Innsmouth Free Press

Mary Robinette Kowal

&

Nathalie Boisard-Beudin
Lori M. Myers
Berrien Henderson
Rafe McGregor
Ann K. Schwader
Matthew Bey

Innsmouth Free Press # 2 ~ Fiction Fall Issue 2009

Table of Contents

Editorial **3**

Prayer at Dark River | Mary Robinette Kowal **5**

What's in a Shell? | Nathalie Boisard-Beudin **8**

Partum | Lori M. Myers **13**

Something Apollonius Rhodius Left Out | Berrien C. Henderson **15**

The Stones at Spurn Point | Rafe McGregor **16**

Scream Saver | Ann K. Schwader **26**

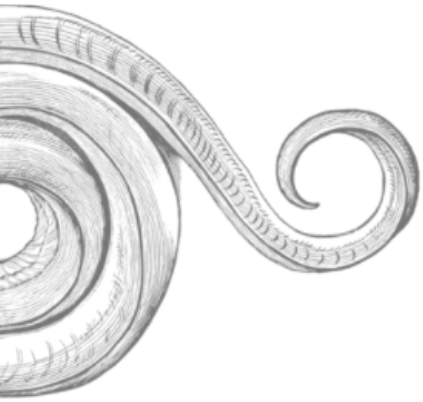
Beneath the Red City | Matthew Bey **30**

Editorial

Women seldom appear in Lovecraft's fiction. His world is a male world, with few female characters dotting the edges of the story. There is Asenath Waite, but she is possessed by the spirit of her father; Lavinia Whateley gives birth to Wilbur and quickly exits the story. The female realm holds little interest to Lovecraft.

That is why six of the seven stories in this issue of *Innsmouth Free Press* look at women, and not just any kind of women, but terrible women. *Femme fatales*, monstrous creatures, all staring at us from the darkest corners of our imagination.

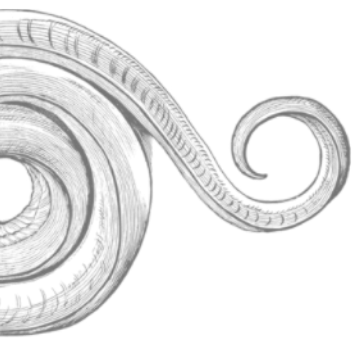
First, Mary Robinette Kowal introduces us to a troubled man looking for a miracle in "Prayer at Dark River". Nathalie Boisard-Beudin plays with a traditional symbol of femininity: a doll. But the doll of "What's in a Shell?" has many layers, and is more dangerous than you can imagine. Lori M. Myers allows us to experience a foreboding pregnancy in "Partum". Meanwhile, Berrien C. Henderson reveals "What Appollonius Rhodius Didn't Say", and no one else has lived to tell – until now. Rafe McGregor is drawn to an old town and an old lover in "The Stones at Spurn Point". Ann K. Schwader takes us to the office and the job from hell in "Scream Saver". Finally, Matthew Bey weaves a hypnotic web of menace in "Beneath the Red City".



And remember, in 2010, *Innsmouth Free Press* will be publishing a special multiethnic issue. We are still open for submissions so send us your work before December 15.

Many tentacles,

Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles



Prayer at Dark River

by Mary Robinette Kowal

Dear Lord in Heaven, O Merciful Father.

Always I have turned to You in prayer when frightened and my first instinct tonight was to kneel upon these old flagstones and beseech you for guidance. My other choice would be to commune with Professor Webb as we wait to see if his sorcery has had effect. Should I pray the American sorcerer has succeeded, so that Guðrun is safe, or should I pray that he fails?

If he succeeds, it means that his power is greater than Yours. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

This – this uncertainty is what drives me to madness. Am I so removed from Your grace that I cannot tell the difference between God's work and the Devil's? It seems so, since a sorcerer is here on my request.

I have racked my brain, searching for some moment in which I failed, some deed for which I can atone.

A fortnight past, Thorir Magnusson discovered my deacon's horse in his field. The beast was shivering and wet, but of Hákon there was no sign. I began praying the moment Thorir told us that he had found the horse, because I knew that Hákon had ridden to call upon Guðrun across Dark River. The weather had turned unseasonably warm and, from the condition of his horse, it seemed clear that the ice had broken as he'd crossed the river.

But I had faith in You. Please, I begged, let him be well. Please let him be safe. Please let him live. Is that my failing? Did I pray too hard and put his life above Your will?

We found him washed up at a river bend, and any hope ended when I saw the bare bone on the back of his skull. I prayed to You then, asking for strength to accept this tragedy. I did not curse or protest because I believed that every one of Your children has his time on this Earth and that Hákon had gone to a greater glory. I trusted You.

I buried him in Your name and told my parishioners to take comfort in knowing that Hákon was now with You. And then, a week after we put Hákon in the grave, Guðrun appeared in the church at night, ringing the bell and raving that Hákon had brought her across the river.

I thought her mad with grief. For hours, I sat by her bed, reading to her from scripture. She had a fascination with 1 Samuel 2:6 "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up." Good child that she is, she thought You had brought Hákon back and that she should go to the grave with him.

Should I have let her?

When she fell asleep, her face drawn and the rosy bloom gone from her cheeks, I left her to the healing powers of slumber. The night had not quite swung to Matins when she screamed. Praying for strength, I ran to her room.

Hákon stood within. His skull caught the candlelight and gleamed like ice. He had Guðrun by the hand, dragging her to the window. I called Your name and cried out for him to leave in the name of God.

Hákon stood within. His skull caught the candlelight and gleamed like ice. He had Guðrun by the hand, dragging her to the window.

And he did. Like a modern miracle, he dropped her hand and vanished out the window. The only evidence of his presence was the smell of damp earth and the girl sobbing on the floor. I do not remember my words to her, for I was too much in shock that I had, like Jesus, driven a demon forth.

It has occurred to me that this moment of pride was my downfall.

Please forgive me and, if You will not forgive me, have mercy on that poor girl for her own sake. Whatever has caused You to send Hákon back to haunt her night after endless night, can be no fault of Guðrun's.

My Lord, I have known this girl since birth. I baptized her and believe, in my heart, that she is as pure as any girl of her age can be. I have begged You for guidance. I have prayed, read scripture, fasted, and attempted exorcisms, but nothing makes this demonic mockery vanish for more than a night.

In my despair, I called Webb, the sorcerer of the highlands, and asked him to try his hand at driving the demon forth. I take this sin solely upon myself. I know that to treat with such a fellow is to damn myself, but I am too weak to continue to watch Guðrun suffer.

I am weak, Lord.

Last night, I rejoiced when Webb, with his dark book, wrestled the demon out of her room and to the grave from which Hákon escaped. Sturdy men waited there with a boulder carved with deep and mystic runes for the purpose. The ghost's pale hands scrabbled at the side of the earth as they rolled the massive stone over the grave, trapping Hákon within.

But that was not the test, for my triumphs with Your word have also lasted a night. No, the test was whether Hákon would return tonight. Outside these turf walls, the rooster crows and the pale light of dawn touches the window. Hákon has not come.

I am kneeling in prayer and, like a child, cannot believe the truth of my own senses. Hákon has not come. Webb is standing from his chair and looking out the window; the light grows stronger and the night has passed, without a doubt.

But I keep my head bent in this empty conversation, pretending for a moment longer that Your answer will come in some other fashion. The cold sun touches me and the answer is clear. Hákon has not come.

THE END

Mary Robinette Kowal is the 2008 recipient of the Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Her short fiction appears in *Strange Horizons*, *Cosmos* and *Asimov's*. Mary, a professional puppeteer and voice actor, lives in Portland, OR with her husband Rob and eight manual typewriters. Tor is publishing her debut novel, *Shades of Milk and Honey*, in 2010. Visit www.maryrobinettekowal.com

What's in a Shell?

By Nathalie Boisard-Beudin

I remember the whole thing.

It all started by Auntie Alice saying that she had brought us back something special from her trip in Russia. Now, considering her history of gift hunting, I'd rather deducted that something "special" was most likely to turn out being a hugely discounted trinket bought from a dingy store, or something she might have been bartering from an illegal street vendor.

Nonetheless, the set of Russian dolls she deposited on Jonathan's bed seemed quite normal. Lovely even, delicately painted in the best tradition of miniatures: rosy cheeks, flowery head scarf and apron, big eyes.

Mind you, this was the first Christmas since Jo's accident, so everybody brought all sorts of extravagant goodies to his room. He was cutting such a cute stricken-angel figure with his golden locks and big forget-me-not blue eyes that it was sometimes difficult to move about for the mass of gifts that well-wishers would shower him with.

However, a set of Russian dolls might have been thought of as being a strange choice for a boy's gift and this is probably why the gift box bore my name as well, for once (Auntie being the famous penny pincher she is known – worldwide – to be, you'd figure that she would try to kill two birds with a single kopeck).

Now, I am a tad too old to really be playing with dolls but since, exceptionally, Auntie seemed not to have erred on the cheap side, I was not going to complain.

I was still a trifle skeptical, though: maybe the nice exterior was only there to fool punters. Perhaps, once we'd started to un-nest the various layers of *matrioshka*, we would find that they were not painted at all, or that they had bawdy motives – although tourists would probably pay more for these than for the political ones – or that instead of hiding a dozen or more smaller versions of the top doll, it would only contain four or five at best.

So, we set to open them with gusto and an inquisitive mind. They proved, however, difficult to undo, even with a screw-like motion, and it took us the best part of fifteen minutes to get to the second layer. It looked just as lovely as the top one, with maybe just a slight slant to the eyes, giving it a somewhat shifty look. I was about to get up close and personal with the new doll when Jo signaled me to pick up the first shell.

I gave it to him, thinking that he wanted to close it again, but he started to inspect the interior of the box instead. I climbed onto the bed to look over his shoulder and, amazingly enough, the inside of the doll had been painted as well, which probably accounted for the difficulty in opening them, as the wood had not been machined with that in mind. The painting was all over the interior and represented some star formations. We had been through a fury of astronomy two years before, so identifying the constellations should not have proved to be problematic and yet, we could not reconcile the patterns with our memories. I went out to my room to get the celestial maps but, even with this aid at hand, we had to admit after a while that we were not able to identify the stars represented there.

We waved it aside, agreeing that the artist had probably invented the formations: after all, what would a poor guy reduced to paint dolls for a living know – or care – about stars?

We therefore abandoned the constellation puzzle to focus again on the second doll and the boon she was meant to hide within.

Again, it was quite a struggle to unfasten it and I will confess that at one point I was tempted to use a spanner to wrench it open. In the end, I demurred: I could not face the damage that such a crude tool would have necessarily caused to the exquisite painting and my restraint paid off, for the two parts came away in the end, without any damage to the lacquer. The third doll was just as cute as the second or first ones and had a rather sarcastic smile on her cheery lips. This was a nice touch, I thought: an exact image reproduced at a smaller scale would have been rather boring. More traditional, surely, but boring nonetheless.

Jonathan reached for the open box again, and this time, I had a look in myself before passing it on to him. Once more, the same starry night had been depicted inside the doll's body, but although the constellations matched – we checked that – the design in the second *matrioshka* felt different, as if we could really see the stars glitter this time. Jo complained about feeling cold and quickly put the bits away – after all, the star formation was just as indecipherable as the first one. We rubbed our hands a bit – I even went as far as to go and make tea, for it decidedly felt chilly all of a sudden – and we attacked the third doll.

Although she was slightly easier to open than her bigger sisters, she still put up a good fight, and I got irritated because it looked like her smile had become a smirk, and that she was mocking my efforts and sweat – that little exertion had got me warm all right. However, the feeling of aggravation must have spiced my twisting motion a trifle because she suddenly gave way, sending me flying from the edge of the bed where I had perched myself. Jo was mightily amused by my antics – despite the fall, it felt good to hear him laugh again after the accident that had killed his legs and left him alive but comatose for such a long time – and happy because the two halves of the open doll had landed in his lap.

I therefore examined the fourth-layer creature while he inspected the inside of her bigger avatar. She had the same sarcastic smile as the one before, but had a somewhat-darkened expression by extremely arched eyebrows that lent a rather diabolical air to her otherwise coy demeanour. I noticed that the flowery pattern on her shawl and apron had given way to a green, twirling motif that should have been innocuous, but somehow conveyed a feeling of chaos. It did not help that – by some optical trick surely – it looked like it was moving, reaching tendrils in the direction of the onlooker. Unsettling effect, although I did admire the skills of the maker.

I was getting cold again and reaching for my cup of tea when I spotted the look on Jonathan's face. His huge blue eyes wide open, he seemed captivated by something hidden in the third doll's cask. Maybe this time, the star pattern made sense or perhaps we were to be treated to a different design altogether? I was, however, disappointed to find, upon looking over his shoulder into the hollow, that it was again the same constellation showing.

At first, I could not fathom Jo's fascination with it, but suddenly I thought I spotted something strange with the painting. Some type of dark cloud seemed to move over the twinkling stars, obscuring them in a viscous way. A trick of the light upon the lacquer work, I thought, and yet it did disturb me more than was reasonable. The thing felt alive. And while I immediately shook the idea away as being thoroughly ludicrous, I gently wrestled the parts from my brother's hands, placing a mug of tea between them instead. He let me do this rather absently, as he had in the months that had followed his accident, when he was there but not quite with us.

Some type of dark cloud seemed to move over the twinkling stars, obscuring them in a viscous way. A trick of the light upon the lacquer work, I thought, and yet it did disturb me more than was reasonable. The thing felt alive.

I supposed that the whole doll business had finally bored him into a stupor, but when I suggested that we put the *matrioshka*s away for the day, he violently insisted that we should go on and unveil all their mystery.

So, I opened the fourth doll – with only a little struggle this time – and uncovered her little sister. The creature was definitively impish, with what I thought was a rather cruel smile on her painted face. Her dimples held no genteel charms and she looked like she had been modelled from a rural version of Sacher-Masoch's "Black Czarina". Her shawl seemed richer, too, nearly pulsating with the design that had intrigued me before. The motif had become more intricate as a sort of wriggling maze made of emerald tentacles, this probably caused by the fact that the drawings of the previous doll had been kept in size and not scaled to fit a smaller body. It was fascinating and looked as if it was alive, as if giving an ominous throbbing sound as it twirled and reached. I dropped the doll, with a sudden sense of repulsion and fright – ludicrous impression; for all her diabolical sauciness, she was just as exquisite as the previous one – and noticed that the dull sound I had perceived was that of my own heartbeat, booming in my ears. My hands felt both cold and clammy.

I looked up to check on Jonathan, and saw him once more transfixed by the inner shell of the third-layer doll. He did not seem distressed by what he was looking at but completely mesmerized instead. Staring unblinking, he seemed to be breathing at a slower rate than usual. Something in there was holding him

spellbound, almost roping him in. I had problems this time in looking into the doll's body, for he was blocking my line of sight and could not be made to move. My brother had almost become made of stone and I was half expecting to catch a glimpse of Medusa's locks painted inside the casing.

But again, the same constellation was staring back at me, much compacted by the smaller size body it was constrained to. In fact, it looked like somebody had taken the formation and twisted it most violently, as if some powerful astral winds had taken hold and uprooted the stellar bodies from their normal path. Again there was a sense of movement inside the lacquer, bringing a disturbing life into the design. I was getting fascinated as well – I could feel that my eyes had not blinked for what seemed to be ages – but suddenly I heard Jo moan, "It's coming." This was enough to jolt me back to attention and I asked him what he meant by that. But he did not reply. He looked straight ahead of him into the box and just repeated – just a hoarse whisper, really – "It's coming".

I did not like that. I wrestled the doll's halves from his hands – I had to actually unpeel his fingers one by one from them – and tossed them aside before shaking him awake. His face looked so drawn suddenly that I again said we should forget the *matrioshka* for today and that maybe he should take a nap. He refused most violently at first, but then suddenly his face relaxed and, with the strangest smile on his face, he agreed to rest for a while. I was to wake him up in an hour with a cup of warm chocolate. Could I gather the bits of dolls and put them back on his bedside table? He was afraid that they might be crushed underfoot or lost and it would be a shame, for once, that Auntie Alice had brought us something interesting. So, I did chase and pick up the various doll parts from inside his covers and underneath the bed. I attempted to close the bigger dolls again, but the lacquer refused to comply with my wish, so I left them opened, placing them by order of size on his table.

Then I tucked him in, kissed him on the forehead, closed the heavy curtains against the afternoon sun, and went off to watch an episode of "Black Adder" on DVD – another gift that a parent had showered Jonathan with and that he had agreed gracefully to lend me.

After an hour or so, I made some hot chocolate and went to his room to wake him up.

It was...

It was as if his whole bedroom space had been saturated with the static luminous points we used to get on late TV, back in the days when we did not have programs on all the time. The air was buzzing angrily with them. It was so thick that I could not even see the room: it was like entering into another dimension, dark and blinding at the same time and cold, cold beyond winter.

I think I dropped the mug of chocolate and screamed.

Unfortunately, there was nobody else at home, so help was not going to come.

That thing... These blinking light dots were flashing and racing around as the content of a gigantic digital hornet nest, angry after its home has been shattered. It pulsated darkness around its forms as if it could absorb space. I would have turned around and fled, but the thought of my little brother lost somewhere in there with

that…thing, rooted me where I was. The dots were becoming smaller and brighter, more aggressive in many ways, but the growing darkness lurking between each one of them was looming, cold and getting stronger, seeping a sinister sense of gloom and loss inside my brain.

I don't know quite why – it might have been the progress of obscurity inside the room, covering me like a viscous film, that did it – but my hand instinctively jerked in the direction of the light switch, turning the main ceiling lamp on.

There was a tearing noise and the darkness seemed to contract, twisting in the luminous dots in its wake, as if they were fingers that had just been burnt. I started to see a little of the room appear and, diving to the side of the room, switched on the desk lamp as well. The creature started to crackle, hissing in frequencies that hurt my ears, lashing at me with a glowing tentacle. While moving, I caught my feet in the carpet and fell heavily on the ground, but that saved me by an inch from the incandescent whip, which only grazed my arm, sending an arctic frost into the deep of my bones, spurring me further into the room.

I dove under the window, hiding in the folds of the curtains. And then, summoning all my courage and energy to do so, I stood up, tore the drape open, inundating the room with glorious sun-setting light. The creature yowled in fury and made to attack me once more.

At that point, panic got the best of me and I hurled myself through the window, landing on the porch roof, gasping for breath and in pain, incapable of defending myself from the monster anymore. I watched it trying to reach me once more – another lightning tendril slit a frosty scratch into my left leg – but faltering in the pale winter sunlight, gathering its feelers around it, closing unto itself like a centipede, getting smaller, smaller still, and disappearing in a whiff of smoke while the first calls of neighbours rushing in to see what the matter was started to break inside my frantic mind.

I suddenly thought of Jonathan again and rushed back in – limping from the icy contact and cutting myself some more on the glass shards – to find him lying arched and stiff on his bed, his mouth frozen in a silent scream. His body was blue with frost and his eyes were stuck wide open, dry from tears and black, black from an absolute darkness, older than our universe.

In his clutched hands, the fifth doll lay open.

The End

Nathalie Boisard-Beudin is French yet currently living in Rome, Italy, working by day as in-house lawyer for the European Space Agency and by night scribbling furiously, with results being published in the multinational anthology, *Wonderful World of Worders* (Guildhall-Press), in 2007, in *Sand Magazine* (Spring 2009 edition) and, on-line, in *Six Sentences, Crime and Suspense*, *Micro Horror*, *Pen Pricks Micro Fiction*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *Membra Disjecta, The Battered Suitcase*, *Postcard Shorts*, *PicFic* and *Form Reborn*.

Partum

By Lori M. Myers

Marlene watched from her living room window as lightning flashed in the distance. She rested her arms on her bulging belly and felt a slight kick that made her flinch. Thunder rumbled. Silence. Then thunder again. She tried to remember that grade-school lesson, the one about how long it takes for a storm to reach its next stop. Then she heard hailstones pinging against the roof.

"I don't like this, Rob." Her voice sounded as though it had risen an octave.

"Just a storm," he said, as he flipped through a magazine. "Nothing to worry about. It'll be over before you know it."

"But hail. There's never been hail."

Several months ago, their cat had looked at her funny until he ran away, returning Marlene to an uneasy calm. Then there was that neighbor kid named Johnny who raced up and down their block on his bike. He cycled with such fury and with such a look of danger in his eyes that it made Marlene's heart race. Fortunately, Johnny and his family had moved away last month. Rob blamed her hormones for the sudden spike in her personality. "Silly," he called her.

The morning sickness had finally subsided a month ago, but she still didn't feel right, still felt the terror. The doctor hadn't said much this afternoon when she complained, instead speaking in whispers to Rob when he thought she wasn't looking.

"What did he tell you?" she had demanded later.

Rob had looked at her with exasperation. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"He said you're nervous and a bit paranoid.

"What does *he* know?"

"He said it's probably because you've been through so much in order to get pregnant, that the slightest thing makes you feel out of control."

"Is that what *you* think?"

Rob had ignored her, one hand on the steering wheel, the other grasping a styrofoam cup filled with coffee that he gulped down in angry mouthfuls. Everything seemed like bad luck lately. Every look from a stranger, every bad word she heard. Marlene sat on the edge of the chair watching the news, wringing her hands, listening to the hail pounding against the windows. The lights flickered, but stayed on. She crossed the room and removed several candles from a cabinet below the television. She put one in each downstairs room and lit them.

"You're ridiculous," Rob barked, his nose almost buried within the magazine's pages. "You're being a child."

Marlene dug her nails into her ring finger. She felt a kick as another crack of thunder caused her nerves to shoot to the surface. The lights flickered again and went dark. And then a knock on the door.

Rob got up to answer it. Marlene could barely make out the voices against the torrent of rain that now fell in sheets. Was it laughter maybe? A young voice? Who would be out in this weather?

Rob returned, the candlelight dancing against his shirt, and creating shadows atop the object he was holding in his arms.

"This is so weird," he said with the grin of a jack-o-lantern. "It was Johnny. That kid that moved away? He said our cat showed up at his house. He recognized it and biked over here in the rain to return her. I had put her in the woods, but somehow she found her way out."

The cat purred and circled within Rob's embrace, looking over at Marlene as if anticipating an arrival. Its black fur was drenched and matted. Marlene then felt a warm wetness between her legs. She placed her hands on her belly, feeling pain, as the gutters outside squeezed out the storm's final remains.

THE END

Lori M. Myers is a Pennsylvania-based award-winning writer in fiction, creative nonfiction, and is also an essayist and playwright. Her fiction has appeared in *PHASE* and *Holy Cuspidor*. Lori has a masters degree in creative writing from Wilkes University, and teaches writing workshops, where she inspires writers to take risks. Her West Highland Terrier, Willy, is her biggest fan. For more about Lori, log onto her website at http://www.lorimmyers.com.

Something Apollonius Rhodius Left Out

By Berrien C. Henderson

Drowning. Refracted light and the waves wreathe his body, borne away on the susurrus of a fading heartbeat. He'd fallen overboard, pushed by invisible hands drawn by some faint tinnitus, his equilibrium shot. His life, now, too.

Gasp! A sledgehammer of light in his eyes (the pupils shrivel to pinpoints, and for a moment relief blossoms in the waking part of his mind – *I live*).

Shade, blessed shade. Some graceful, svelte body, feathered by a soft robe, eclipses the sun. "Are you all right?" asks a feminine, euphonic voice. He coughs a gout of brine and imagines a smallish clump of seaweed had expectorated along with the water from his lungs.

"Thank you for rescuing me," he says. Water breaks on the rocky shoreline while he pushes himself up on his elbows and shades his eyes. His head swims again, as before, the thin whine.

"You're quite welcome." Her face comes into focus, and…

…he never knew beaks could form such ghastly grins.

THE END

Berrien C. Henderson lives in the deepest, darkest wilds of southeast Georgia with his wife and two children. He teaches high school English, is a long-time martial artist and has a big, geeky spot in his heart for literature, speculative fiction and comic books.

The Stones at Spurn Point

by Rafe McGregor

I was thinking about drowning when the child stepped out from behind the 'enforcement cameras' sign.

I slammed on the brakes.

Even though I was only crawling along, the car sluiced across the motorway-turned-river, straight for him.

I closed my eyes at the last instant, but when the impact came it was from behind, not in front. As I'd expected - or hoped.

I should be used to this shit by now.

I pulled over to the hard shoulder, tried to calm my nerves, and stepped out into the unrelenting rain. The good news was that the car was a monster SUV, so I hadn't done any damage with my little MX5. The bad news was that the driver was almost as big as his car, a skinhead with a boxer's nose and rugby player's ears. I thought he was going to rip my head off, but I'm at the stage where I really couldn't care less, so I joined him in the space between our vehicles.

I was right: no damage to his, a big dent in my rear end. I told him a dog had run out across the motorway, and he bought it. We exchanged details in the downpour and he asked me if my car would be all right to drive. I said yes to get rid of him. I returned to the convertible, watched him pull back out into the traffic, and chucked his details out the window.

Obviously, I'm not going to claim this one on the insurance either.

I waited for the Big Friendly Giant to disappear into the cataract, and resumed my journey east. It's Friday the twenty-ninth of October, East Yorkshire is saturated, and one of my editors has sent me to cover Halloween at Dane's Dyke. Dane's Dyke is a forest near Flamborough Head, which forms the northern part of Bridlington Bay. It's become a big occult centre since a BBC news piece unwittingly featured evidence of a haunting during a broadcast in the late eighties. I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in money, and money always follows a good story. Word is that this year, the Satanists are going to provide one by descending on Dane's Dyke en masse and doing...whatever Satanists do. I think it's a recognised religion these days, so I'm not expecting human sacrifice, but whatever they get up to, I'll be there to watch.

Howden was a diversion courtesy of the booklet lying on my passenger seat: *13 Horror Stories from Holderness.* It was the last thing Gwen gave me. She must have bought it a while ago, because even though we haven't spoken in five months, it arrived in the post on my birthday. I wasn't surprised. Gwen can be unspeakably kind and delightfully cruel - and often at the same time. All thirteen tales are traditional ghost stories set in what was once known as Holderness, the Yorkshire coast from Flamborough Head to Spurn Point. In Roman times, Holderness extended three miles east of today's shore, but the coastline has been submerged over the years as the sea gradually eroded and inundated the soft rock. The idea of the thirty-odd settlements now lying so close under the water disturbs me, but I think there might be a story in the city of Lod, which was not only the biggest of the drowned towns, but also had the most dramatic end.

I found the right junction and followed the signs to the small market town. Once upon a time, Howden must have been a lot more important than it is now, because it still sports a great big thirteenth-century gothic cathedral in the style of York and Beverley Minsters. I should have gone straight to Flamborough to start nosing about for some back-story on the Satanists, but I'd decided on two stops *en route*. The *Evening Post* might be paying for Dane's Dyke, but when you're freelance, you've got to try and make the most of your research. I can give the Post their story and do a piece on Lod for something a little more highbrow, maybe the *Express* or *Mail*.

I parked in the centre of the town, the spires of the minster looming ominously above. The rain had eased to a drizzle, so I took my little Nikon along, stuffing it in one pocket and *13 Horror Stories* in another.

I turned the corner to enter the grounds of the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul, and stopped dead: the huge chancel was in ruins.

This couldn't be right. I'd Googled Howden Minster yesterday; it was a fully-functioning church. I had a sudden fear that I'd lost the ability to tell what was real and what was imagined. I suppose it wasn't really sudden, because it's something I've been thinking about more and more of late. I'm not going to get into that now...I walked further into the churchyard. The colour of the stone changed from beige to bone and I remembered the minster was constructed with limestone. To my relief, I discovered that the nave was intact, but the dark, decorative arches supporting nothing and leading nowhere were eerie, like the shadow of a cathedral. A distant, decaying memory of better days.

As there were still a few minutes left before the communion service finished, I decided to see if I couldn't find what I was after by myself. According to *13 Horror Stories*, the only remaining evidence of Lod is the market cross, which was saved and removed to the churchyard of Howden. The graveyard ran along the southern side of the minster, with the headstones ordered in neat lines amidst overgrown vegetation. I wandered down the aisles searching for anything dating back to the fourteenth century, though I wasn't sure how much of the cross would be left after six hundred years or more of exposure to the elements. I squelched through the puddles and mud, but couldn't find anything more than two hundred years old.

Presently, I saw a few people leave the minster by a pair of wooden doors under a trio of vertical stained glass windows. I smiled at a couple of more elderly parishioners and entered the transept. A large clergyman,

looking like a blonde Brian Blessed, was talking to three old ladies. To my right, a recess housed a chapel commemorating the war dead. On my left, various pamphlets, leaflets, and booklets were arranged on a table. I flicked through *Howden Minster, A Guide Book*, and was just finishing a paragraph on the collapse of the chancel roof in 1758, when I was disturbed by a grating cough.

Brian Blessed and I were alone.

"Hello, Reverend Slaughter, I'm Grant Markham." The Reverend Cedric Slaughter chose to regard me with disdain instead of taking my extended hand. He was almost as big as the skinhead, and a lot fiercer. I dropped my hand and continued. "I'm a journalist doing a story on the lost towns of Holderness. I read that the market cross from Lod is in your churchyard?" When he failed to reply, I tried the direct approach: "Is it here?"

His eyes darted to a grey stone pillar lying on the floor next to the chapel. "I think you need to go back and do your research properly, Mr Markham. Nothing remains of Lod, or Ravenser Odd, but there's a cross commemorating the arrival of King Henry IV in Ravenser in 1399. Ravenser also lies under the water now, and the cross is in Kilnsea." He moved closer, ushering me towards the door.

I held my ground. "What's that?" I pointed at the pillar on the flagstones.

He was very close, one great arm encircling - but not quite touching - me. "If you would like a guided tour of the minster, I suggest you make an appointment with the sexton." He moved further forward, so his face was only inches from mine.

I stepped to the side, away from him and the door. "I don't want a guided tour, Mr Slaughter. I want to know what that stone is."

His cold blue eyes held mine for a few seconds, and then he obviously decided it would be easier to humour me. "It's from the original Norman church."

"So it dates back to the thirteenth century?"

"Before that - long before that. The minster is closed, Mr Markham, I'd like you to leave." He raised his arm again, indicating the doorway.

As I walked out into the rain, the door slammed shut behind me. I was retracing my steps past the ruined chancel when my mobile rang. I stopped in the graveyard. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello!"

"Grant..." A woman's voice; it sounded as if she was crying.

"Gwen? Gwen, is that you? It's me. Talk to me!"

Whoever it was put the phone down.

I checked the last incoming call and saw 'number withheld'. Could it have been her? She hadn't spoken to me since she left, but she did send me the booklet, so I knew I wasn't forgotten. I put the phone back in my pocket, and walked out into Market Place.

The deluge had resumed and it seemed as if the whole of East Yorkshire was drowning. No wonder all these Ravensers disappeared. *13 Horror Stories* was written by Rethuel Scarcig - one of those randomly-generated pen names if ever I've seen one - and published by The Preceptory Players, of 5-7 Vicar Lane, Howden. I found the narrow, Georgian alley easily, then the right house number, belonging to the Howden Bookshop. The premises had both sets of windows boarded up – which was strange, because I'd phoned to check their hours of business only two days ago.

* * *

Saturday the thirtieth of October. I'm sitting on a rock at the foot of a dune on the eastern shore of the Spurn Peninsula as I dictate this, looking out to Lod in what I'm sure will be a short interruption of service in the downpour.

I spent the rest of yesterday driving through the rivers of Babylon - AKA the roads around Hull - to Kilnsea. New Kilnsea actually, as Old Kilnsea is under the sea like the rest of the county will be if this rain continues. Everything took longer than it should have, and on top of it all, there's no cross there, either. I asked some local halfwit and he told me he'd never heard of Ravenser - Odd, or any other - or Lod. Waste of time. I stayed in a shitty B&B in another little dump called Easington, and overslept.

At midday, stuck on the narrow road between Easington and Kilnsea, I realised the folly of this Gwen-inspired diversion. Up ahead, there were temporary traffic lights, and the northbound lane was blocked. It was raining harder than ever and the road was completely flooded. As I inched closer, I saw a mains pipe had burst and water was gushing out from the roadside while workmen waded around in wellies. The drainage ditches on the side of the road were full, and pools of water covered the fields.

I had the feeling that if I continued making for Spurn, I'd be cut off from the rest of England, and either slide into the sea, or disappear under floodwaters.

The light ahead turned green and I drove carefully through the overflow. At Kilnsea, I took Spurn Road and drove to the entrance of Spurn Point Nature Reserve. I left my car at the warden's lodge and set off on foot. The reserve covers the last three miles of coastline, a skinny peninsula called Spurn Head. The strip of land curves back west like the tail of a 'y' and the very end is known as Spurn Point. Instead of walking to Spurn Point, I headed for the beach on the eastern side, armed with an Ordnance Survey map, a printed download and a compass.

Lod existed between 1200 and 1360, growing until it rivalled Kingston-upon-Hull by the beginning of the fourteenth century. Rivalling what is now considered England's worst city doesn't sound very impressive,

but Hull was the country's second biggest port until about 1600. First syphilis, and then the Luftwaffe, made it what it is today. Unlike the other towns and villages along the Yorkshire coast, the inundation of Lod happened quickly, while people were still living there. The last days were also faithfully recorded by the monks, and Abbot Burton of Meaux wrote: 'by its wicked works and piracies, it provoked the wrath of God against itself beyond measure.' Although the town had been losing ground to the water for several years, the abbot described scenes of panic and flight as the last part of the city was claimed by the sea in a flood of biblical proportions circa 1360.

A strong northeasterly wind was blowing the rain into my face, but it had at least eased off to a drizzle again. I marched onto the wet sand and stared at the great mass of water beyond. The North Sea: cold, treacherous, inhospitable; fatal to seafarers and landsmen alike. I read that storm surges have claimed over two hundred thousand lives since records began in the twelfth century. If you're Dutch or German, you don't even have to go swimming to drown - the sea comes to you.

The North Sea: cold, treacherous, inhospitable; fatal to seafarers and landsmen alike. I read that storm surges have claimed over two hundred thousand lives since records began in the twelfth century.

Up the coast, I could see a rocky outcrop. I fished out the compass and the OS map, and worked out it must be the remainder of the Second World War coastal defences - also partly submerged. I couldn't see very far south because of the curve of the spit. The exact location of Lod is a mile and a half southeast of Spurn Point. Or rather, where Spurn Point was in the fourteenth century. While the coastline is retreating steadily westward, Spurn Point erodes and rebuilds itself every 250 years. Something about longshore drift, apparently. I scrutinised the second map, which I'd printed from a website called *yorkshirehistory.com*. It gave estimates of the positions of Spurn Point from 600 AD onwards and - after referring back to the OS map - I decided Lod was further south.

I'd just stashed the maps back under my cagoule when my mobile rang again.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello. Gwen, is that you?"

All I could hear was the sound of the sea, and wind over water.

"Gwen! Is it you?"

"Yes."

There was a strange sibilance to her speech, but it was definitely Gwen. I should know. "Where are you?"

"Grant..."

She put the phone down again.

For the first time since she left, my hopes are real rather than ... spurious. I don't want to use the word *imagined*. Two phone calls in two days. She changed her number so I couldn't talk to her, and then changed her address so I couldn't find her, but now *she's* trying to reach *me*. I'd hoped *13 Horror Stories* was a message. Now I know it is.

I first set eyes on Gwen in a pub in Lenton nearly three years ago. She was singing with her band, Land Locked, and she was...wonderful. Sheryl Crow meets Alanis Morissette with an English accent, weaving her magic in a lacy, pink floral dress, her long, blonde hair offset by a black choker. As soon as they'd finished their set, I bought all three of them a drink, and began a relationship more powerful, fluctuating and painful than I'd ever imagined possible. There was no equator or mean, only the polar extremes of ecstasy and torment.

For a year or so, it was great, despite the lows that inevitably followed the highs. She was finishing her degree at university; I was still finding my feet as a freelancer, but the work suited me because I'm a nosy, pushy bastard at the best of times. I sold a few articles to the *Express*, *Sun*, and *Guardian*, then a few features to some glossy magazines, and Gwen and I moved in together in a house in West Bridgford. I didn't want to be with her; I wanted to possess her. Her mind, her body, her soul.

Then, last year - her final year of legal apprenticeship - something changed. She changed. Matured, blossomed, I don't know. She was inducted into a club called the Order of Dagon through someone at work. I don't know if it was the club that changed her, or if she joined the club because she'd changed. Maybe it was both. She wouldn't say much about it, but she never took off the ring they gave her. She wore it on the middle finger of her right hand: a plain band of striking, luminous gold. I guessed Dagon was a branch of Freemasonry or like Scientology for solicitors.

I tried to drown her with my love, smother her with more and more attention. But the more I tried to make her mine, the more distant she became. It's called the 'diving reflex' in physiology. Immersion in water causes the body to protect itself by switching to energy-saving mode. It's an automatic action that takes place in both conscious and unconscious drowning victims, and it was exactly what she did. Whether she knew it or not, she withdrew from me. Although on the surface, things seemed unchanged, I knew she was saving energy, marking time until she could draw breath and take her next step.

This is the first time I've spoken aloud about Gwen since she left. The first time I've had the strength to, because of the phone calls.

I walked south for several hundred metres. When I lost sight of the remains of the Battery, I crossed the dune to the dirt track that goes all the way to Spurn Point. I made good time on the road, which runs very close to the western edge of the spit. I wondered if the marshy flatland on this side was permanent, or if the tide was just out. After about a mile, I took a path to my left, back up the dune and down onto the beach again. A few metres to the south, there was a row of about a dozen wooden pillars extending from the beach into the sea. The tallest was only a few centimetres above the sand and I realised it must have been a pier or groyne of some sort, now under water.

I took out both maps as the rain resumed play, really pissing it down. I'd no idea I was going to be caught in East Yorkshire's next cataclysm, but at least I'd had the sense to cover the maps in clear plastic. Between the lighthouse at the end of the spit and my compass, I could work out my position with a fair degree of accuracy. I estimated another couple of hundred metres down the beach before I'd be directly in line with the submarine city.

I trudged on until I came across something surreal: half a dozen square stones leading into the sea like steps, in a similar fashion to the wooden pillars.

I trudged on until I came across something surreal: half a dozen square stones leading into the sea like steps, in a similar fashion to the wooden pillars. They looked like some kind of ineffectual sea defence, although that made no sense. I couldn't tell what size the stones - which appeared to be flint - were, because I could only see their tops protruding from sand and sea. When I reached them, I noticed a completely-uncovered flintstone square sitting at the foot of the grassy dune that bordered the beach. Despite a distance of at least twenty metres between the square stone and the first of the buried stones, it was perfectly in line with them, and stood about chest high. I clambered onto it, and stared out to sea.

I'm still here now.

So is Lod, a mile or so to the east.

Inundated, drowned, dead.

* * *

Saturday the thirtieth of October; later. It was then, on that rock, that the sense of faceless, inevitable doom descended along with the torrent. Twelve hours later, I can't shake it. Perhaps it's the unforgiving devastation of the waters that engulfed Lod, or perhaps I've been unnerved by the county itself. It's a ghostly, ghastly place. There's Lod and the drowned villages and towns, Dane's Dyke, and the Whitby Gothic Weekend, all within a few dozen miles of each other. Or maybe I'm just drowning along with the rest of Yorkshire, the few millimetres

that disappear each day accelerated by the flood. Maybe that's why I'm still in Easington in this B&B. I know I should've left for Flamborough, but I don't really need to be at Dane's Dyke until tomorrow night.

In case my fears are justified in some way, and someone other than me should listen to this recording, I'd probably better explain about the child and the HPPD.I didn't really see a child step from behind the road sign on the M62. What I actually saw was the sign collapse or melt into a small, humanoid shape. The black-and-white square became the head, the metal frame the shoulders, and the sandbags the feet. Then the road sign walked out across in front of me. I was pretty sure I was hallucinating, but I couldn't be a hundred percent certain in the rain, and I couldn't afford to take the chance. About a quarter of LSD users experience flashbacks, and about a fifth of those develop Hallucinogen Persisting Deception Disorder. What that means is that I'm one of a lucky five percent of hallucinogen users who trips on a weekly basis, sometimes more, even though I haven't had any of the shit for seven years - phone!

That was another call from Gwen, which went like this:

"Hello!"

She said nothing, but I could hear the wash of waves.

"Gwen, talk to me."

"Grant..."

"Are you all right?" Perhaps it was just the sea in the background, but her speech still sounded unnatural, like a hiss.

"Meet me."

"Now? Where?"

"Tomorrow. Ke-thoo-loo-f-tug-en..."

"What?"

She hung up.

Her voice slipped through my fingers as easily as she'd slipped out of my life. I couldn't hold her then, and I couldn't keep her on the phone now. I tried to drown her, but it was me that drowned.

When she moved out, the HPPD got worse. I went from a couple of mild visual distortions a month to half a dozen full-blown bad trips. The irony is I only got into LSD because I thought I was going to be the next Jack Kerouac, a Jim Morrison of journalism. I wasn't and I'm not. What I am is half-mad from years and years of

seeing patterns, halos, and faces where they aren't; stationary objects swaying or sliding across the floor; things growing to giant dimensions or shrinking, like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Truth to tell, I'm fucking sick of it.

* * *

Sunday the thirty-first of October. It's dusk now and I've been sitting on this flintstone block since noon, waiting for Gwen to call. I'm soaked through, but I don't care. While I waited, I've been watching the sea, looking for signs of Lod. I've worked out exactly where it is. It's a mile and a half east-southeast of where I am, under the water, submarine and breathless. These stones form a direct line to it, an arrow from Spurn Head to Lod, less than half an hour's walk away. I've been looking for Lod and thinking about Lot. Lot's wife. She turned into a pillar of salt when she disobeyed the angel's command: do not look behind you.

Do not play back the tape.

I played back the tape.

I don't know why, but I listened to the recording I dictated last night. The thing is - the part when the phone rang - it isn't on the tape. I heard myself say phone, but I couldn't hear the ringtone. So I checked the log of incoming calls for the last three days. I think I must have deleted them by accident, because I can't find them. I know I didn't imagine those phone calls. I can't have imagined them, because all my hallucinations are visual. That's how I can always tell what's real and what's imagined if I don't panic; the imagined stuff is never accompanied by a soundtrack.

I *know* I didn't imagine those three calls.

I haven't - I mean I *have* - spoken to Gwen, but she hasn't called to tell me where she is. It's okay, she doesn't need to. It's no coincidence she sent me *that* book. It was a message, one of those games she liked to play. She knew I would come here when I read the book, so this is where she must be. And if she isn't on Spurn Head, then she must be in Lod. I'm confused and I'm not really sure what's going on, but I *know* she's waiting for me in Lod.

The only problem I have is the breathing reflex. An unavoidable instinct of self-preservation that results in a human being fighting to draw breath regardless of how strong the desire to stay submerged is. Something to do with the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood. Half an hour ago, I took all the prescription tranquillizers I've got for the HPPD. I haven't used them for ages, but I always carry a box with me - just in case things get out of hand. As soon as I swallowed the last one, I was flooded with a sense of peace. Seven hundred and fifty years ago, there were men in Lod who didn't panic and flee when the waters came. There were men who knew they were at the end of all things, men who were tired of their lives and loves, and just stayed put.

They're probably still there.

A few minutes ago, a sliver of sun slid through the clouds and bathed a strip of ocean in yellow light. It was exactly a mile and a half away in exactly the direction of the stone steps in front of me now.

I'm going to walk down them.

Down to Lod.

Where Gwen is.

The End

Rafe McGregor is a crime fiction author who spends far too much of his time rereading the work of H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James. He lives with his wife in the historic city of York, in England. His first novel, *The Architect of Murder*, was published in February 2009. More information can be found on his blog at: www.rafemcgregor.blogspot.com.

Scream Saver

By Ann K. Schwader

The fractal on Halpin's screen writhed through a dozen color shifts in as many seconds. One flowed into many, many into one - and the gaps between were jagged mouths, gnawing at a void blacker than imagination.

Susan backed away from her colleague's desk. "Where did you download this thing?"

"It's a distributed computing project. Strictly volunteer."

He tapped one corner of the screen, where translucent spikes stabbed in counterpoint to the fractal's movements.

"That's got to be a pig for bandwidth." She frowned, feeling queasy. "The IT Nazis will have a fit."

Halpin's smile was mysterious and deeply irritating.

"*She* already knows about it. Where do you think I got the URL?"

Susan bit back her doubts. Halpin's nose was the brownest around, but his instincts were good. If the new head of Info Tech - some big-ticket foreign hire - hadn't banished this monstrosity yet, she probably had her reasons.

"It's like SETI, but better," Halpin babbled on. "SETI just does space. This does space and time, because they're the same when the angles bend right."

This screensaver was definitely not bending right. "You're not making sense."

Halpin's eyes stayed fixed on the screen. "Time," he muttered, "doesn't exist. Everything that ever was - or will be - is here right now, in some dimension of space. We simply can't see it because our own dimension is too curved."

Were those silver spikes jabbing higher, now?

"Angles are intersections," he continued. "Points of contact between here-Now and here-Then - any Then. Imagine a time machine where nothing moves. Where you can just step through, back to the beginnings of life on Earth."

His voice dropped even further. "And beyond."

Susan understood now what Halpin's problem was. Pharmaceuticals manufacturing involved unique challenges - like coworkers who sampled.

If she didn't want to lose her own job, she needed to go report him. Bad enough that she'd stayed late - on a Friday night, too - at Halpin's request. He had cited problems with a new tablet coating, but when she got to his desk, he'd started in about this instead. Now, he wasn't even talking, just gawping as the screen's patterns twisted and pulsed and leaped.

She retraced the cubicle maze on autopilot and adrenaline, heading for the hall as lights throbbed across the ceiling. Random doorways revealed screens all displaying the same fractal, each more twisted than the last.

She retraced the cubicle maze on autopilot and adrenaline, heading for the hall as lights throbbed across the ceiling. Random doorways revealed screens all displaying the same fractal, each more twisted than the last.

Where do you think I got the URL? Hard to imagine Halpin working directly with the new head of IT, but it was just possible.

A low, overstressed hum rose around her. Risking a peek at one screen, she saw larger gaps of void between the fractals. Narrow, sharp things flashed in those gaps.

Eyes? Teeth?

"*Oh God!*"

Halpin's desperate wail rose from back in the cubicles, but Susan fought the impulse to turn around. By the time she reached the corridor, she was running.

Think of a time machine where nothing moves. Where you can just step through. Every desk in this building had access to the Intranet, which probably meant access to the fractal program as well.

Access was such a horrible word. It went both ways.

Somewhere behind her came a dry scrabbling, like scales or claws or something worse fighting for traction. Halpin wasn't screaming anymore.

Bolting for the nearest elevator, she slammed her hand against the Down button. When the door opened breathless seconds later, she ducked inside and flattened herself against the closest wall then fumbled with the controls to shut the door again fast.

A squat figure swathed in a long coat occupied one back corner.

"Is there a problem?"

Susan froze at the quiet, vaguely-Asian voice. *The new head of IT*. Of all the people she didn't need to look like an idiot in front of -

"I'm not sure. There's a screensaver running on all the terminals, and they aren't sounding good." *Neither am I*. "Halpin said it was a distributed computing project, some volunteer thing, but he wasn't making sense, and it just got worse as he went on -"

Her voice trailed off as she realized whose "volunteer thing" the project must be. Still, Halpin *had* been babbling about space and time and angles…hadn't he?

As though in answer, the squat figure nodded. "It is the Liao program."

Susan blinked. Was this something she should have gotten a memo about?

"The program was experimental. It generates random angles of opportunity. Halpin was not meant to discuss it, although I suspected that he would."

Sharp, dark eyes peered over the top of the coat's collar. "I am sorry you were the one he chose."

Something in her tone made Susan wish she'd taken the stairs.

And what the hell were "random angles of opportunity"?

"Halpin isn't exactly discreet. He seemed worse than usual tonight, too." *Spit it out*. "Like he'd been taking something –"

"You are so much less expendable than he was."

As the pit of Susan's stomach followed the elevator down, she stared into the eyes opposite her and saw nothing but void. Void in which strange sparks woke. In which something moved.

The head of IT folded down her collar with gloved fingertips.

"Your coworker was correct about one aspect, though. Like SETI, the Liao program assists something: the plight of immigrants. Immigrants desperate for the curved reality of a purer world than their own, which they made foul."

Susan stared at the woman's yellowed-ivory features, smooth and perfect as a mask.

"Immigrants?" she croaked. "From where?"

The elevator stopped. As its doors began to open, black eyes flicked away from Susan, toward the angled walls overhead. Toward the inexorable pressure of jaws forcing through at the corners, lean and thirsting shadows shifting from Then to shrieking Now.

The head of IT spread her arms to welcome them.

"It is called 'Tindalos'."

The End

Ann K. Schwader lives, writes and accumulates far too many books in Westminster, Colorado. Her Lovecraftian/SF sonnet sequence, *In the Yaddith Time*, was published by Mythos Books in 2007. Her short fiction collection, *Strange Stars & Alien Shadows*, appeared from Lindisfarne Press in 2003, and her first Lovecraftian poetry collection, *The Worms Remember*, was published in 2001 by Hive Press. She is an active member of SFWA, HWA, and the Science Fiction Poetry Association. For updated information on her work – as well as other topics of possible eldritch interest – please visit her LiveJournal, Yaddith Times: http://ankh-hpl.livejournal.com.

Beneath the Red City

by Matthew Bey

The Red City began calling to me that winter. It became like a canker that you probe with your tongue: a constant nuisance and ache in my mind. You who would judge me and condemn my betrayal, you have no idea how it pulled me into Her spidery influence. Yes, I knew about Her from the beginning: that queen arachnid crouching hidden within a net of a city; that web of monoliths, avenues and temples far below the ice and the deathly-cold darkness of the Arctic Ocean. It was that winter, when the ice began to crack, and for the first time in the age of Man, Her prison parted, letting the rays of the North Star shine down to Her wet grave.

I was in my apartment on Wilson Street. You've seen the photos, no doubt, of the walls covered with newspaper clippings, the ceiling diagrammed with blood and feces, much of it mine. All that came later, when I had fallen deeper into Her thrall, when my mind became like that of Her servants: inhuman and profound, capable of leaping through the curdling logic to terrifying truths.

But then, on that winter day, as a ribbon of freezing air blew through the cracks of my window panes, it was just an apartment. Poor and ugly and cheap. The carpet had never been shampooed or vacuumed in memory, its stains chronicling a history of previous occupants and their petty sins: a spaghetti stain here, a smear of vomit there, a fleck of blood near the bed, a blackened button of chewing gum ground permanently into the threads. In the corner where I hung my bicycle from a ceiling hook, tire smudges decorated the wall, but otherwise the apartment was bare.

It was one room and a bath surrounded by the darkness and gritty slush of winter.

I lived on the third floor, which meant I rarely had to deal with the landlord. The fat bastard would sweat and blush and nearly have a heart attack just standing on a chair to change a light bulb. Only the worst greed would prompt him to climb three flights of stairs. I would hear him sometimes when I checked my mailbox, shouting in the basement at the semi-homeless drunks he hired to do odd chores.

His shouting frightened me. He sounded like a pitbull that had been beaten every day of its life. A pitbull that crippled children for fun. Nevertheless, every month he spoke to me with quiet sweetness as I handed him a rent check.

The night She sent her dogs to me, I listened to the couple across the hall shout at each other. The door of my apartment was as thin as tissue paper and so, I could hear every word they spat. I had learned from previous

arguments that, although they were married, they were not actually married to each other. I sat on my grungy carpet, eating canned soup, too tired not to listen.

I knew it was at my window without turning to look. I could feel its sepulchral gaze blowing on my neck and down my collar. I was terrified of turning and looking out that window: I would have cut out my right eye not to see that thing hanging there. My head turned ever so slightly, swiveling with the reluctant compulsion of putting a hand in a frying pan of hot grease.

I could see it out of the corner of my eye, leering and staring. It loomed there, on three stories of empty air, as black as the shadows in a coffin. Its jaws gaped, laughing and snarling, a toothed carrion hole. To say it looked like a dog was like saying a corpse looked like an unborn child. It loomed taller than me, broader and more massive. It could be at my side in an instant, my whole face swallowed in its jaws. I could smell it. It smelled like rot and sex.

I could see it out of the corner of my eye, leering and staring. It loomed there, on three stories of empty air, as black as the shadows in a coffin. Its jaws gaped, laughing and snarling, a toothed carrion hole.

It seemed to laugh, and then it was gone, disappearing into the black space at the edge of my vision. I stared at where it had been, at the roof of the building across the alley, searching for the pattern in the tar shingles that looked like a dog, looking for an image I did not want to find.

I would come to learn that the shadow dogs were just one aspect of Her, like a baited hook is an aspect of an angler. The dog was a shape of Her will; a tickle to let me know that I had touched a sticky strand of Her web; that She was coming for me; that before I could free myself, She would leap on me with Her talons and legs like spears, and She would wrap my soul in Her mind, and smother my unholy terror.

Perhaps you think it ironic that the great betrayer started so humbly: accosted in his home, ignorant of the part he would play, a victim of Her animosity. But I won't play the martyr. There were others with their parts to play, their own corruption to embrace. There were other manifestations of Her awakening power.

That winter, lights appeared over every city. The magnetic poles shifted restlessly. Farmers reported strange shapes preying on their herds at night: things like dogs or bats or huge lizards that would disappear into forest or field. The most sensitive among us began to dream of the Arctic ice, which was even now breaking apart in her restless slumber. Only the ignorant attributed the shattering of Her prison to the folly of man.

The sensitive had become aware; we had tasted Her venom. We gravitated toward each other.

I found them when I posted to the webpage of a radio show that catered to the bizarre. I had seen the dog several times since it first appeared at my window, growing closer and bolder with every visitation. If I used a public restroom, it would fill the stall at the very end, its shadowy back hulking above the partitions and scraping the ceiling. I would strain on the toilet, all the while listening to its slobber. The previous night I had woken and it was in the apartment with me, leaning over my bed, caressing my mouth with the hot stink of its breath. Some days, it would trail me, staying just at the edge of my vision, a giant darkness fleeting behind my head whenever I turned to look.

I met the remote viewers on the radio show website. They seemed like the answer to all my problems at the time. They promised they could "image" the source of my visions, trace the shadow dogs through the collective exercise of fantasy. Others had seen the dogs by then, or things worse than dogs. So, we had an eager crew of twelve remote viewers - and me, the eager novice - when we met in the basement of that house.

The thirteen of us sat in a circle like a seance or a coven, an inauspicious beginning for our investigation. They let their minds go blank and began to free-associate images, feeling out the threads that tied the shadow dogs to the world.

I had glimpsed the dogs on my way to the remote viewing, lurking between the houses, big as horses, but leaving no footprints in the gray snow. I neglected to tell the others. The dogs had never approached close during daylight, so I had thought us safe. How foolish I was, inexperienced in Her scheming.

I relaxed my mind poorly. While the others went limp and closed their eyes, sketching visions on yellow legal pads, I remained very-much alert and anchored in the present. I alone noticed the shadow dogs entering the basement. I watched, frozen in terror, or perhaps in limp complicity, as the thirteen black specters took their places around the circle. They leaned over the remote viewers. Their stench filled my blood. Sweat poured down the remote viewers' faces, yet still they recorded their fever sight. Pencils scribbled furiously and broke. I could feel septic drool drip on the back of my neck.

In that moment the remote viewers touched Her, their questing minds brushing against the purest essence of hate, a dormant capacitor beneath the Arctic Sea. She broke them as human beings. Something vital in their brains burned out like a radio dropped in icewater. As one, twelve pairs of eyes turned to me, and with twelve mouths and a thousand voices She spoke to me:

"The Red City rises."

I left the remote viewers there in the basement, lying in their own shit and frothy vomit. One or two continued to scratch at legal pads covered with sketches of spiders.

You know as I do that they were the lucky ones. They who escaped her burgeoning kingdom, those who never saw the Red City rise through the broken ice and draw its full power from the stars. You envy them, as I do, their blissful vacuity.

But you grow bored. You want to know how I brought all this to pass, how I foiled Project HAARP, the government's great ionic weapon they had erected in Alaska to forestall Her coming. You want to know about the people I lured to my apartment, the women and the boys, the landlord, and the adulterous couple across the hall; the grisly deeds that heralded the last days with headlines of blood. You want to know how I drew their guts from them, my victims, the innocent and the vile, tuning their pain like an antenna, a lightning rod of cause and consequence. You want to know how I slew her enemies, even as She drew the magnetic North Pole into the bowels of Her city, that giant lodestone reactor.

I will tell you that I chose of my own free will. I alone among the teeming innocents of earth chose the raping, chose to be flayed and gutted and re-knit, and I chose when She had no influence over me. From sanctuary I made my decision, and from safety I lashed out at the world.

It happened as I fled the basement of drooling psychics, the dogs in pursuit, their howling laughter slicing the night. I ran through the middle of the streets, black salt-slush seeping through the rips in my boots. Asthmatically, I gulped the steel-wool air. Stumbling to all fours, sliding on ice-wet knees and palms, I squelched to a stop, cringing with the expectation of jaws clenching the back of my neck and the meat of my legs.

When I rolled over to face the nighttime droning of the city, the dogs had gone, returned to the nightmare ether that engendered them.

What relief I felt to be alive. As I lay on my back, staring at the sky, I saw my saviors. Black planes without running lights crisscrossed and wove, visible only against the streetlight haze of the city. They drew a web of contrails from horizon to horizon, a web of dissipating chemicals to counter Her psychic web. I could feel their protection like a blanket, I could hear the voices shut off one by one, the ceaseless jabbering of the Red City, the background hum of madness that I had not noticed until it had gone. The chemtrail counter-measures, the haze of carbon-black, had erased the city from the Red City's dreaming.

They were men, agents of government, who resisted the plotting of the Red City. I would discover that a mighty battle was waged against the Red City in the highest levels of the powerful and the privileged. A handful knew of Her existence, although fewer still believed Her weak enough to defeat. The chemtrails were only the leading edge of a campaign that included the Project HAARP facility in Alaska, the acres of ionic lenses that focused day and night on the Red City, striving to curdle her power. I let myself hope, but a hope is not so thoroughly crushed until it is allowed to blossom.

Within an hour, the wind scattered the web. The gibbering seeped back into my head. The dogs slurped from the darkness, searching for the fingernail crack, the flaw in my mind that would let them in to ravage my soul, and leave me drooling and empty, freebasing Her divine consciousness.

You who have never seen a soul devoured by Her appetite cannot understand that dread, that supreme comprehension of powerlessness: a cockroach between pliers, a corpse in a coffin, a slug on salt.

I chose to be Her slave. I chose to be a concubine. I became a general among the tens of thousands who answered her call, the captains of the dogs, the feeders of nightmare.

So, that night, I lured the adulterers from across the hall into my apartment. It was easy. The landlord proved more difficult. He would never mount three flights of stairs voluntarily, so he had to be bludgeoned and dragged by the ankles. I had to rest six times before I got us both to the top.

The dogs ate their guts while they screamed around the gags. And as the dogs took in the pain, they became more solid, flesh poured into molds of shadow, standing on two legs like fanged parodies of men. Their shoulders scraping ceiling plaster, the dogs spoke to me, teaching me logics beyond the walls of thought.

We orgied in viscera for days. And when we had glutted our black souls in that vile revelry, they bore me up between them, carrying me to Her, resplendent within Her web of cyclopean stone, to sit at Her side as the most depraved of Her lieutenant slaves, to preside over the ascendence of the Red City, as its monoliths and avenues were re-painted with the gaping throats of a billion sacrifices.

I regret it all, every moment of it. You can take little comfort in that, I'm sure. And I can take little pride in being Her concubine, pregnant with a thousand thousand of Her maggot spawn. I stand swollen before this world of the dead, the traitor presiding over strewn carcasses, and I weep for you, my kingdom of corpses.

The End

Matthew Bey is one of the stupid geniuses behind *Space Squid*, a free humor and fiction 'zine. He's also an editor, blogger and podcaster at *RevolutionSF.com*. Links to his many publishing credits can be found at his website: www.matthewbey.com.