for a supermarket, thinking like some superhero, determining how to slay the monster and maybe even get the girl. Shoot, I couldn't even get my life together most days.

Dog-tired, I decided my best bet at the moment was to head home and get some much needed sleep. I nosed my car onto the street and drove down the road, just as dark clouds rolled in and blotted out the sun.



I woke up at noon. Still in my work clothes, I got up and undressed, shoving them into the dirty clothes hamper in the bathroom. I showered, letting the waterfall of hot water clean me, then shut off the faucets and dried myself. Finding a pair of clean underwear, jeans and a T-shirt, I dressed. Then I made myself a sandwich and ate it quickly, drinking a glass of milk to wash it down. Everything seemed like a dream, or more precisely, a nightmare I must have had. As I stepped out onto my front porch, I discovered it hadn't been a dream. The sun was eclipsed with a dark shadow that had reached out and darkened the whole sky, too. And instead of the usual Southern muggy heat, the air had grown freezing cold, as if winter had decided it would shove summer into a hole and bury it, taking its place. Everything felt wrong, for the neighborhood seemed quiet.

Too quiet.

Where was everyone? Okay, maybe they had all left, fleeing from the thing from the supermarket. But I noticed the cars and trucks still parked in the driveways. At least it appeared that my neighbors were home.

Why the hell wasn't there at least one person besides me outside?

Hell. Really not a good word to think of.

I decided to go back inside when out of the corner of my eye a

curtain shifted in the window of the house across the street. I bolted across the street and up the steps onto the front porch, halting at the front door. I knocked.

Nothing. I knocked again, a louder, heavy pounding. Even the dead could hear that.

Oops, wrong choice of words.

Maybe I'd imagined the movement earlier. I had decided to go back to my house when the door opened slowly with a loud creak. It stopped midway.

The small round face of my neighbor, Mrs. Rimel, peeked around the door frame. One gray curl straggled from her forehead and down to her left eye. With a face pale as cream, her eyes narrowed as she stared at me. Distrust glinted in them.

I smiled self-consciously. "Hi, Mrs. Rimel--it's me. Alan Holly. From across the street."

She blew through her nose, the air lifting up that lone curl. It settled back down over the eye.

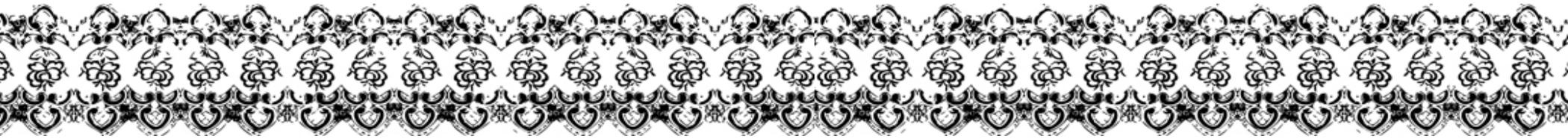
Was she going to make it hard for me?

I cleared my throat. "Have you noticed how strangely quiet it seems around here?"

The door opened wider. "No."

"Well, uh. . ." Damn, but she was making this hard for me, the old bitch! "You do know about the monster that broke out in the supermarket I worked for. Right?"

"No, I don't get the newspaper and my TV set is broken. Anyway, there is no such things as monsters, Alan Holly, and you shouldn't tell such whoppers to a poor old lady like me. Now, good day!"



The door slammed in my face, but I stuck my foot in and stopped it.

She glared, her eyes darkening to the color of muddy water, or more precisely, sewer seepage. My mind wandered as she chewed me out. I had never liked the old bat since the first time I had met her. She had the odor of a musty, aged second-hand bookstore, had gaps in her yellow teeth and was always cranky.

Realizing that she had stopped barking at me, I looked at her. A strange little smile graced her lips.

“Azathoth is here . . . and he wants you,” she said, with a voice that had gone all deep, dark and scary.

Then she began to change. Her mouth rounded like a big zero and her eyes had glazed over. Something black and gelatinous oozed out of her mouth. It slipped down her chin like a big, oily-black drool, dripping from there to slide down her blue dress and congealing on the fluffy bunny slippers she wore on her feet.

I backed away.

She had always been, like, an evil old bitch, but really, I never thought of her as that kind of evil. A chill streaked up my spine as goose bumps broke out all over my flesh. First, the thing at the supermarket, now another one here right across the street from me.

As more and more of the thing flowed out of her mouth her face cracked like an egg and the whole head split apart, the pieces coming off her neck with a loud rip. They fell to the floor of the porch with a plop, and still the thing flooded out of the hole between her shoulders, tentacles whipping everywhere. Worse, it had eyes, so many damn eyes attached to stalks shooting out of its gelatinous mass, and all of them blinked at me.

I bounded down the porch steps and headed for my house, not looking back.

Now I understood why the neighborhood seemed silent as a graveyard, even on a Sunday morning. If anyone else other than me existed here, they better damn well stay behind locked doors.

Azathoth is here . . . and he wants you.

I grabbed the knob of my front door and twisted it. The door wouldn't budge. I tried again and discovered it was locked. That scared me as I knew I hadn't locked it. Worse, I had left my keys inside. I heard a noise behind me and I whirled around. The thing had oozed its way across the street and sat by my mailbox in the front yard. All those eyes stared at me. And, if at all possible, the sky grew darker.

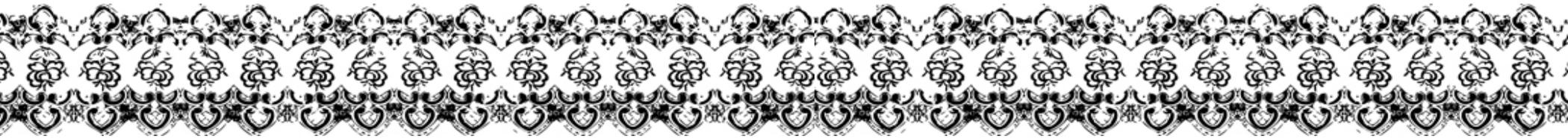
Azathoth is here . . . and he wants you.

Not being able to get inside my house I leaped off the porch and headed to the garage. The garage door stood open. A glint from red metal. I spied two cans of gasoline I kept in there for my lawnmower. I grinned. Both cans contained at least half a gallon of gas in them and I had a lighter in my pocket. An idea germinated.

Grabbing one of the cans, I slipped around the monster and dashed back across the street to Mrs. Rimel's. It reared up and made like a snake after its prey, slinking after me. As I trotted up the porch steps and stepped onto the porch, I noticed something in a big pile in the opened doorway.

It was Mrs. Rimel, or what was left of her. Flakes of skin. No bones, no blood, nothing else. Just big, dry pieces of skin lying there in a pile. Like she had sunburned herself all over and the skin had flaked off.

I heard something and whipping around, saw that the thing had made it to the bottom step of the porch. Upending the can, I poured the gasoline onto the porch and what was left of Mrs. Rimel. I threw the can at the monster, striking an eye, and sidled to the right side of the porch, ready to jump off. I flicked my lighter, bringing up the small flame, and let it fly. It landed onto where the gasoline soaked into the wood. Fire



whooshed up like an angry spirit. Shocked, I fell off the porch and into a bunch of dead day lilies.

I picked myself up and ran, pausing in the middle of the street. The creature crawled onto the porch and became engulfed in flames. It gave off a high-pitched, unearthly scream. All the glass in the windows of Mrs. Rimel's house shattered, pieces flying everywhere. Something wet leaked out of my ears and I reached up, coming away with blood on my fingertips.

“Die, you damned thing!” I shouted, holding a hand to my bleeding ear. “Whatever you are, it seems you can die like anything else.”

I twirled around like a ballerina and laughed. These evil things could be destroyed. Fire. A good, clean way to destroy something as nasty as that was. The only problem: I needed my car keys to drive my car back to the supermarket. For even though the newspaper reported that the thing there had vanished, something inside me said it still would be there, waiting for me. But my front door was locked and the car keys inside. Just as I was about to break a window and crawl through it, the front door opened by itself.

I stood there, shocked. Had it ever been locked to begin with? I stepped over to the doorway and slipped into my house. Grabbing the keys off the table by the front entrance, along with my wallet and another lighter, I raced out of the house, locking the door behind me. I grabbed the last can of gasoline from my garage and, opening the passenger door of my car, sat it on the seat there. I got in the driver's side and, minutes later, I drove down to the monster-siege store.

It was there, as if waiting for me, its flesh undulating where the store had stood. At least it hadn't left the area to feed. Then I saw the bones that littered the parking lot. In the immediate area and even nearby, nothing moved. It felt spooky like a ghost town. Silence permeated the air. Even the monstrous thing stayed still. A cold breeze lifted the occasional piece of trash and carried an odor of death to my nose.

I climbed out of my car, which I kept running but set in Park, and after flicking my lighter on, threw it onto the passenger seat. Red and orange flames licked the air and grew, as they ate up the cloth. I slammed the door shut and ran over to the driver's side, opening it and taking the car out of Park. I watched the car roll toward the monster. I had gotten as close as I could. The car ate up the cement as it headed toward the thing, fire enveloping the inside.

I gave a big grin as the car ran into the hellish monster. The creature sucked the whole thing up. The next moment, flames soared up through its flesh and the burning odor of something nasty rent the air.

I never saw it until it was too late, but a part of the thing roped around my legs, tightening, and yanked me off my feet and onto my back. It drew me toward its burning mass, parting like the Red Sea and showing me what hid inside it. Things unimaginable danced, gibbering and gesturing at me like monkeys in the zoo. A madman's version of monkeys, of course. Girlish screams filled the air and I realized that they came from me. I kept screaming as black, slimy ooze closed over me.



I awoke to find myself alive and tied to a cot in a room with white walls. A man in a white coat, with a nurse by his side, stared down at me.

“Dr. Combs, is it true that he killed all those people, burning down the store and that home after he did the crimes?” asked the nurse.

“Yes, a most curious case. When they found him sitting on the cement of the parking lot, in front of the fire raging out of control, he raved about giant black oozing monsters. That these monsters had come out of hiding to take over the world, feasting on mankind.” He laughed and shook his head. “But the only monsters are those in his delusional mind.”

He strolled through the opened doorway. Before he left, he gave her an order.



“Give him ten CCs of triflupromazine.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

She took a needle and shoved it into a vein in my arm, sending something into me, then pulled the needle out. As I glanced up I saw that her mouth opened. Something black whipped out and found my face, caressing it. I cried out from its slimy touch. It returned to her mouth.

“Sweet dreams,” she said with a dark laugh, and walked out of the cell I was in, locking the door behind her.

The light went out and the room grew dark with shadows. Shadows that seem to have tentacles that danced and writhed as they approached, nearer and nearer to the bed. I opened my mouth to scream, but the only scream that escaped gleamed black, slimy and like primordial ooze. Frightening words whispered in my head.

Azathoth is here . . . and he's inside you!

THE END

Pamela K. Kinney is an author of published horror, science fiction, fantasy, horror, poetry, and the nonfiction book, *Haunted Richmond, Virginia*, published by Schiffer Publishing, along with *Haunted Virginia: Legends, Myths and True Tales* coming May 2009 from Schiffer Publishing, too. Using the pseudonym, Sapphire Phelan, she has published erotic and sweet paranormal/fantasy/science fiction romance, also poetry and a couple of erotic horror stories. She also has done acting on stage and in films. Find out more about her at: <http://FantasticDreams.50megs.com> or at either of her MySpaces: <http://www.myspace.com/PamelaKKinney> and <http://www.myspace.com/SapphirePhelan>. She admits she can always be found at her desk and on her computer, writing. And yes, the house and husband sometime suffer for it!



THE CTHULHU WHISPERER

by Robert Borski

Because it's important he not stutter, the young man in the rowboat does not swallow his medication until he is far from shore. As a result, though the waves of the Atlantic are soon crashing about him, inside his mind he is calm and almost at home as much as he is in any of his favorite places: the comic book store, the cafeteria at Miskatonic U., engaging in flame wars on-line. And after one last check for cell phone messages, he begins his mission.

It takes one to know one.

This is the credo of all those who aspire to the Whisperer Clan, whether it's horses, ghosts, or giant cuttlefish from outer space that need to be gentled. You must imagine what it's like to be in their hooves, their ectoplasm, their cephalopods. Their aspect and affect -- what's acting as a burr on their souls. Only then will you be able to address their particular variety of rage and negotiate its release.

Suddenly, but to no surprise, the waters part and, seeing the writhing thing before him with its flukes and wings and cruel squid head, the fledgling Cthulhu Whisperer is careful to address it in syllables old when Atlantis was new, but updated in tone, so hierarchies of awe, respect, and compassion dominate. Oprah-speak, in other words. "I know your pain, my brother. I, too, have been unfairly precluded my due. Really, the sunken streets of R'lyeh are not so much different from those of the town I now live in."

Sluggish but attentive, the Great Old One lifts its tentacles in a semaphore of curiosity, chromatopores shifting toward the red.

"Good, I see I've piqued your interest. Like me, you must find it maddening that your current position is held in such low esteem by the world. You could literally rule this marble of dirt and blue piss if

you chose to end your somnolent phase, and will again when the stars are right. But who actually knows of you? A few fish-gilled initiates with a passion for pulp literature and maybe a legion of game-wankers with a serious non-grasp of reality and feeble networking skills. Everyone else is much more entranced with arrivistes, whether it's the tripartite goddess of Britney/Lindsey/Paris or worshipping at the altar of Facebook. Meanwhile, from that anvil of dreams once known as Hollywood, torture porn is now extruded in ever greater quantities, even as its leading monsters grow increasingly mired in sequelitis, like the monarchs of some severely inbred aristocracy. Small wonder you became so riled when your agent stopped returning your calls."

Tentacles begin to lash wildly. A pulsing crimson strobes along the tail flukes.

"Ahhhh," says the Cthulhu Whisperer, allowing himself a first faint smile. "I've touched a nerve. Forgive me. Perhaps we should continue elsewhere."

Partially submerging itself, dread Cthulhu flings a pod-arm his way, but stops just short of a scaly towel-snap.

Once again, just as he rehearsed, the young man continues his speech, his attempt at communion. "Then, of course, there's your ridiculous status as an undocumented alien, as well as your loss in the previous century of your favored human conduit, the gentleman from Providence (himself no fan of the genetically suspect, eh?). Global Positioning Satellites stalk your every move like paparazzi, and the elopement of both Hastur and Shub-Niggurath could not have boded well for this cycle's bimillennial snog-and-shag. In fact, were I capable of generating tsunami the way you can, there is little doubt a certain local prom would not have ended as placidly as it did. So you see, my brother, I'm down



with you; I've walked 20,000 leagues in your star boots; I know what it's like to be dateless and unappreciated, with a face full of barnacles and sea grit."

Suddenly, all color drains from its pores as Dread Cthulhu sighs like a fumarole.

"What? No. Really? Sure. I might be able to wrangle you a fix-up with Gojira. You fancy her a bit? She reminds me of Bethany, from my spinning class. Except without the braces."

The gulf that appears is both far and wide, and deeper than the sea. Or perhaps it's simply his medication beginning to fade. At any rate, soon only a wriggling meter of tentacle remains above the waves.

"Hey, not a problem," says the young man, easing into rowing position again. "They don't call me the Cthulhu Whisperer for nothing. Now if you'll excuse me, I've the last of three Doctor Whos to watch."

THE END

Robert Borski grew up in Wisconsin, not far from Sauk City, home to Arkham House and its founder, August Derleth. Though he has not written much HPL-inspired fiction, he was a contributor to the early *Weird Tales* fanzine *Etchings & Odysseys*. These days, he mostly writes poetry.



BY THE SEA, BY THE SEA

By Caroline Totten

My mother and father loved the sea, but its dark water terrified me. At night, I would huddle on the Innsmouth beach next to my mother while she held the lantern as a signal for my father. He would wade out into the cove, carrying the lobster cage, and then the strobe light attached to his head would sink into the water. He said lobsters came out at night to feed and that was the time to harvest. My mother said the sharks also hunted at night. She didn't like sharks, and though she was a strong swimmer, one scary shark encounter was enough to keep her out of the water at night.

Fishing and scuba diving occupied my father. Each time he left the house, I thought I would never see him again. Once he had taken me out in his boat, and I cried and screamed until he brought me back and dumped me with my mother. "I think we got a landlubber," he told her.

I adored my mother, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not share her love of the sea. Nor did I share my father's delight when he dropped the wiggling lobsters into a kettle of boiling water. He had a fire pit in the yard and cooked the lobsters outdoors because mother didn't want the stink in the house. He cleaned fish outdoors too on his work table. He knew just how to slice them and lift out the backbone. Then he would put them on the grill. We almost never ate meat. It was always fish, lobster or clams.

My father was bald, thin but solid. He said he was born bald and he would die that way. My mother said he would live to a hundred. When I was six, a hundred seemed like a long time to me.

My mother was beautiful. She had long, wispy blond hair and eyes blue as the sky. She was much younger than my father. She was his third wife. I was the only child, and I think my father wished I had been a boy. In fact, I'm sure he wished I had been a boy. His son by his

previous marriage was a disappointment. From time to time, he came to stay with us. All he did was eat and sleep and wander the beach. I called him Walrus and he called me Brat.

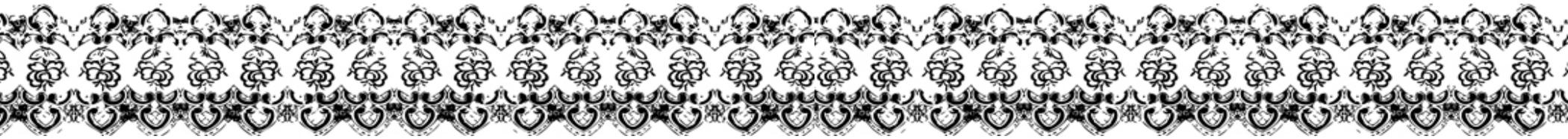
I wasn't a brat. I played quietly with my dolls or helped my mother in the garden. One day when my mother was hunting for clams, I found three red rocks that had been washed up by the tide. They were round and smooth and about the size of baseballs. Mother helped me carry them home and put them in the garden. She planted parsley around them. They were my treasures and I thought they were magical. I loved to touch them because I thought they were teaching me something, though I didn't quite know what. Anyway, one day when I touched the rocks, I became inspired and I asked Walrus, "Where is Venus?"

"It's in West Virginia, stupid."

The one thing Walrus and I had in common was a fear of the sea. When father suggested a day of fishing, Walrus would vomit, then roll on the bed and say he was sick. I knew he was afraid. He came to Innsmouth only when he was desperate for a place to stay. He told me the place creeped him out. He was a baby when his mother took him to Ohio to live with his grandparents. After the divorce, he didn't see his father until he was three, and even now that he was older, he and Father were like strangers. Actually, I think Walrus liked my mother more than he liked his father.

She would defend him in a kind way. "Stop nagging the boy. These are depressed times. There are no jobs in Innsmouth for a young man with his talents."

When my father bit his lip, I knew he was thinking: What talents? Then he would give Walrus money and put him on the bus going back



to Ohio. I wondered if someday my father would put me on a bus and tell me to get a life.

I was six when my mother gave birth to a purple baby. In those frightful hours when I heard her moaning, I also heard my father shout at the doctor. He called him a “worthless boozier.” He ordered the doctor from the house. I was hiding in the corner of the hallway in my nightgown, terrified that my mother would die. The grandfather clock at the bottom of the stairs was bonging midnight when I crept toward the bedroom of my parents. Through the crack in the door, I watched my father tie a string around a tube that was hanging from the belly of the baby. There was blood on the bed. He wrapped the baby in a blanket and placed the bundle on the pillow next to my mother. She smiled and her face glowed like the moon. I knew then that the new baby had replaced me in the position next to my mother’s heart.

From the very beginning, my little sister was strange. My mother protected her with an obsessive devotion which was shared by my father. I was supposed to love Lisalee and I tried, though she was nothing like me. Not the slightest resemblance. She was tiny, thin, and bald like my father. Her eyes were black marbles and mine were blue. I thought I might learn to love her when she stopped crying.

At night when the surf pounded on the beach, I could still hear her wailing in the other room. My mother rarely slept. She spent the nights rocking Lisalee. In the morning, father took over Lisalee’s care while mother stayed in bed.

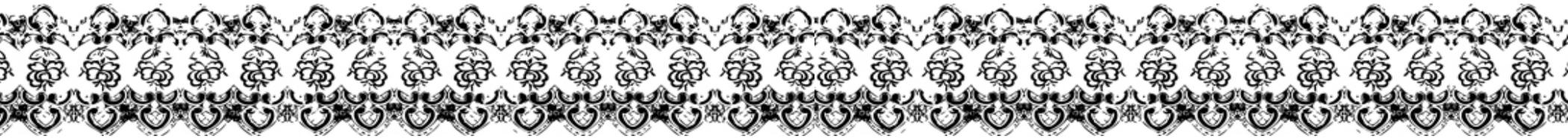
Father did not have a regular job. From time to time, he collected rents from Innsmouth properties that he had inherited. In 1927-28 when the houses along the waterfront were burned by the Federal government, my grandfather bought the land dirt cheap. Gradually, with the help of his brothers, he built cottages. At first, he rented to tourists curious about Devil’s Reef and the imps from Hell. Later some pagan crafters, shady ladies, and fishermen rented the houses. My father didn’t talk about the renters, but once in a while, he referred to them as “pond scum.”

So, even before Lisalee was born, my father was anti-social. Afterwards, he was even worse. He didn’t want anyone to see Lisalee. He said she had baby rash, but it looked like fish scales to me. She couldn’t drink cow’s milk. It made her vomit, so mother nursed her in secret until she was four years old. Lisalee would also eat pureed fish, seaweed, and mashed peas, and father said she had a delicate stomach. But her disposition was far from delicate where I was concerned. She tore my dolls apart, ripped my drawings into shreds, and though I was upset, I wasn’t allowed to scold her. Strangely enough, she liked my three red rocks. She named them Dorty One, Dorty Two, and Dorty Three. She talked to them as if they were invisible playmates. She wasn’t stupid, but she did odd things. When in the garden, she ate dirt. In the house, she ate all the erasers on my pencils. Father said it was nothing odd, just something that children did. Mother said she had a mineral deficiency, and she gave Lisalee little sips of cod liver oil.

After my sister was born, my father wanted to send me to boarding school, but my mother would not permit it. She had spent twelve years with the Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters, who dressed in long, grey robes and helmets with grey veils, ran a boarding school for girls near Hathpine. My mother was sent there by her father when she was eight. He wanted to remove her from the “curse of Innsmouth,” which he claimed had killed his wife.

Mother insisted on schooling me at home. She bought books from the itinerant book peddler for a small sum and began to teach me to read. I was an eager student and soon I was reading nursery rhymes and children’s stories to Lisalee. She would sit beside me on the sofa and listen with rapt attention. Before long, Lisalee was turning the pages and repeating the rhymes. Father thought she could read, but it wasn’t that. She memorized everything. She particularly liked the picture book of sea creatures. She would point to dolphins and say “duffins.” She made me laugh, and mother said I was a good influence on my little sister. But that influence did not extend to outdoors.

Our cottage, the one my mother’s father had built, was nestled on the rocks above the beach. The foundation was stone and the fireplace was



made of pudding stones, but the second floor and the widow's watch were made of solid timbers weathered to a dull brown. The window in the sitting room faced south and overlooked the sea. The kitchen in the back of the house had steps down to the herb garden. It was protected from the winter winds by an L-shaped pudding stone wall with a smooth top. I liked to play Monkey on that wall. I would climb onto the garden bench and pull myself up to the top. Very carefully, I balanced myself with outstretched arms and walked the top of the wall. Only once did I fall into the rose hip bushes.

Lisalee wanted to play Monkey, but she couldn't. She had weak legs and bruised easily. The bruises bled, wouldn't heal, and gradually turned into seeping holes that impaired her walking. Although mother treated the wounds with a poultice of honey mixed with rosemary and lavender, Lisalee did not heal. Neither of my parents trusted the Innsmouth doctor, who was rarely sober. Sometimes at night, I huddled on the stairway and listened to my parents talk of the curse. My mother cried and said, "It killed my mother and it will kill Lisalee."

I didn't know what the curse was, but I suspected it was a flesh-eating disease. I didn't know my grandparents. They died before I was born. My father said Innsmouth people did not live long; it was the Devil that took them.

Sometimes, when I went to the beach to play with other children, Father would lecture me, "Don't drink from the same cup as them. Don't eat candy from their hand."

I was eleven when my friend Tommy told me, "You best not play on the beach after sundown. The imps will getya." He wore an ugly, little amulet around his neck. It was carved from wood and looked savage. It had one shiny ruby eye. It had washed up on the beach and he found it. His mother told him it was worth plenty, so he kept it. When he went swimming, he asked me to hold his amulet. I knew he liked me because he trusted me with his treasure.

Mother allowed me to go to the beach when Father was away, but did not allow me to bring my friends home. She did not want anyone to see Lisalee. By the time, my sister was five, her feet had turned a reddish-purple and her toes were stiff. Mother carried her around the house, and I read to her.

Then one morning, Lisalee stopped breathing. I heard mother wailing and ran to Lisalee's room. Her skin was dark, something like a purplish blue. She lay very still and peaceful. When mother left the room to call Father, I asked Lisalee, "Are you really dead?"

I swear she winked one eye. I believed her spirit was still alive. When father came into the room, he looked at Lisalee and said, "Well, it is done." He wrapped her in a blanket and said we would bury her at sea like the good fish that she was. I didn't know what to do. I ran to the garden and sat, staring at the three red rocks that Lisalee had called her invisible friends. I didn't want my sister to go into the sea alone.

An hour later, trembling with fear, I climbed into my father's fishing boat. The mist was thick as chowder, and I could not see anything but the dark water lapping at the boat. The tide was going out as father stood at the wheel and started the engine. The chugging sound was harsh and I covered my ears. No one talked. My mother sat in a somber daze, clutching the bundle. My sister was wrapped in a white blanket; the boat was white; the mist was white; and the water looked black.

Father steered the boat through the cove, past Devil's Reef, moving steadily toward the deep ocean. It was like slow death. I expected to be sucked into the underworld, gasping for breath. I leaned against my mother for warmth and comfort, but she seemed oblivious to my whimpering. Then my father cut the engine, and the boat drifted on the whispering water.

My mother handed over Lisalee, and my father unfolded the blanket and slipped her into the sea. For a moment, she floated and then the current pulled her under. I was hysterical when I dropped my three



red rocks into the water. I imagined Lisalee's invisible friends going with her. My father ordered me to hush, and my mother wrapped the blanket around me and held me under her arm.

When we back on shore, Father said, "Never speak of this day." Together we climbed the stone steps to the house.

Slowly, my parents resumed the quiet routine of a reclusive life, but I was restless. Every morning when the weather was fair, I walked the beach for miles. I didn't go into the water, but its murmuring made me feel less lonely. About a year later, after a stormy night of churning waves, the tide brought my three red rocks back to me. I was ecstatic and carried them home as if they were a message from Lisalee.

My parents were awed. They didn't know what to make of the rocks. The mathematical possibility of finding them again was astronomical. Father polished them and put on the mantel of the fireplace. They were beautiful, and on dark nights, the rocks glowed red like beacons that had broken loose from the underwater world.

THE END

Caroline Totten lives in Canton, Ohio USA. She has worked as a reporter and a teacher, and currently is a freelance writer. Her fiction, humor, and poetry have been published in print and on the Internet. She is a member of Writers With Humor and the Canton Writers' Guild. A few of her recent publications are listed in the Directory of Poets and Writers.



A BEDTIME STORY

by Kírk Barrett

She fingers the voodoo doll and looks past me out the window. Ocean waves rise and fall in the listless light of evening. Autumn breezes taste of salt and anticipation. I don't often have guests, but it's not unheard-of for devoted fans to find my beach-front alcove far from any other house along the shore. They come to meet the reclusive author who writes weird and disturbing stories of other worlds so closely resembling our own.

"They're like bedtime stories," Kira tells me, and we both laugh at what sort of kids might read my stories at bedtime.

Those condemned to some accursed fate, perhaps.

"So you stick pins and stuff in this thing, Mr. Stout?" she asks, holding the scarecrow figure of stick and straw wrapped in soft fabrics of gold, green, and purple. Seven pins with colored plastic heads stick out of the voodoo doll at odd angles: this one red, that one blue. "Isn't that like--I dunno--karmically bad or somethin'?"

I eye the young girl's fingers and pose a smile.

"Call me Cully. Sticking pins in voodoo dolls is only as bad as the intentions that guide the action. Besides," I tell her, "my interest in a particular subject shouldn't be confused with belief in it."

I cast a half-hearted yet dramatic glance around my workspace. The clutter of religious paraphernalia and spiritual trappings represents most regions of the world: an authentic Aztec calendar which once held the flow of sacrificial blood hangs on the south wall; a brass statuette of the Zoroastrian winged lion perches atop the eastern bookshelf; a jadeite green dragon from the Han Dynasty watches from the northern window sill; and placed on my writing desk is a small

glassine oblong sphere that may--or may not--be a World Egg. Each item is a memento of a particular time or place or person. Some are gifts; others come to me from less direct sources.

These fetishes inspire, remind me of what has come before, and warn of what can happen when dealing with these forces. I pay great respect to the origins of each, and even though I do not subscribe to the spiritual belief associated with them, they all have guided my own cosmology.

"If you don't believe in voodoo," my young guest asks, "why do you have a voodoo doll with these pins stuck in it?"

"I don't need to concoct hoodoo potions to know it's a really bad idea to go around invoking Baron Samedi."

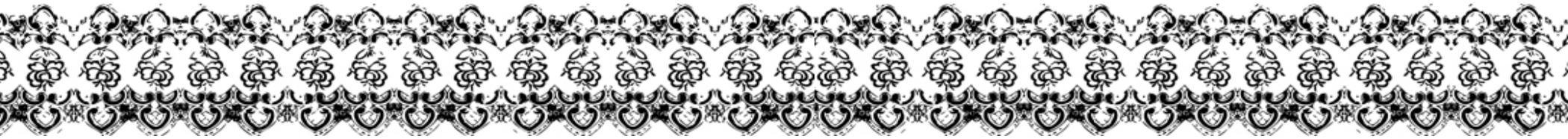
Kira glances out the window behind me again, staring at the dimming beach and lazy surf. "You sound kinda like an old boyfriend of mine," she says.

The girl doesn't look to be more than 19 or 20 years old, so I wonder how much of an *old boyfriend* she could possibly have.

"He talked a lot like you sometimes, except--" she turns the doll in her hands, fingers brushing over the seven pins. I shift uneasily, but she doesn't alter their positions.

"Except?" I prompt her to continue.

She looks down from the window to the doll in her hands as if just noticing it was there.



“Except that he was full of shit. He liked trying to cast spells from that stupid paperback book, the *Necronomicon*.”

“Ah, the Simon-penned comedic version of an old classic,” I say, stifling a laugh, “certain gateway for childish trouble.”

“Yeah.” Her voice trails off and her eyes drift back up to the window behind me.

I don’t keep the question at bay any longer: “You expecting someone out there on the beach?”

The young girl startles.

A cute, brief flash of surprise blushes her face. Her laugh is just as nervous as her fidgeting hands. She sets the voodoo doll down on the corner of my writing desk strewn with manuscript pages like broken shells across a stormy beach.

“Uh, no. Yes. I dunno. I thought –”

I know what she is going to say

“– I thought I saw something out there in the waves. But when I look, nothing’s there.”

“Eh, trick of the light,” I tell her. “Probably nothing.”

She giggles, looking directly at me, salacious smiles in her dark eyes. “Like the light in your story, ‘Abandoned Plan of Dreams?’”

I nod, and quote the line she’s thinking of: “‘There is a Sacred Light that shines forever, and an Infernal Glare burning without warmth.’”

That is truth. I have seen and felt both.

I swing my chair around to look out the window. The view is much the same as it has always been since I took up residence here. The gloaming of stars, sand, and ocean.

I always wanted a house on the beach, a writing room that faced the waves. I was granted this place as part of a deal I made. I am allowed to remain here so long as I keep my part of the bargain.

To achieve a great desire, an equal sacrifice must be offered.

I swing back around in the chair to face her. I know what is likely to happen. But she has to suggest it. It has to be her idea.

Some things are governed by rules that cannot be bent or broken.

A flicker of anticipation flutters behind her eyes. Another blush blooms across her face and she looks away.

I wait from her to continue.

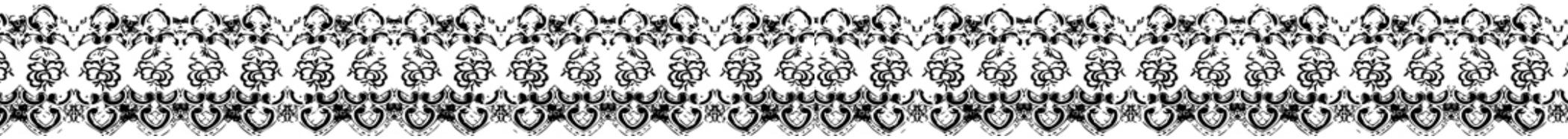
Her blush sharpens her smile. “Want to go for a walk on the beach?”

For a moment, I wish she hadn’t asked, that she had stayed for a while with me inside and then left without stepping foot on the beach. Once her feet touch the sand, I would have to--I would have to keep my part of the bargain.

“Sure,” I say, and take the voodoo doll from her hands and place it back in its particular place on the southwest corner of my desk.

“Is the water still warm enough for a swim?” she asks as we pass through the dim house, the veranda, and on outside.

It’s late August. The air is warm and lush and the seven stars of Ursa Major perch just above the glimmering sea. Even after dark, the ocean is still pleasant. I tell her as much, and lead the way down the narrow path



among the sedges and marram grass. It's not far to where we need to be.

She runs ahead of me over the dunes to the wet sand where the high tide has retreated from the beach.

Her footprints sink deep then are engulfed by the waves as she dances and plays in the dusk light of eventide. I enjoy the sight of her splashing through the waves, bare feet kissed by the foamy surf before it pulls back into the sea, and wish again, for a moment, that she could stay here with me for a while.

But I could not remain here for long unless I do what is needed.

She spins and dances and we walk along the beach. The night creeps in over the eastern sea.

The young girl doesn't notice seven crustaceous figures emerging from the receding tide. The creatures' skin glistens green-gray in the dusk light; opalescent eyes shine from the tips of prehensile stalks and fix on her. A single serpentine leg propels them quickly through the surf and six webbed claws on each snap open and closed as they anticipate their feast.

My agents.

My neighbors.

This is just the deal we made.

The beach is theirs. They allow me to live here, in the sand dunes of their backyard, and in return, I bring them provender for their strange rites.

I have tasted their Light Eternal and smelled the rancid decay in the place where Light Never Warms. Never do I want to sink into those depths again.

I uphold my part of our bargain.

Even when I falter with regret.

The girl splashes deeper into the surf, but never sees the seven briny, gilled things until they are upon her.

She howls until her screams are cut short. I must wait until I no longer hear the slow, wet gurgles in the crimson froth staining the blood-rimmed tide and my neighbors slink back into the wine-dark sea.

They have their offering and I have another story.

A tale from my most recent guest.

Something beginning with a voodoo doll, and I try to remember the young girl's name, but can't quite think of what it was.

Not that it matters. This one will be hers.

A bedtime story: *She fingers the voodoo doll and looks past me out the window . . .*

THE END

Kirk Barrett recently moved to the coast of North Carolina. His fiction took 3rd place in the 2008 Writer's Digest Short-Short Story Contest, and he currently has a Southern Gothic novel submitted to several agents and publishers. He is a chief interrogator at a kitty Gitmo prison where he specializes in the stretching-purred stress position. His website is awaiting a long-overdue update, so until then, he could be found on Facebook.



SWIMMING LESSONS OFF THE NORTH SHORE

By Paula R. Stiles

The little boy had opalescent eyes and imbricated skin. He was human. He walked on two feet with ten toes, had two hands with ten fingers. Yet those feet and hands were webbed. And he almost smelled like seaweed. Like his mother.

His father worried about him. He didn't like to take his son down to the beach. The few times they went, to go clamming or just to walk and pick up seashells, the boy was far too enthusiastic. He would jump up and down, in and out of the surf, barefoot or in shoes. And he would stare out to sea, to the reef that was the boundary between the shallows and the deep with all its singing mysteries. The father would watch the boy intently, sure that if he so much as took his eyes off him for a second, the boy would disappear into the waves like the flash of a fish. His mother had drowned herself a little farther north only two years before.

But the boy had begged and pleaded. Finally, the father gave in. They would go horseback riding on the beach. Surely, that was safe enough.

The first oriflamme of danger appeared when the owner of the stables led them to the paddock where the horses waited. One of the ubiquitous horse-mad teenagers that worked there has already saddled up two horses for them.

What warned the father next was the smell. He caught it and at first thought it was the groom. There were trends in the local youth toward his own boy's looks, especially among those of the old town diehards who had settled there back in the 17th century. But as he approached, he realized that it wasn't the groom at all. It was the horse.

The horses seemed normal enough on the surface--one, a head-shaking, side-stepping black mare and the other a grass-chewing, hard-mouthed, gelded specimen of equine nonpulchritude in bay colors. But the gelding lacked the usual musty, grass scent of horses. Instead, he smelled like fish. Or seaweed at low tide.

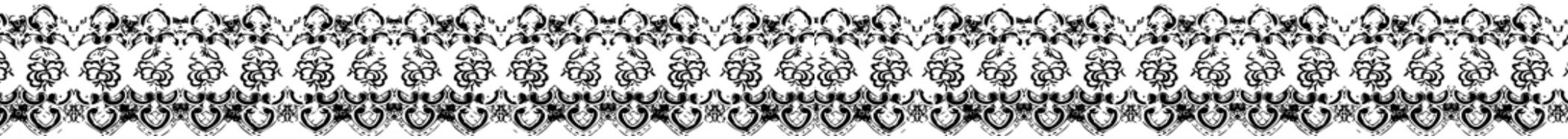
The father backed up, immediately made uneasy by the stink of day-old fish wrap. He put a hand up to the groom. "Wait here. I want to talk to your boss first." He turned to his son. "I'll be right back."

His son nodded, though he seemed confused, or perhaps disappointed. The father didn't want to think about the latter. Of course his son wouldn't mind. And they could always take another horse. The father ran around the side of the barn, to catch the owner who had disappeared from sight. He'd rented horses from her before and she never stuck around for the nitty-gritty of saddling a horse and sending it out with its owners. She always left that to the teenagers.

Even though it had only been a few minutes, the owner was already well-headed back toward the house. The father had to run to catch up. "Excuse me!" he called. "Excuse me! Wait up, please!"

The owner slowed, looking reluctant. "No refunds," she grunted in true Old-New-England style. She was a middle-aged woman of slowly-accumulating gravitas in knee-length black leather boots, jeans and a ratty t-shirt.

The father felt annoyed. Of course, the woman wouldn't give him a refund. She was famous around town for making any money that passed into her hands disappear in a feat of legerdemain. And anyway, it was only thirty dollars for an hour's ride. He switched tack.



“It’s not about that,” he said. “I’m a little concerned about that gelding. He seems a little...spirited.”

The owner stopped and turned around. She guffawed. “Are you kiddin’ me? Ol’ Marsh, he’s eighteen years old. He hasn’t had a spirited thought since they gelded him. He’s as calm as they come.”

“He’s not exactly like other horses, I don’t think.” The father really didn’t want to get into this, but he also didn’t want to let his son go out to the beach on that horse.

The owner raised an eyebrow. “Ah, you mean the smell. Marsh has always been like that, ever since he was a foal. His dam was like that, too. My father used to joke that she came from the sea out by the reef, not a land horse at all.”

“Yes, well, I’d like for my son to ride another horse. He’s allergic to fish.” This was a lie--his son loved fish--but he was running out of excuses, and for thirty dollars, he was a little irritated that he needed any excuses in the first place.

The owner seemed to recognize this, or perhaps she remembered that it was an unusually cold and rainy fall without many tourists and father and son were local customers she’d had before. Best not to drive them away by being stubborn. “All right. We’ll saddle you up another horse.” She hesitated and then started back down toward the barn. “I’d better go down there, myself. Jake can be stubborn with guests if they want him to do something I ain’t told him outright myself.” The father figured “Jake” must have been the disreputable-looking teenager.

Having gotten his way, the father should have been relieved. Yet, as he followed her down to the barn, he felt more uneasy than before. As they rounded the edge of the barn, he heard a shout of surprise and a high, strangled neigh. The shout sounded like Jake not his son. He exchanged a glance of surprise with the owner, then bolted past her around the barn back into the courtyard in front of it. The mare was trying to bolt toward them, Jake hanging on to her reins for dear

life. Neither the gelding nor the man’s son were anywhere in sight, except for the flash of a black tail disappearing between the thorny Beach Plum bushes down the trail toward the ocean.

The father cried out in terror. His son had ridden a horse before, though he was too young to be good at it. But it wasn’t just that--it was the beach. The man felt a great dread that they were heading toward the beach.

He would have jumped on the mare, but she was clearly out of control, eyes rolling as she tried to pull away in the opposite direction from the gelding’s last appearance. Well, she would. She was a normal horse.

The father pelted down the trail after his son, dodging among the thorny bushes, still evergreen even in fall and amply covering his view. It wasn’t until he came out onto the high-tide dunes that the beach plums fell away and he had a clear view of the shoreline.

He was too late. Already, the bay gelding had entered the water up to his neck and swum out almost halfway to the reef, the boy just visible on his back. The man screamed at them both, but it was no good. Neither old Marsh nor William Martin Simms IV heeded the cries of William’s father, who could not hear the call of the sea.

THE END

Paula R. Stiles is a random citizen of the world who has sold SF, fantasy and horror to *Strange Horizons*, *Writers of the Future*, *Jim Baen’s Universe*, *Arkham Tales*, and *History is Dead*, among others. She also has published a cowritten mystery/SF novel, *Fraterfamilias*. Find her at: <http://www.geocities.com/rpcv.geo/other.html>.