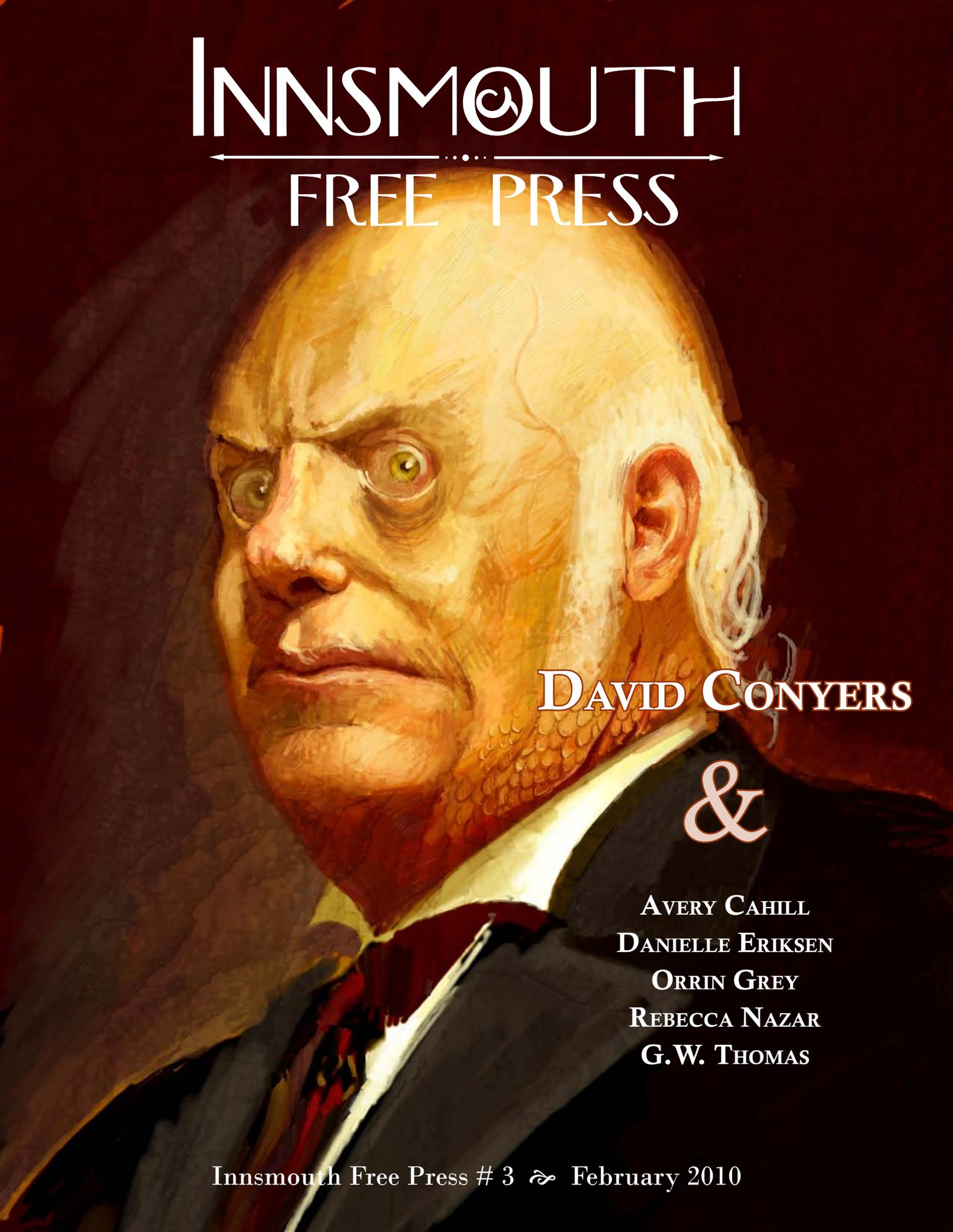


INNSMOUTH

←.....→
FREE PRESS



DAVID CONYERS

&

AVERY CAHILL

DANIELLE ERIKSEN

ORRIN GREY

REBECCA NAZAR

G.W. THOMAS

Innsmouth Free Press # 3 ∞ February 2010

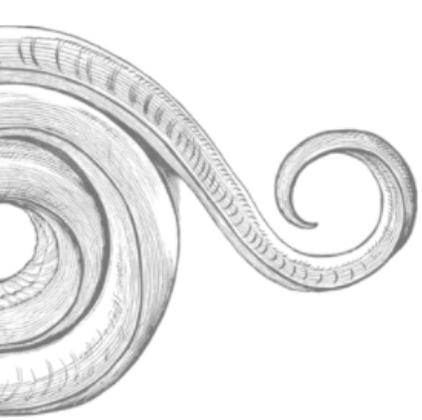


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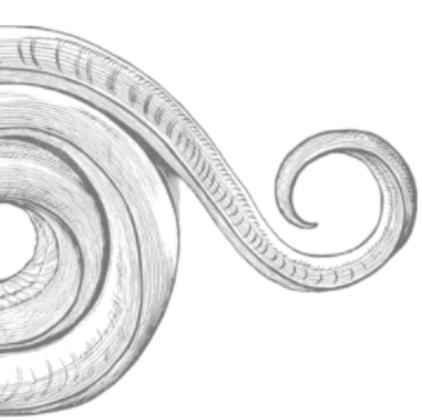
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EDITORIAL

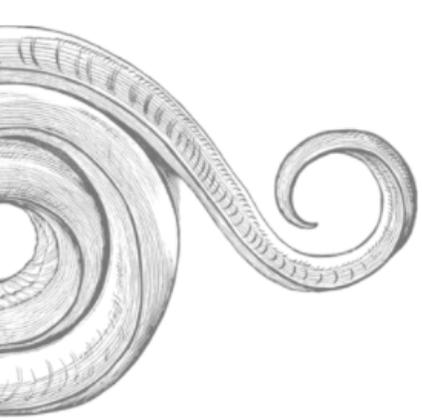
Let us open this editorial with a bold statement: we like slush. Sometimes, we dread it; sometimes, we complain about it, but, in the end, we like slush: the good, the bad, even the ugly. Because it is the slush which brings us new stories, new writers, and most of all, new friends.

The idea that writers live in isolation, locked in a mountain cabin in the middle of nowhere, typing away, is patently false. We connect with each other in a myriad of ways. In a 'zine like ours, connections are vitally important. We want writers to come back with more Monster Bytes or an article or another story. By the nature of our operation, we are a small shop and depend on the affection of writers toward the 'zine to keep uploading content.

Innsmouth Free Press operates a bit like a family. Once we meet a writer, we are usually able to remember them by name and you can probably find us Twittering or e-mailing each other back and forth. Innsmouth may not be on any map in Massachusetts, but it is very much a real place for us.

So we'd like to dedicate this issue to the many writers we have been introduced to since we launched this project in 2009. We hope we'll meet many more in 2010.





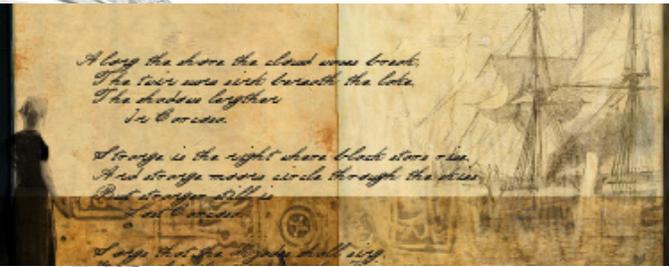
Finally, what you can expect in this, our third fiction issue: Australian Mythos writer David Conyers offers us a tale of evil at sea in “The Swelling”. Danielle Eriksen, from South Africa, shows us the plight of a woman who seeks to be liberated by the coming of the sea in “Mary, Mary”. Rebecca Nazar’s spinster heroine faces Cthulhu and brings a new spin to an old Lovecraft tale in “The Black Ship”. Orrin Grey discovers the loving bond between a parent and a ghoul. Avery Cahill brings us the tale of a man with a curious ocular affliction in “One Dead Eye”, while our regular columnist about all literary things Mythos, G.W.Thomas, writes about a phone call that is more dangerous than your regular telemarketing message.

All this and a cover by talented Spanish artist Francisco Rico Torres.

Many tentacles,

Silvia Moreno-Garcia (Publisher) and Paula R. Stiles (Editor-in-Chief)





For five violent days, the unrelenting storm battered the *Daintree*, threatening to submerge her at any moment, but it was the unraveling of Greg Wright's mind that disturbed Tracy more than any elemental assault.

THE SWELLING

by David Conyers

First published in The King in Yellow, Atlantean Press, 2007. Reprinted in Cthulhu Australis Part 2, Rainfall Books, 2007.

For five violent days, the unrelenting storm battered the *Daintree*, threatening to submerge her at any moment, but it was the unraveling of Greg Wright's mind that disturbed Tracy more than any elemental assault.

As the weather worsened, so did his delusions. First, he claimed to see mermaids then fish-demons. Both, he said, were plaguing the angry waves, clawing at their yacht. Tracy never witnessed these fanciful creatures herself, even when he pointed them out. After his fifth day of peculiar behavior, Greg calmly explained to Tracy that he'd finally read the truth in a book. It told him what to do and he had done what he was told. He had just murdered their daughter Matilda. How? A revolver pressed against her temple had splattered her brains all over the cabin walls.

Unwilling to witness his wife's shock and grief, Greg threw himself into the crashing waves, becoming lost within seconds. Perhaps this was his only appeasement.

Not long after, the weather finally beat her. Tracy knew she had lost her mind, and then didn't know who or what she was.

That was the beginning.

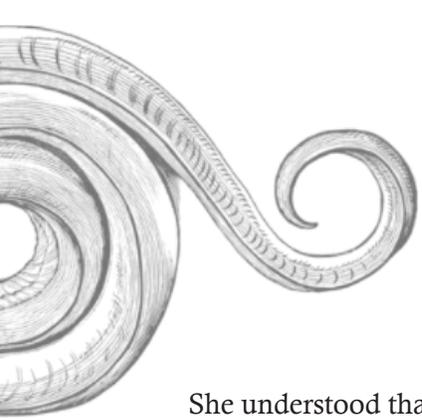
As for the end, she didn't know when that day might come, and if it did, would she even recognize it....



The *Vestibule* churned over the swelling ocean. Salty foam broke at its bow as the steamer fought back and ploughed towards its unknown destination. Overcast and grey, the clouds above filled the sky, never relenting in spitting rain. The chill captured in the wind ran straight from Antarctica itself.

Wrapped in a blanket while the tears on her cheeks vanished in the spray, she lost her thoughts towards the horizon where the water and clouds merged into one. Their unnamed destination was somewhere out there and it seemed to her to be so far away, unreachable, as if it did not exist except inside her mind.





She understood that her current emotional state was shaky and weak. Her thoughts had been disjointed these last days or weeks - exactly how long she could not remember. To compensate, she tried to recall pleasant memories and found that she had lost all that she might once have known. A loss which served only to catapult her into deeper depression.

No birds in the sky, no fish in the sea, and the colour of the water always a decisive grey, textured like spoiled meat. What survived in this place? Herself, obviously, and the crew, but what the crew were was not exactly what she would call "living".

Despite her misgivings, the fresh air did somewhat relieve her nausea. In the last few hours, the swelling had grown worse, and she wasn't sure why. So, she had slipped outside, hoping to escape her sickness. With the fresh air came the cold and wet which, in minutes, became a worse misery. Yet again, there was no simple solution.

In the end, she returned to her cabin, found her daughter wrapped in blankets as she had left her. The little girl's smile was faint and grey. Her face pasty and dry like cardboard.

"Where are we?" her daughter asked somberly.

"Safe," she answered. A mother's response, spoken while she ran her fingers gently through the young girl's auburn hair. Ever since the accident, the strands had tangled in knots and stayed that way. Neither mother nor daughter had been able to straighten them again, even with persistence and their only comb.

"Where's Daddy?"

"Daddy's gone away for a while."

"When's he coming back?"

"Soon," she whispered. "We'll be with him soon."

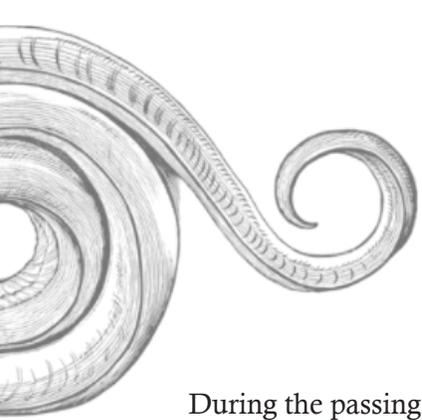
One day, she'd have to tell her daughter the truth, but to do so, she would first have to be honest with herself.

Running out of time, she didn't know if that day would ever come.



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During the passing weeks, her daughter had become infected with a lasting illness that was more than just a cold or flu. Confined to her bunk and this cabin, her little girl had remained here since their rescue. All fates considered, it had been a miracle that they had been discovered at all. Floating alone, thousands of kilometers off the east coast of Australia, fighting to stay alive in a cold, frigid and tumultuous ocean. What had begun as a luxury yachting cruise from Sydney to the tropical Pacific atolls had ended in nightmare. She wasn't sure that her torment would ever end.

Always, they were hungry. Always, the food was unpalatable, its taste nothing more than wet cardboard or soggy paper. Yet, they must eat, especially her little girl, whose health was not improving. As a mother, she instinctively knew that she must again seek medical help. Unfortunately, she didn't trust any of the crew, so again, she was forced to take on the role of examining doctor herself. The cause was easy: they needed to eat proper food and to find proper food, she would have to overcome her loathing towards venturing beyond their cabin. She would once more have to explore the interior of the *Vestibule* in hope of discovering the elusive kitchens.

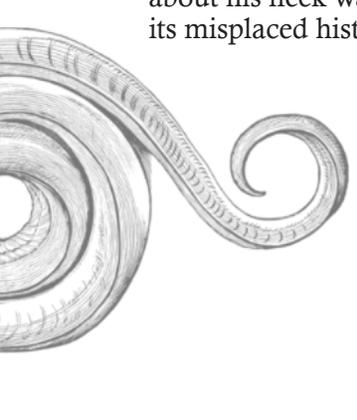
Like a memory that was a dream turned inside out, she recalled their third day when the mother first wandered into the lower levels on a similar quest. In no time at all, she became hopelessly lost in the labyrinthine turns and dead ends that made no sense. There had been no doors or portals down there either, only stairs and corridors that echoed endlessly. As she foolishly descended to each successive level, they progressively became darker and colder than the one above, and the half-heard noises muffled through the walls became harder to disbelieve. A part of her knew that if she descended too far, she might actually hear what they were saying, and what they had to say would not be pleasant.

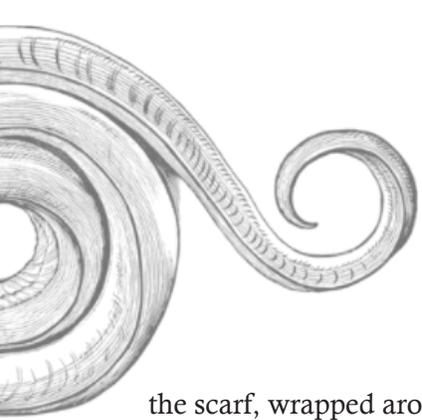
The one location on this ship that she could easily find at any time was the bridge.

From all points on the decks, it could be seen, high and lofty like a lighthouse upon a cliff, a beacon of rationality. At night, when the ocean was pitch-black and restless, it seemed that the bridge and her cabin held the only light in the entire world, that everyone elsewhere on this ship did not require electricity. After this realization, she ceased to venture out at night.

It was the middle of the day now, not that the sun was ever seen. Climbing the metal stairs, drenched by the incessant salty spray and convinced that she was always wet, the mother stumbled inside the bridge. She sensed the pronounced effects of the swelling now that she was up high, looking down on the *Vestibule* as if it were a map. The nausea returned, but if she threw up again, her subconscious reminded her that she would probably drown by doing so.

At the wheel stood the Captain, positioned in the only place she had ever seen him. He was staring forward, towards the vanishing point that was a never-ending merger of a violent ocean and a tumultuous sky. He turned when she sealed the porthole behind her, and nodded delicately to acknowledge her presence. Wrapped in a dark grey coat, his feet and hands were covered in their entirety by leather boots and gloves. The woolen scarf about his neck was wound tight, and that large pirate hat on his head didn't really seem all that odd, despite its misplaced historical context. What numbed her most was his mask: World War One flying goggles and





the scarf, wrapped around his face so she could never see what he really looked like. There was flesh in there, glimpsed only occasionally when he let his mask slip. Nothing more had ever been revealed.

“Ma’am,” he nodded ever so slightly. His voice was lyrical, even familiar, and disturbingly feminine. He was her height exactly, so she didn’t need to chink her neck to look up at him, as she had to do when conversing with any of the strange crew.

“Captain,” she shivered then dripped. Now that she had joined him on the bridge, words were lost to her. He said nothing in response. He would wait indefinitely until she had a question to ask of him.

Concluding that she had not come here to talk, the Captain returned to the wheel. Feeling awkward, she glanced at the charts pinned to the back wall, hoping to discover a topic of conversation. She quickly found one, when she was surprised that the charts displayed no continents or even islands, as if the sea was all there ever was and ever could be. “What’s our destination?” she asked, knowing that she had asked before, only she could never fully remember his previous answers, and that she would forget again what he was about to tell her now. Still, he never seemed to mind her repetition.

“Carcosa,” his words were soft.

Whimsically, she said, “I’ve heard of that place, but just can’t seem to remember where?” She searched for it on the map and failed to find it. “Will I find what I’m looking for there?”

The Captain nodded slowly. “If you can create happiness, Carcosa is the one place that I know of that can manifest it in you.”

“And if I can’t?”

“That is the normal state of affairs, for most that arrive there. That is how it will be.”

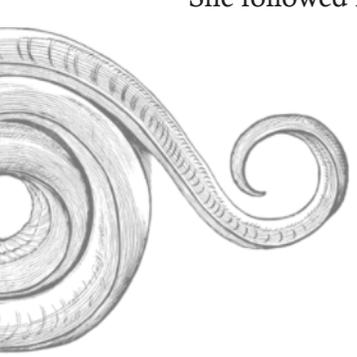
“So, then, why is that our destination?”

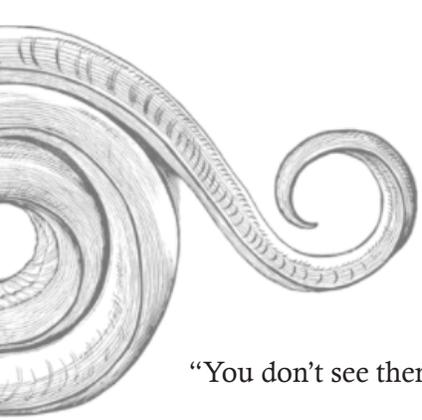
He did not answer. A part of her knew she didn’t want to hear the answer, anyway. It was as if the Captain understood her very mind, had probed the very insanity festering inside, and knew what must not be said to keep the insanity locked inside.

“Is it far? I can’t see it anywhere.” She pointed to the blank charts.

The Captain appeared unconcerned and shook his head. “Not far.” His reflective goggles turned to the swelling seas while a gloved hand pointed toward the horizon. “I’ve seen the signs.”

She followed his finger and saw nothing out of the unusual. “What signs?”





“You don’t see them? Then watch the horizon.”

Doing what she was told, she spied nothing out of the ordinary, or what passed as ordinary in this place. Then the sign appeared, as if the distance to the horizon had suddenly shrunk, as if the circumference of the earth had diminished to almost nothing. A moment later, the horror of what she witnessed overcame her, and she understood that it was neither of these things. Rather, it was a wall of water, a tidal wave a hundred meters high, rolling straight for them.

“Oh, my God!” she exclaimed. There was nowhere to escape, for it grew from every horizon, roaring like the thunder that follows impressive lightning.

The Captain turned to her. She saw her fear reflected in his goggles. “There is no concern,” he spoke calmly. She expected his lips to move behind the scarf when he explained such things to her, but they never did. “This is the eighth tidal wave today. It will pass without effect.”

“Eighth?” He was so calm she almost believed him.

Almost.

What was she to do? The crest was advancing so rapidly it would be upon them in minutes. Not even enough time to run back to her daughter, to be with her at the end. Dumbfounded, she could only stand calmly by the Captain, tasting sea water in her mouth, ready to drown again.

But when the wall of water finally caught their vessel, she saw that it was wide, and they rode right over the top without incident. She compared it to the rising and falling of her daughter on a swing, and suddenly, an explanation for today’s peculiar nausea was revealed.

“See,” said the captain once the ocean settled again. “No danger.”

“No...?”

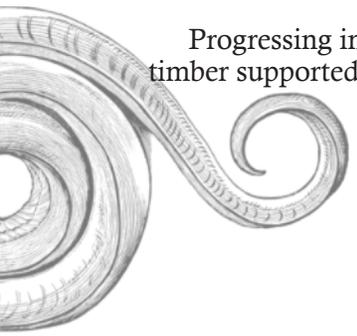
Even to herself, her voice sounded distant. Unreal.

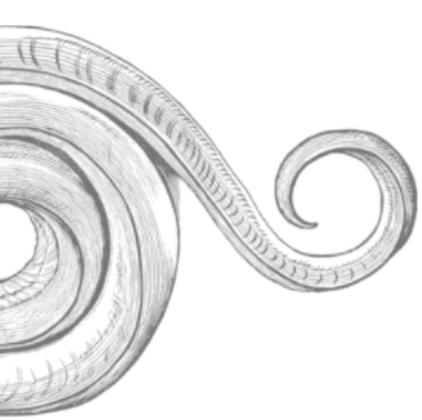
She knew she should have been worried about the wave. But she just wasn’t, couldn’t afford to be, not while she was still pretending.



Still hungry, always hungry, her drive for food again overcame her distrust of the ship’s interior, and she ventured into the one place she dreaded more than any other. She told herself to trust her instincts and that her nose would smell the food, lead her to the kitchen and then all would be right in the world again. They both needed to eat. If they did not eat, then her daughter would never recover.

Progressing into the depths, the interior seemed to grow darker at every turn. Grey walls, fashioned from old timber supported by heavy iron struts, vanished into the shadows. The swell seemed more pronounced without





portholes to watch the ocean, and the taste and wetness of sea water in her hair and clothes would not leave her. The corridors carried dampness. It was no better than standing on the deck, and she wondered if the *Vestibule* were not rotting from the inside out.

Again, despite the whispering voices in the walls and the distant sounds of portals opening and closing, she failed to find any doors apart from the one that had led her down here.

Vestibule.... The thought occurred that this was a strange name and that maybe it held meaning. A clue perhaps which might reveal her purpose in her being in this place, this nightmare. All this time, she had been thinking “vestibule” was a French word, and it probably was, but it was also commonly used in English. “Vestibule” meant an entrance hall, a reception area, somewhere to wait. Were they waiting to get somewhere? Was the Captain waiting for something to happen? Did a decision need to be made first? But to get where they wanted to go, well, they’d have to first step outside of the “vestibule” to get there. She wondered how to do that.

She remembered bobbing in the ocean, crests threatening to crash down upon her time and time again, while the reciprocal troughs promised to drag her into the depths at any moment. The nightmare never seemed to end. The sea spray kept her cold and filled her mouth with the salty water taste that lingered with her today. Her only hope was rescue.... For a moment, she was back, really in the ocean, really drowning.

For a moment, she scared herself half to death.

“Ma’am?”

A steward had found her, dressed in his fine, three-piece suit cut entirely from paper. His face was hidden behind one of the paper masquerade masks that all the crew insisted upon wearing at all times. He was stuffing something into his sleeve, and she noticed it was more paper, crunching into tiny balls. Memories came back to her, of a scarecrow on her parent’s farm in Adelaide, an effigy fashioned from her old clothes, filled with yellow straw.

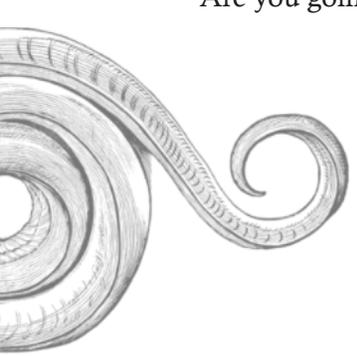
“Hello,” she stuttered, surprised that the servant managed to sneak up on her unannounced, even unheard. “I’m looking for the kitchens. I’m lost.”

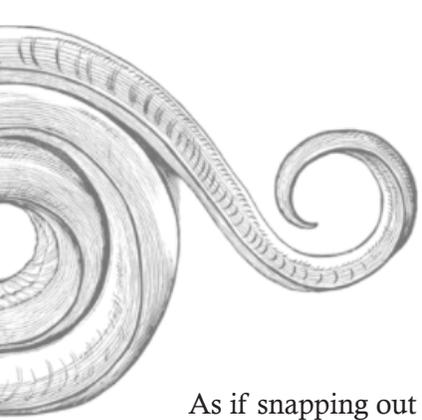
“I’m sure you are.” Like the Captain, his answer was matter-the-fact and useless.

Annoyed that he had not properly answered her, she straightened her back and raised her pitch. “Well, then, would you be able to show me where they are?”

He said nothing. Did nothing. The silence grew more uncomfortable as each second passed, but only for her.

“Are you going to answer me?”





As if snapping out of a hypnotic trance, the crewmember's head flicked towards her, the motion reminiscent of a mechanical doll controlled by external powers. "Sorry, Ma'am, I cannot. It is not possible to reach the lower decks from the upper decks."

"What do you mean? I mean, that's ridiculous."

"Yes, it is," he said, without modifying his pitch or tone. "But I can arrange to have food brought to your cabin, if you like."

She didn't know whether to feel relieved or angered further. In the end, her daughter's wellbeing had to be her first priority. She could never take any course of action that would harm her daughter. Besides, picking a fight just to win a point didn't seem worthwhile, not if there was any chance they could eat again. "Yes, for me and my daughter, both. And please be hasty about it; my daughter is not at all well."

"Certainly, Ma'am." He gave a curt bow, spun on his toes and vanished down a corridor as if he were gliding on wheels.



The yacht was lost and so was her family. Tracy cried, giving to the ocean more water than it would ever need or even notice. Moments before, the *Daintree* splintered and crumbled, she had dared to peer inside the cabin. Tracy was sure she had, for the image of the blood and skull fragments splattered on the wall was too powerful a nightmare to easily forget, burning into her mind and tearing apart her soul. Her only child.... For the life of her, Tracy could not recall why her husband chose to murder their only creation together.

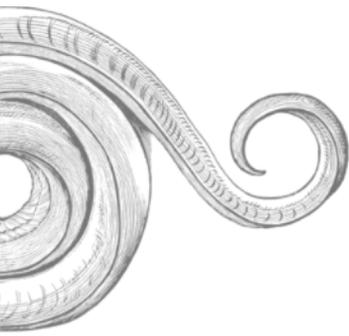
Much later, while the crashing waves and the storm's unrelenting downpour threatened to drown her again at any moment, she heard a ship, its foghorn reverberating through the sleeting rain. They might all still be rescued, she hoped. They might all become a family again. All she had to do was believe.

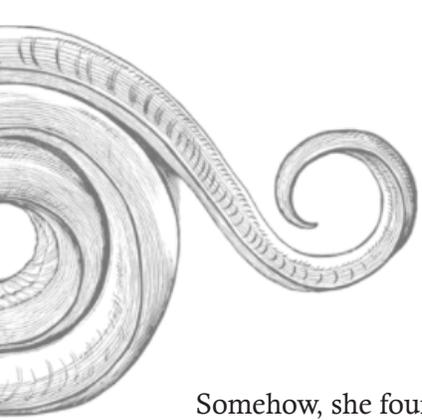
Anything was better than believing she'd lost everything and that the only path lying ahead was a lonely death at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

So, she clung to Greg's book, his sole purchase on their last port stop at Rarotonga. It was the *King in Yellow*, with its waterlogged pages and disintegrating cover. What did it say about that place on the shores of the Lake of Hali? What did that book mention about hope and the futility of it all? What did it say about distant, fabled Carcosa, where one could lose one's mind and, in doing so, perhaps rediscover happiness.

She didn't know, but she knew her husband had discovered the truth. She recalled that it said something about them all being together again, perhaps.

So, she kept reading.





Somehow, she found her way back from the endless corridors and up onto the deck, again. Here, her nausea lessened and so, she took a moment to study the waves, all the time ensuring that she didn't drown from vomiting. The massive surges of water were like big angry slugs shaken inside a bowl, fighting each other to crawl to the top of the chaotic collection of their own kind. The ocean was rising higher and higher by the minute. The spray was hard on her face, tasted again in her mouth, and stung at her eyes. She fought against the salt water sloshing inside her stomach, expecting at any moment that the *Vestibule* would be overrun with breakwaters.

On the distant deck, she spied two of the masked, paper-wrapped crew, struggling to tie down several loose crates, wooden boxes large enough to hide elephants. She had failed to notice these crates before and wondered why, as if she perhaps had just made them up and placed them into this picture.

As if sensing her awareness, the two men stopped dead in midpoint of their frantic work then pointed together back towards the ocean. Theirs was not a command, but she had the sense that if she did not look, she would miss an important aspect in the deeper symbolism of this exotic ship, where she was nothing more than one of the lost.

Heeding their advice and returning to the rails, she gazed out into the churning waters and spotted what she thought must be a human head. Then she noticed arms attached to that head, pushing through the waves. It was a young woman without garb, swimming in the frigid waters. Next to her was a man then another figure. Soon, she became aware of dozens of humans, naked and cold, powering through the water. The heavy waves kept taking them down, pounding them with their foamy swells, but they kept rising up, kept swimming. They had hope when really, they had none. They believed in the impossible.

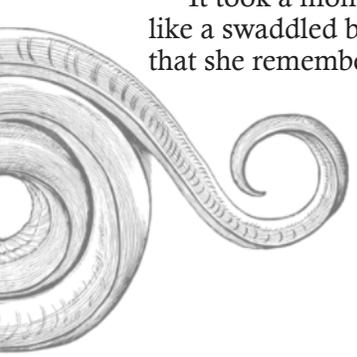
As the next wave subsided, the new vision presented before her forced her to draw breath. Not a dozen, not even hundreds, but thousands upon thousands of pale, naked humans were swimming these seas. None screamed, none called for help, not even in this cold water, where they should have all died from hypothermia. Uncaring, the *Vestibule* ploughed right through them, crushing swimmers who were too slow to get out of the way, or too preoccupied to care. Yet none of this shocked her. She knew their fate was hopeless, and yet, they blindly continued to pretend otherwise.

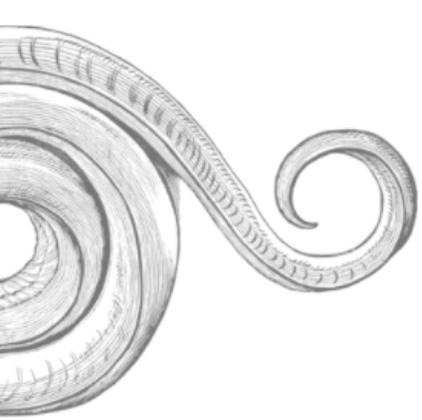
But what did tear at her soul was the fact that each and every man, woman and child was swimming in the same direction, swimming in her direction, towards Carcosa. Did they, too, believe salvation might find them in such a distant and exotic land? Was she perhaps not one of those swimmers herself?

Unsure both of whom she was and what her eyes now witnessed, she fled to her cabin, sealing the portal behind her. Somehow, the darkness seemed inviting. She drew a breath, then another, and tried to forget.

“Mummy, are you okay?”

It took a moment to remember where she was, that there was a shape in the far corner, wrapped in blankets like a swaddled baby. The only bulb overhead swung with the ocean roll, casting sharp shadows over the shape that she remembered now must be her only daughter.





“I made you something,” spoke the child.

Fear returned to the mother. She looked at her daughter for moving lips, or perhaps for fidgeting, anything, something to indicate that her child was real.

“Something for me?”

“Yes...Mother.”

A chill stung at her heart. That was not her daughter’s voice. It wasn’t even human a human voice. Rather, it was something artificial like the voices that all the crew shared. For the briefest of moments, she was back in the ocean, lost in the storm, recalling what had really been left behind inside their crumbling yacht.

“That’s really nice. How sweet.”

She sat by the dark, speaking shape. An arm extended, wrapped in papery cloth so tightly that no skin showed. At the end of the appendage was a white-gloved hand holding forth folded paper. Tentatively, with more than a hint of trepidation, she withdrew this gift from the icy-cold grip. “I’m so lucky to have you,” her words forced themselves, spoken through whispers and trembles.

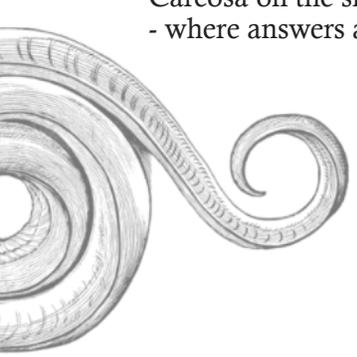
The paper unfolded easily into white cutouts of mother and daughter, hand-in-hand, foot-to-foot, unraveling in a chain. Like two mirrors that forever reflected occupants trapped between their panes, so, too, the paper continued to unfold. She almost cried at the thought of its symbolism, of being bound to her only child forever. That nothing would take her away again, that everything distant Carcosa promised her was here for her now.

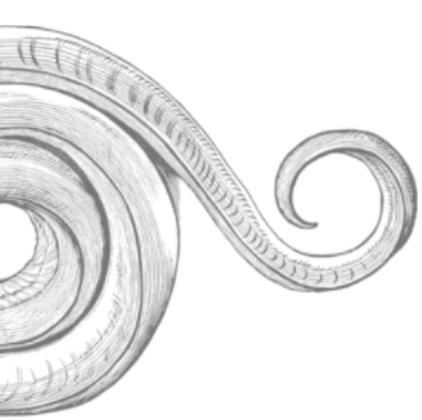
She kept unfolding.

The paper stretched deeper, into her daughter’s arm and then on through into the sleeve. In moments, she had hundreds of the mother-daughter folds spilling out of her hands. And then, without warning, the arm vanished under the weight of paper and now, the very sheets themselves were unfolding, cut and shaped into the same pattern: mother-and-daughter, mother-and-daughter, mother-and-daughter....

She kept unfolding.

Paper lay everywhere. Soon, her undoing smothered the entire floor until the bunk itself was lost under a mass of folded pulp. The paper became wet and it was no longer pure white, for words were etched in the cuttings. She read some of the lines. It was a play, the characters speaking nonsense she could not read. The play’s characters’ were her daughter and herself, or that was how she interpreted the passages. Characters were discussing their loss, but they were unwilling to accept the truth. They focused their minds on discovering lost Carcosa on the shores of Lake Hali where Hastur lies. Carcosa was a mystical land - the words kept telling her - where answers and loved-ones would always be rediscovered, even when they weren’t real.





She kept unfolding.

How long she unraveled she could not recall. To her, one moment, this had been her cabin. In another, it was a mass of pulpy, wet paper filling all the space that was possible to fill in such cramped quarters. A chain of the larger-then-smaller woman repeated endlessly, cut from the pages of a waterlogged book that she had so desperately clutched in her hands for so long, reading it for hope.

“Where are you?” she asked, pushing through the walls of paper. Its mass was too thick, so she had to tear at it, shred her way through like some Victorian explorer braving the thick jungles of Africa. “Where are you?” she cried wildly. She sobbed the same words again, sensing now her pathetic loss.

“Where are you?” she could only whisper.

Eventually, the weight of paper was pushed aside and the bunk re-emerged, only for her to discover that it was empty.

Empty except for a cut-out, masquerade mask. Like all the other masks worn on this ship, it was fashioned entirely from paper.

It was the mask that her daughter had worn.

It was all her daughter’s face had ever been.

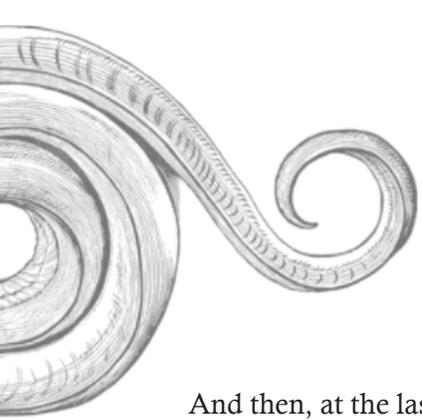


Exhausted and terrified, red-eyed and wide-eyed, she ran across the decks, screaming inside, hoping for any kind of release.

While she sprinted across the deck, a wave of salty water gushed around her. Ahead, it grew large, collected the two crew and their huge boxes, tossing them into the water like dust flicked from an emptying dustpan. As the ocean took the crew, they crumbled and folded, as if they, too, were made of paper and the spines of old, water-logged books. Neither cried nor struggled to hold onto life. Both accepted their fate as readily as she accepted the sun or moon, or that her daughter and husband had once loved her. She was struck dumb as they promptly vanished then felt sick at the thought that death was so easy and so casual. She didn’t want to die like that. She’d do anything to ensure that never happened to her and her family.

A second wave, not as crushing as the first, managed to wipe the decks, drenching her further, filling her mouth with its putrid tastes. She clung to the railing, feeling its pull grow ever stronger, threatening to take her, too, or, failing that, drown her on these very decks, themselves. She held on. She knew that she was drowning. Very soon, it would all be over.





And then, at the last moment, the waters subsided and she was cold and wet and drenched on the decks as she had always been. Now, the *Vestibule* was rising out of the water, still floating, still powering ever onwards to hopeful Carcosa. She stared out. Beyond her immediate surroundings, it was impossible to see much beyond the rising waves and the grey spray of the mist. Of the horizon, nothing at all could be seen. The world was shrinking inwards, trapping the *Vestibule* inside what must seem to some to be an enormous glass bottle, forever shaken by an angry owner.

Darkness was settling, readying the world for the night.

She took to the stairs, climbing higher to where the only light shone, to the only place that might provide answers...or relief.

At the portal, she wrenched open the latch and threw herself inside. Everything was as before. The sole captain wrapped in his coat, scarf and flying goggles, diligent at the wheel, fighting the angry ocean. Lightning flashed outside and he lit up like a black-and-white photograph before he had time to notice his visitor.

She ran up to him, pulled him by his arm so he had to look upon her. “My daughter, someone has taken my daughter.”

The expressionless face, always concealed, gave nothing away concerning any emotions that it might feel. “Daughter?” he asked in that strangely familiar voice, “you have a daughter?”

“Of course I have a daughter.”

The Captain shrugged. “Oh? Well, that is strange, because I was well-informed that your daughter had been dismantled.”

“What?” Her voice became hysterical. She needed answers. She needed them fast; otherwise, she knew she would really lose her mind, or find it. “I want to know what you and your crew did with my daughter.”

Another shrug. “We did nothing.”

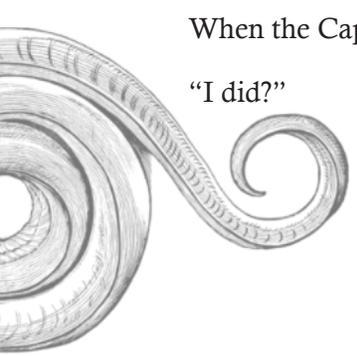
“Then who did?”

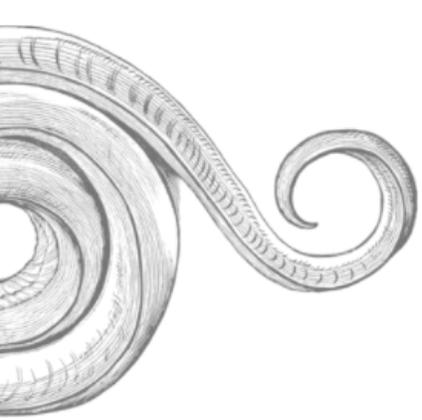
“Oh, I thought that would have been obvious too.”

She tried to speak, but his words were just confusing her. She wanted to be angry, wanted someone else to take the blame for her hopeless predicament. She wanted the Captain to take control, to bring her back and restore everything that she had lost these last weeks. “Who dismantled her?” she finally demanded, even though a part of her already knew, a part of her that knew a lot of things that the rest of her mind pretended not to.

When the Captain finally answered her, all he said was, “You did.”

“I did?”





Her mind flashed to that moment, the unraveling of the mother-and-daughter paper chain. Only now did she see what she had done. Her daughter had been made of paper, always had been. From the beginning, her only child had been nothing more than the mother-and-daughter chain. Her heart turned cold at the very thought of what she had created.

“I pulled her apart, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but you made her, first. Don’t ever forget that.”

More lightning as deep shadows threw themselves onto the wall of charts behind them.

“We just assumed that you no longer required her. But don’t concern yourself. My crew are clearing the mess away as we speak.” Again, that voice, it was almost female. And he was her height exactly, even the same build.

“You mean, she’s gone?”

“Yes. You no longer need her, now that we are nearly there.”

Her anger flared, built upon an ever-foreboding thought that in reality, all was lost, and all that she had hung onto was nothing more than fantasy. She didn’t want to think that, didn’t want to remember.

“Who are you?”

Once more, the face was as silent as stone, the goggles reflecting her own eyes. Or were they? She looked again and saw that they were not reflections, rather, real eyes behind the mask, so similar to her own. “Who are you?” she asked again.

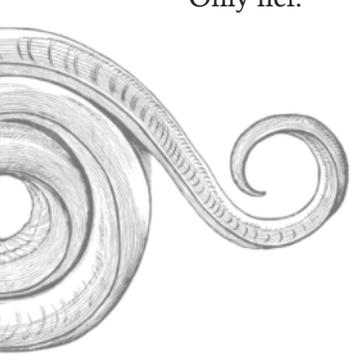
“I thought you already knew.”

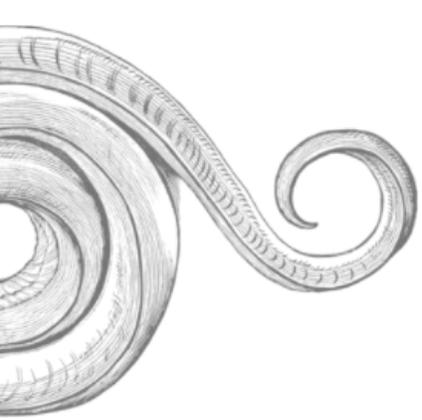
Her hand flashed to her open mouth, because suddenly, she did know.

How easy it was for the human mind to deceive, especially to deceive oneself. So, she unraveled the scarf, pulled away the World War One flying goggles and drew from his head the pirate hat. He was her height, of the same build - these should have been clue enough. The familiar voice, like the familiar human face that looked back at her now, she was looking at herself.

Who was the only living person in this entire ocean who was willing to do anything to find fabled Carcosa?

Only her.





Tracy Wright came up from the ocean for what was probably the hundredth time. It could have been her thousandth for all she cared, or remembered. Down there, in those moments trapped in the murky, dark waters it was calm, it was just water. Down there, she couldn't breathe either. Up here on the surface were the swelling waves, the eerie lightning and angry thunder. They would eventually claim her and send her back down again. That final moment now could be no more than hours away at most. Probably sooner, considering how exhausted her muscles had become treading water.

The wreckage of the *Daintree* had long dispersed. Her daughter with her splattered brains was somewhere down there, many miles under the angry sea. Her husband might still be alive, but she doubted it. He was never as strong a swimmer as she.

All she had left was his book, that dreadful *King in Yellow*. She'd held onto it this long, so she might as well keep reading until the very bitter end. Only that book offered any semblance of hope, no matter how futile that hope had ever been.

She laughed at the irony. Her wish would finally come true. All she had to do now was to decide how to make it so. Down there, at the ocean's end where the dead are never found, she could still be reunited with her husband and daughter and it would be a silent, lifeless reunion.

Instead, if she wanted the madness, if she wanted to escape oblivion, to become lost in her own torment in a world where she would always believe her family could be made whole once again, all she had to do was keep reading.

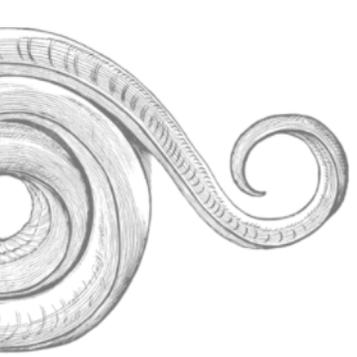
It was the impossible dream. Oblivion with nothing, or madness with false hope?

The choice was so easy.

So, she kept reading and asked again of her captain to take her to the distant shores of Lake Hali, where fabled Carcosa lay.

THE END

David Conyers is an Australian science fiction author from Adelaide who also writes Lovecraftian horror, with over 35 short stories sold worldwide. His first book, *The Spiraling Worm*, co-authored with John Sunseri, received honourable mentions in both the Aurealis and Australian Shadows Awards, and was a blend of spy thriller fiction and the Cthulhu Mythos. His latest book and first as editor is *Cthulhu's Dark Cults*, the first fiction collection set entirely in the world of the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game. David's website is www.davidconyers.com.





The scene is strangely quiet, broken only by the occasional sound of their claws striking granite or the roar of one of our gunshots.

NATURE VS NURTURE

by Orrin Grey

The scene is strangely quiet, broken only by the occasional sound of their claws striking granite or the roar of one of our gunshots. When they fall they make dull thuds, like a side of meat slapping down on a counter, but usually they're too far away for us to hear it, or we're already chambering another round.

Harter stands to my left, shrouded in the mist of the graveyard. He looks like an old-fashioned gunslinger with his faded black duster, his cowboy hat, and his big gun. His rifle--the kind with a bolt-action chamber--is more powerful than it needs to be for this job, and he always has another bullet gripped between his teeth. He raises and fires in a motion so smooth you'd think he'd always done it.

I never developed Harter's easy sureness. I'm on cleanup, walking along a little behind with a pistol to finish off any that are still alive, or head off any that try to sneak up on us. They don't try that anymore, though. Now they just run, like animals before a forest fire. "That's what we are," Harter would say. "A goddamned forest fire."

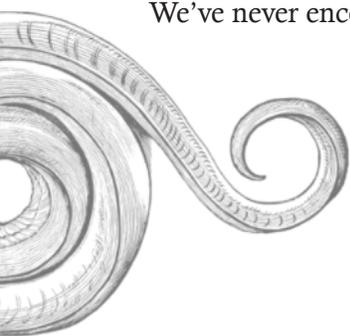
Harter's rifle roars again, smoke bursting out of the end like a puff of cotton. One of them pitches over, slamming against a headstone and cracking it at the base. The thing shudders and tries to stand, then falls back against the stone, knocking it to the ground.

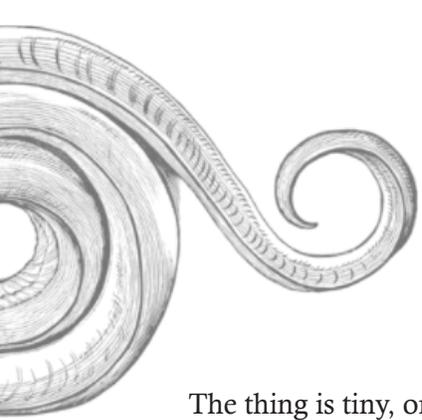
"Pay attention," Harter barks, bringing the butt of his rifle down on one's head. Its skull gives way under the blow and it goes down. Harter turns the rifle around and puts a bullet in its spine, just to be safe. "When you don't pay attention, someone gets hurt," he tells me and goes back to his business.

Again the rifle roars and flashes in the darkness. In the illumination, I see them running, see their loping bodies hurtling over tombs and behind trees. I see one go down, but the shot isn't clean. This one will get back up. I raise my pistol and make sure that it doesn't.

Because of the darkness, I might have missed it, but the light of my gunshot illuminates it, painting its shadow on the headstone. My first instinct is to shoot, but I don't. Instead, I bend down to look. I've never seen anything like it.

"Get over here," Harter is yelling at me like a drill sergeant on television. "Goddammit, get over here." I can hear him approaching, hear the sounds of his boots in the wet grass. He won't be happy with what I've found. We've never encountered a young one before.





The thing is tiny, only a little larger than a human baby, but it already has teeth and claws. Its skin is a mottled grey-black-green, a color that I cannot readily name. Moss on an extremely dark stone. Its eyes are glimmering pinpricks, like staring down the barrel of a laser pointer, and it has rocked back on its hind legs, hissing and holding its claws out to attack if threatened. Unlike human children, it is almost an exact replica of its adult brethren, only smaller. Built to scale.

Harter's footsteps stop just behind me and I hear the sound of a bullet entering the chamber. "No!" the next thing I know I'm grabbing the rifle and pushing the barrel away from the creature, into empty space. "We've never found one this young before."

"It doesn't matter," Harter answers. "Little ones grow into big ones."

"I want to keep it. To study it," I add quickly. "Maybe we can learn something."

Harter is silent for a moment, making the low growling sound deep in his throat that he has taken to making whenever he is thinking about something.

"Better ways to kill them," he finally says, as though finishing my thought. "But it's your responsibility."

He turns and walks away as I slip off my coat and throw it over the shaking body of the baby ghou.

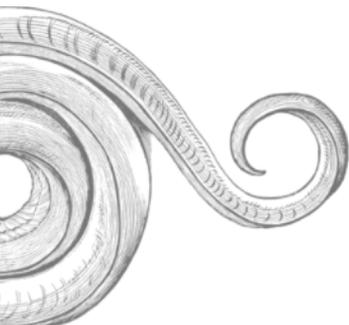


For the first week, I have to keep it in a locked trunk. I feed it bowls of milk mixed with a little bit of blood. Whenever I open the trunk to put the food in, it huddles in one of the corners and makes a hissing, rattling sound. Once, I make the mistake of trying to touch it gently, to reassure it, and I draw back a hand ragged with bloody teeth marks.

I have to keep it locked in the trunk at all times. Whenever I'm not nearby, it scratches wildly and makes a sound somewhere between the frenzied bark of a coyote and the wail of a hungry infant. All night, as I lie in bed, I am kept awake by the sounds. I try throwing blankets in with it, to give it something warm and soft, but they just wind up shredded.

The ghou is malnourished. It doesn't trust the food that I give it. It always eats, but never much, and never when I'm watching. So long as I keep the lid of the trunk open, it remains crouched in the corner, as small as it can make itself, hissing.

Harter doesn't come by. I think he's angry with me. Normally, he would be over every other night or so. Normally, we would go out hunting. During the week, I only get one call from him: to say that work's been keeping him busy. His voice sounds forced. I tell him it's all right.





I'm just about to shut the lid of the trunk when the ghoul unfolds and begins to crawl out of its corner. I freeze. We're partway into the second week, and this is the first time it has moved from the corner with me there. It crawls forward, sniffing the air slowly, its claws tapping quietly on the scarred bottom of the trunk. It sounds like a puppy with overlong toenails trying to sneak across a hardwood floor.

Reaching the bowl of milk, discolored and swirling with blood, it lifts a claw and taps the side of it. The milk shakes; a little spills over the side. Once again, it taps the bowl, with the same result. Putting its claw back onto the bottom of the trunk, it creeps closer and nudges at the bowl with its snout. The bowl moves slightly, and the ghoul draws back, but nothing else.

It pounces on the milk with a suddenness that is almost startling after its slow exploration.



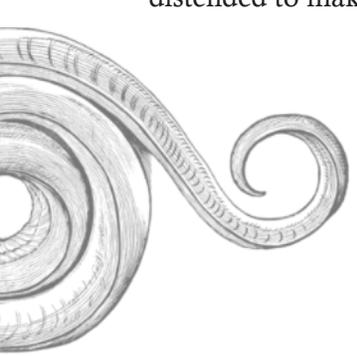
The ghoul learns to trust me almost as quickly as it grows. In no time, it is sucking the bloody milk from a rag I hold in my hands. It no longer attacks if I try to touch it, though it still doesn't seem comfortable. Sometimes, it sniffs at my fingers, but it doesn't draw away. It still looks malnourished, so I move up to feeding it raw hamburger. It eats this as greedily as it once drank the milk, thrusting its face into the meat and chomping and slurping until there's nothing left.

It has graduated from the trunk to an entire room of the house, which I cleaned out and prepared for it. I still lock the door, just in case, but it no longer shreds the blankets I give it nor howls in the night. Almost a month has passed since I brought it back from the graveyard, and it's the size of a German Shepherd. A week ago, I named it Charlie, though I won't ever tell Harter that.



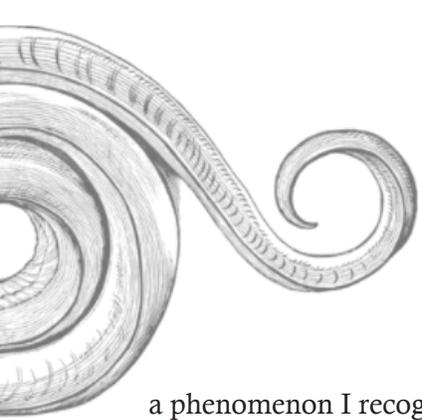
Charlie eats an alarming amount of meat for a creature that remains so thin. He is as big as a man, though he moves hunched over on all fours like all ghouls. His entire body is covered in ropy muscle, like cables drawn tight under his skin.

His eyes still glow, though their brilliance has faded. When the fading began, I worried for his health, but it seems to be the way with them as they age. His claws and teeth have grown progressively larger; his jaw has distended to make room for his enlarging canines. Bony protrusions have appeared down the center of his back,



Reaching the bowl of milk, discolored and swirling with blood, it lifts a claw and taps the side of it. The milk shakes; a little spills over the side.





a phenomenon I recognize as being indicative of males of the species. In the evenings, I can hear him running around and around the room for exercise, but I am as yet afraid to let him go outside.

A week ago, he learned to unlock the door to the room I kept him in. When I found him in the upstairs hallway, I was able to coax him back in, thankfully, but I could never have forced him. Despite his lack of any real exercise, his ropy muscles have turned to steel under his flesh. He could rip me apart as easily as he once did the blankets I provided for him. I had to buy an outside deadbolt for the door.

I don't know what to do with him anymore. He's too smart to keep. And too big. He's bigger than me now, as big as I've ever seen them get. I should let him go. He eats too much. I can't afford to feed both of us. A voice in my head that sounds like Harter tells me that I should be afraid of him.

But I'm more afraid of letting him go than I am of keeping him. There are people like Harter out there who won't recognize that he's different; who won't know that he's tame. There are people like Harter who wouldn't care if they did know. And he is tame now, too docile to be afraid of them like he should.

I pour myself another brandy. Harter called me a few minutes ago and asked me to go hunting with him. I told him that I was busy. Upstairs, I can hear Charlie running.



When I open the front door, Harter is standing outside. It's raining and water pours off the brim of his hat and the shoulders of his duster. Held limply in his right hand is a pickaxe, the head of it resting on my front step. "Can I come in?" he asks.

I'm glad that Charlie has stopped running. Harter looks like shit and I've had more than a little to drink.

Harter comes in, lifting the pickaxe and letting the head of it thump to the floor with each stride. "I thought you were going hunting," I prompt as he walks into my living room. He pushes his gaze across the room. It almost seems like turning his head is difficult for him. His eyes linger on the brandy sitting next to my armchair.

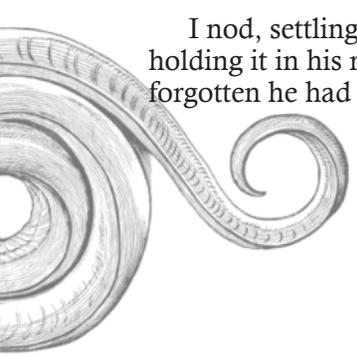
"Would you like a drink?"

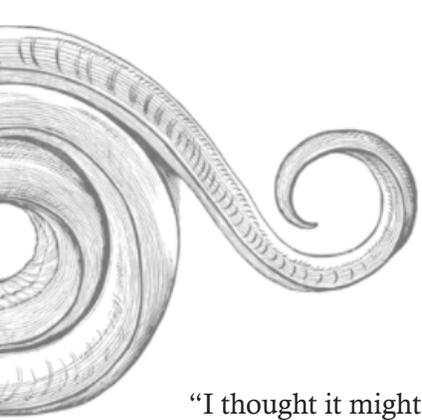
He shakes his head, looking around blankly again. Then, abruptly, he walks over and sits down on my couch without removing his wet coat. I open my mouth, but then snap it shut. Something is obviously wrong; my couch will stand a little rainwater.

"I thought you were going hunting," I repeat.

"I am," he says. "I was. The guns are out in the car."

I nod, settling myself into the armchair and leaning forward. "What's with the pickaxe?" I ask. He's still holding it in his right hand, rocking it back and forth on the floor. When I ask, he looks at it as though he had forgotten he had it.





“I thought it might be prudent to do some burying,” he replies.

I nod again. We sit in silence for a while, Harter staring at my front door with blank eyes. He continues to rock the pickaxe back and forth and I can hear the squeaking sound it makes on the floor even over the sound of the rain.

“Learn anything from it?” he asks suddenly. I know, of course, to what he is referring.

“A great deal.”

He nods now, biting his lower lip. I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen him so subdued. “How is it?” he asks.

“Fine,” I reply.

He nods again. He lifts up the pickaxe and lets it drop back to the floor with a loud clank. I jump in spite of myself. “You’re not going to kill it, are you?” he asks.

“No,” I say quietly.

Harter just looks sad, not angry like I would have imagined. He shakes his head, looking down at the floor now. “What happened to you?”

I stand up, pacing across the room in front of him. “I trained him, Harter,” I say. “I tamed him.”

“They’re monsters,” he replies, his voice still quiet but full of emotion. It almost sounds as if he is holding back tears.

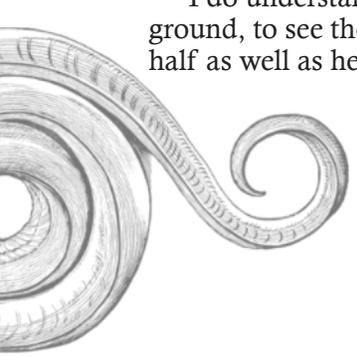
“They’re animals.”

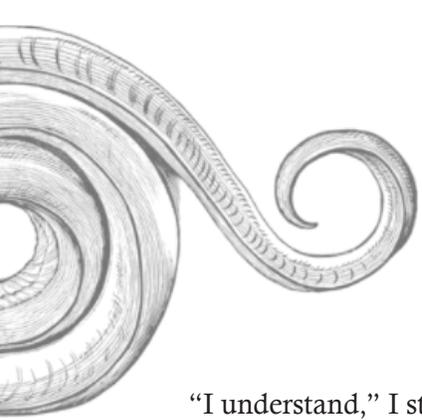
“They eat the dead!” he shouts, jerking his head up and staring at me with wild eyes, as alive now as they were dead only a few minutes before.

I round on him, “So do we,” I shout back. “So do we. They eat our dead and we eat the dead of animals, cows, creatures not that unlike them. For fuck’s sake, Harter, they’re scavengers. They don’t even kill most of the time.”

He stands up, facing me. He is crying now, the tears spilling down his cheeks, though he doesn’t even seem to notice. “They ate Ginny,” he says. “They ate her. Don’t you understand that?”

I do understand. I remember, all too well, approaching her grave in the twilight to see them digging at the ground, to see them gnawing at her body. I remember the smell and the sounds. But I’m sure I don’t remember half as well as he does.





“I understand,” I start to tell him, but he pushes me away. Harder, I think, than he intends to. I stumble back against the table next to my chair, falling over it, sending brandy and glass spilling across the hardwood floor. I fall atop the mess, a chunk of glass wedging itself into my shoulder blade.

Harter starts forward to help me, but then he stops and shakes his head. He turns away. “I have to see it,” he mutters as he staggers toward the staircase, dragging the pickaxe behind him. I can hear the thump-thump-thump as it ascends the stairs.

I stand, trying not to put my hand down in any broken glass. I barely make it up. The fall twisted or bruised or broke my leg and I can hardly put my weight on it. The brandy burns in the wound on my back. I can’t reach the chunk of glass and I don’t have time to try very hard. I don’t know who I’m more frightened for if Harter gets that door unlocked. Harter’s crazy, but if Charlie realizes that he’s a threat, then Harter won’t stand a chance.

I stumble toward the staircase. “Harter,” I call up it, hoping to at least slow him down. “Harter, don’t do this. He’s harmless. He’s not one of them. He’s harmless.” I don’t know who I’m trying to convince with my refrain, him or me.

My back aches. Every step I take feels like I’m grinding the chunk of glass into my bone. I notice myself limping and grit my teeth. The pain in my shoulder is so great that I can hardly feel the pain in my leg.

I hear the deadbolt click as I round the top of the stairs. Harter is standing in front of the door to Charlie’s room, that blank expression back on his face.

“Harter no!” I shout as he begins to turn the knob. He doesn’t even look at me as I hobble toward him.

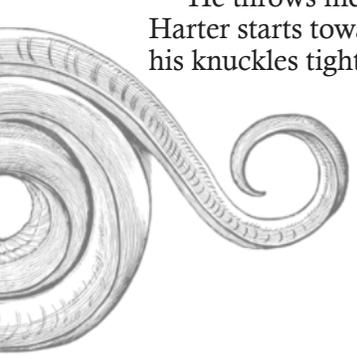
Charlie can obviously tell that Harter isn’t friendly because from inside I can hear a rumbling, growling hiss: the grown-up version of the tiny noise he made when I kept him in the trunk as a baby. Harter walks in, dragging the pickaxe behind him.

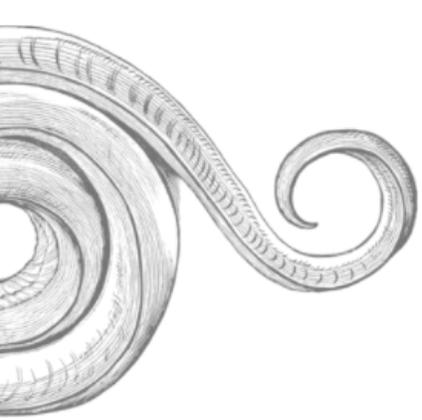
I slam up against the doorjamb, groaning involuntarily at the burning in my shoulder. Charlie is backed up against the far wall, huddled in a corner, teeth and claws bared, looking almost just like he did when I first found him. Only now, he’s more than ten times that size. He’s almost as large as a gorilla, the biggest ghoul I’ve ever seen, more than two hundred pounds of tightly wound muscle. The growling, hissing sound fills the room. Harter doesn’t look fazed, even though I know he’s never seen a ghoul as big as Charlie either.

“You’ve grown,” I hear him say, his voice barely audible above the vocalization of Charlie’s fear.

I stumble forward, laying my hand on his shoulder. “Harter, don’t. You see he’s harmless.”

He throws me off, pushing me back against the wall. I grind my jaws together to keep from screaming. Harter starts toward Charlie again, wrapping both hands around the handle of the pickaxe. He lifts it; I can see his knuckles tightening. Charlie’s growl deepens.





I launch myself off the wall, driving into Harter's back with my good shoulder. I send him pitching forward, the pickaxe falling from his hands to clatter on the floor. He falls to one knee with a deep exhalation, like an old drunk. He is reaching inside his coat and I know he lied about the guns, or at least about one of them.

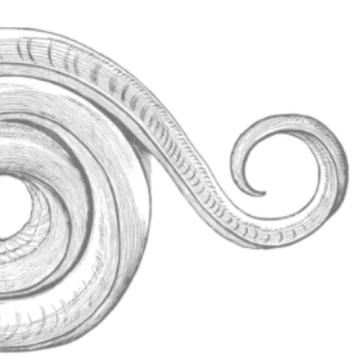
The only thing I can hear is the sound in Charlie's throat as I lift up the pickaxe. My shoulder is screaming and maybe I am, too. I can feel the growling in my bones.

Harter has the pistol half out of his coat pocket when I bury the head of pickaxe in his back. He falls, the pistol sliding across the floor, and I lever it out to drive it back in. Charlie's growling quiets and I hear the sickening crunch of bone and meat.

I let go of the pickaxe, leaving it to sag in the flesh of Harter's back. I don't waste any tears; he wouldn't have wanted them. Instead, I reach out a hand, shaking from the pain, and lay it gently on Charlie's head. I want to comfort him, to let him know that everything's going to be all right. But I don't think I can.

THE END

Orrin Grey was born on the night before Halloween, and he's been in love with monsters and marvels ever since. He has a BA in English and Philosophy from Baker University, and now he writes weird stories featuring mad monks, ape fiends and cursed books, among other things. His first chapbook novella, *The Mysterious Flame*, was recently released by Dead Letter Press. You can learn more at www.oringrey.com.





I am Sonya-Nell Elton, keeper of the North Point Light that my father and grandfather and great-grandfather kept before me.

THE BLACK SHIP

by Rebecca Nazar

I am Sonya-Nell Elton, keeper of the North Point Light that my father and grandfather and great-grandfather kept before me. My father, Basil, named me after a place where he dwelt as a young man for eons, Sona-Nyl, Land of Fancy, where time, space, death, and pain does not exist. The White Ship, its captain a bearded man, its sexton, an ethereal blue bird that soared above its masts, bore my father to that heaven-like realm.

I loved my father's make-believe tale as a young girl. I never thought my father mad. He possessed two pieces of evidence to support his claim: the White Ship's shattered spar ("an object so white it rivals the purity of mountain snow," he'd always point out) and the blue bird he had had stuffed. On rare occasion, he suggested I cradle the spar, gingerly rest its end across my lap, and then tuck a number of the bird's stray feathers in my wiry hair. This ritual made me feel as if I was a fierce warrior of Sona-Nyl, with an ungainly-yet-mystical weapon and tribal headdress. In my enthusiasm, I swore both radiated a restorative heat.

"But my tale is a cautionary one," he'd say as he replaced the spar and bird atop his mantel. "I'd still reside in Sona-Nyl if not for my curiosity. I desired to travel to Cathuria, Land of Hope, a realm where gods dwelt. I thought its grandness would impress me more than Sona-Nyl's."

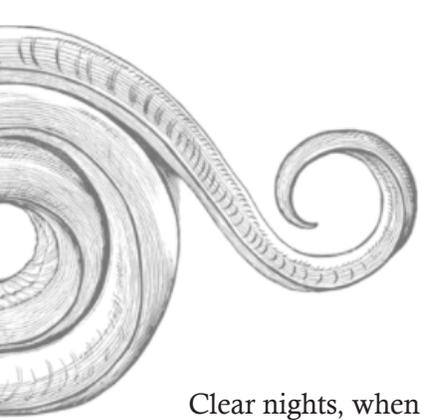
This was my cue to say, "The White Ship tried to deliver you to Cathuria, but plunged into an abyss where all oceans drained. The ship returned to the lighthouse, but crashed upon the rocks, splintering the spar and breaking the bird's heart. The bearded captain informed you that you'd never set foot in Sona-Nyl again. Oh, what you lost." I'd feign woefulness by jutting my bottom lip and bowing my head.

"But for eons, what did I lack? When I returned, what happened, Sonya-Nell?" He'd slyly grin, prepping for a broad smile.

"You returned and fathered me," I'd squeal.

He'd beam and laugh. "I wasn't foolish at all, eh?" We'd hug and I'd peck his cheek.

For years, we tended the lighthouse together, amicably, finding comfort in each other's company. Then, alas, the moon seduced my father. He gawked at its changing phases as if a buffoonish lover beguiled by a beautiful face. Silly notion, this, but I needed something to blame when, honestly, being of advanced years, he was stricken with dementia. A year passed and each day, beginning at dusk, he chanted for an hour or more, "What the moon brings," fully anticipating the White Ship to ferry him away to Sona-Nyl.



Clear nights, when the moon was full, agitated him greatly, for thrice he nearly drowned, attempting to walk upon moonlight rippling on the waves. Moonbeam bridges, he called them, which led to the White Ship.

Life as an old maid on a sparsely-inhabited island embittered me, I'll confess. That grim year prematurely wrinkled my skin and grayed my hair. Never one to suffer nightmares, I endured them now, but those of a malevolent black ship. Nightly, I clawed myself out of sleep with it trying to ram me.

Last month's pregnant moon delivered a worse blow.

My father's condition worsened considerably; his chants were replaced by rants. He wailed, "I forfeited utopia to face mortality. I feel pain more acutely, knowing none for eons on Sona-Nyl. I forfeited comfort for you. You possess no instinct for anticipating my needs and wants."

These statements cut me deeply. If given a choice to listen to such malice or be stretched upon the rack, I'd have preferred the latter. Know this: never did my love for my father wane. I clung to memory, the sweet paternal sentiments he had expressed, and our pretend ritual. Welling tears stung my eye whenever I dusted the spar and bluebird.

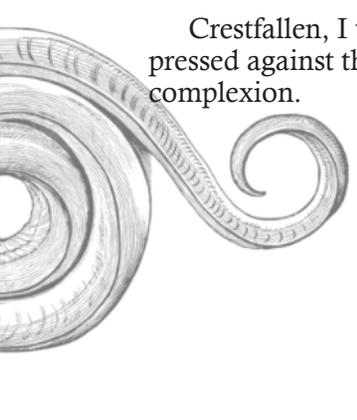
Then came this month's moon. Its pustule-like appearance pocked the night sky. A horrible omen for us both.

While tending the lighthouse light, I mistakenly breezed in front of my father. This broke his lecherous gaze upon the moon. He grabbed my arm, yanked me towards him and screamed in my face, "The White Ship will rescue and return me to Sonya-Nyl to live forever. What the moon brings is Cthulhu for you."

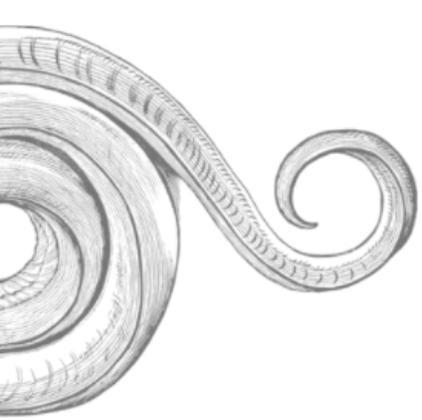
His acid tone I'd become accustomed to, but this new contrived word 'Cthulhu', oddly, molested my soul. "Cthulhu? What of it? More nonsense? Father, the bearded man said you'd never return to Sona-Nyl, remember?" The statement played into his fantasy. I shook my head, began again. No, Sona-Nyl doesn't exist, never existed. Such pretending as a grown man is foolish. You're insane. Stop with this pathetic prattle. You'll suffer pain and die like everyone else."

Too, too cruel of me. But it brought him, somehow, the genuine him, round for a few fleeting seconds. Contrite, he kissed my cheek as penance. I hugged him back, relieved. "Bring me the bluebird," he whimpered. With that said, the light in his soulful eyes was snuffed, victim of some darkness I could neither ward off nor fathom.

I retrieved the bird from the cottage and brought it to the lighthouse. My father snatched it from my grasp, slamming it against his chest. He took a seat again as the moon's attentive began to whisper, "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyehwagn'nagl fhtagn," while slowly stroking and occasionally plucking the bird's plumage.



Crestfallen, I tried to wrestle the bird away but his hissing face and strange words repelled me until my back pressed against the far wall. From this short distance, I discerned that his face was taking on a gray, scabrous complexion.



Midnight came and a great wind, rank with the smell of rot, extinguished the lighthouse light. “The last time our beckon went out was when the White Ship wrecked upon North Point,” my father said. Cackling, he danced with the bluebird over his head. “It comes, it comes.”

The darkness smothered me. I collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

The dawn that roused me cast not a cheery yellow hue, but a jaundiced light. I noticed my father gone. I rushed down the winding stairs, the first time suffering vertigo. Blue pinfeathers swirled at my hem. My knees buckled when I spotted my father’s splayed form on the landing. His neck looked broken, his eyes red billiard balls. Blood sullied the floor, oozing from his cracked skull and the bone that protruded from his left lower leg. The bluebird’s torso-section was stuffed in his mouth, which cocked his jaw violently to the right.

I suspect I wandered in shock for quite some time. When next I regained my full senses, I lay on the shoal. A skeleton knelt at my side, rousing me by trailing its fingers across my face. The long strands of its beard twined throughout its collarbones and ribcage.

With clacking teeth, it implored, “The splintered spar, where’s its location? Say you have it. May I see it?”

I gasped in horror and thrashed my arms to cast it away.

“I’m sorry I startled you, miss.” In gentlemanly fashion, it bowed its head. “Fear not; I was Captain of the White Ship. Did Basil ever mention me? What of my bluebird?”

“Yes, he pined for your ship daily. The spar rests on his mantle. In a mad fit, he tried to ingest the bluebird and fell down the lighthouse stairs to his death,” I cried. “How were you reduced to such a state?”

“After the wreck, I was forced to swim the seas for years. My flesh could not weather such exposure. What is your name?”

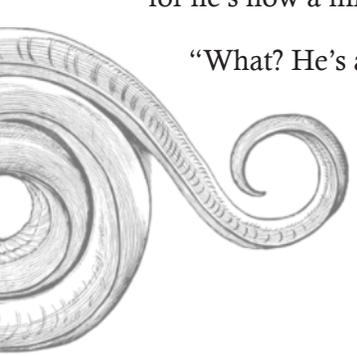
“Sonya-Nell Elton.”

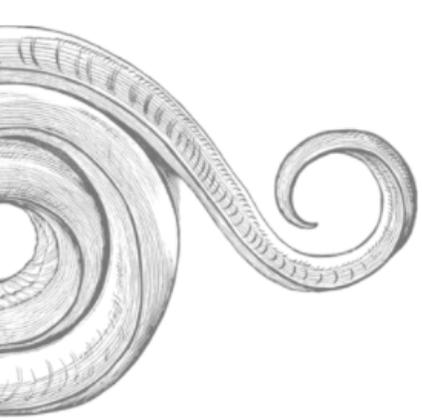
“Ah, in homage of Sona-Nyl. Clever.” A slight whistle sounded from his nostril holes. “You question your sanity?”

“What do I care for my sanity? My father is lost to me.”

With cracking joints, the Captain cocked his head and pointed at the horizon. “Remember him as he was, for he’s now a minion of a horrible god named Cthulhu.”

“What? He’s alive?” I tittered.





I sat up to spy a black ship that inched across the waves. Its many long oars arced and plowed the water slowly and independently, much like a tarantula's delicate-yet-unnerving gait. My stomach lurched. "I dreamed of a ship such as that." Panicked, I reached out and grasped his shoulder. A heat, similar to that of the spar's years ago, shot through my arms. The sensation brought clarity and tremendous range to my sight. As if spyglasses, my eyes focused. I read the ship's name: The Call. I gaped, disbelieving. My father served as its masthead; thick black tentacles bound him to the prow. I nearly swooned.

"The call of Cthulhu eroded your father's mental state, Sonya-Nell." The Captain propped me up. His soothing tone was akin to a life preserver that buoyed my unsteady nerves. "Did he reveal that the White Ship plunged into a great waterfall where all the oceans drain and from there, bestial sounds emitted?"

"Hours ago, he uttered that name and used this alien language," I said.

"Cthulhu is a god that reigned millennia ago and was desirous to enslave humanity. The White Ship changed profoundly after exposure to his vile, bestial call. The wreckage resurrected as a black ship, The Call. It then set sail for the lands of Zar, Thalarion and Xura. Did your father mention these lands, how I suggested he not step foot on them? We sailed around them before reaching Sona-Nyl."

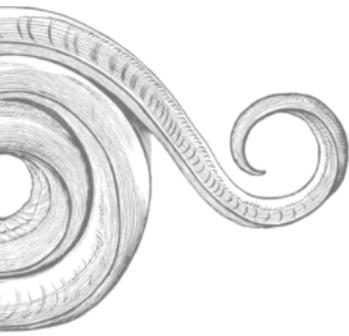
Again, I shook my head.

"The Call enticed the inhabitants from these lands onboard to man its decks. Poets who died of want resided on Zar, The Land of Dreams and Thoughts. They slave as oarsmen, poor souls. Notice how they gnaw at their limbs in the vain hope they'll free themselves from the shackles."

"They are naked and beaten, too," I added.

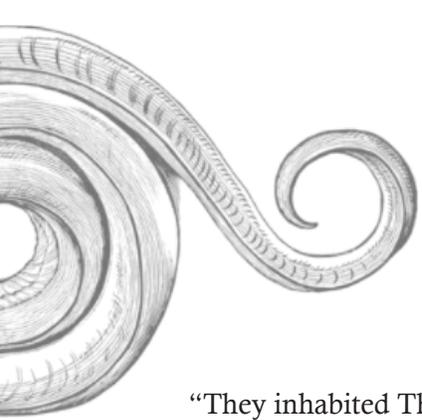
"Do you see who beats them?" the Captain said.

I observed for a moment. "Yes, rabid men with scarred flesh. Demons are oft rendered likewise in books."



I sat up to spy a black ship that inched across the waves. Its many long oars arced and plowed the water slowly and independently, much like a tarantula's delicate-yet-unnerving gait.





“They inhabited Thalarion, City of a Thousand Wonders. All were reduced to such a state because they did not strive to fathom life’s mysteries. Lastly, notice what binds the ship together. Be not faint of heart.” He held me closer.

I could not respond to the Captain’s query, being so stricken with disgust. The Call’s hull festered. Rotting corpses clung to it; their desiccated entrails, like twine, bound the planks together. The masts were leg bones lashed end to end; tanned flesh had been fashioned into sails.

“That is the refuse of Xura, Land of Pleasures Unattained. It was a plague-ravaged place where cemeteries went uncovered,” the Captain said.

I locked eyes with my father. With outstretched arms, he mouthed the words, “See what the moon brings.” He clawed at the air. His fingers raked across my face, despite the span between us. “Do you hear Cthulhu’s call, Sonya-Nell?”

The Captain tugged my chin, turning my face away, which broke the grip my father’s odious stare had on me. “Look not upon him again until the spar rests in your hands. Retrieve it quickly. My crumbling bones cannot climb over rocks.”

“What do you intend to do?” Gazing into the Captain’s eye sockets, I detected a faint, ethereal light. I conjured a handsome face for him that smiled at me sweetly.

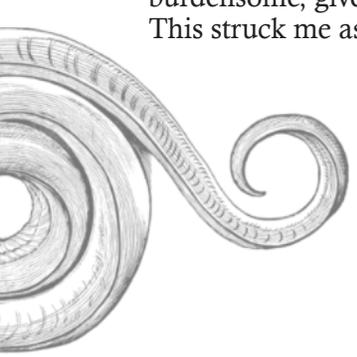
He took my hand and pressed it against his brittle chest. “I’ll instruct you how to destroy The Call, assisting you as best I can, but you must do the greater part.”

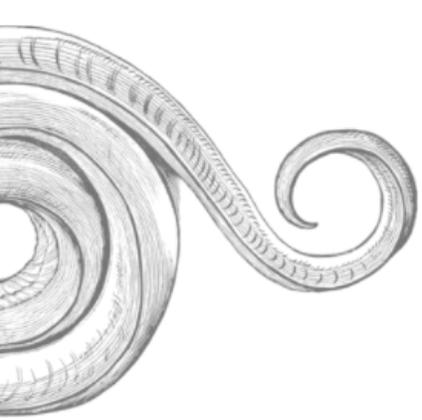
A jolt of fear shot through my heart. I withdrew my hand. Dust covered my palm. “I’ll not fail you or my father, Captain.”

With laboured breath, I clambered over the rocks, and then tottered along the path. A blood trail marred the way, grim evidence that my father had dragged himself down to the sea, despite his dire injuries. Hours ago, I thought him dead, victim of a gruesome accident. It seemed a pretty notion compared to his damnable fate.

The cottage was not far. When I crossed its threshold, the cozy interior seemed foreign. Madness, the monstrous, the surreal had become the norm. Never would I be the same again, or surrounded by everyday things. My sobs filled the space. I entered my room to acquire two blue tail feathers from between my mattress, tucking both up my dress sleeves so as not to lose them. I squirreled them away years ago, aware they’d fade if exposed to too much sun. Having them brush against my flesh fortified me. My pulse steadied.

The door to my father’s room groaned when opened. The spar possessed a sheen I did not recognize. As I grasped it, a splinter lodged in my right index finger. There was no pain. To cradle the spar in my arms was burdensome, given my modest size; soon, my strength waned, forcing me to drag it the remainder of the way. This struck me as an act of sacrilege, for its ivory surface quickly became dun.





A bestial din rose from The Call. My father's shrieks, accompanied by a chorus of lowing crew, caused me to cringe reflexively, tightening my grip on the spar. Dozens of splinters were embedded in my palms when I arrived at the beach.

Only half an hour had passed, yet The Call floated close to shore. Its cesspool stench robbed me of breath. Waves did not tumble upon the beach. The sea was smooth and black as obsidian; it simmered, threatening to boil. Dead fish and fowl stewed atop its surface.

"Cthulhu is what the moon brings. Captain, assume your command. Sonya-Nell, voyage with us," my father called.

The Captain spotted me. "Well done, Sonya-Nell; come as close to the water as you can tolerate. Tilt the spar at a forty-five degree angle." I did so. My body trembled under the strain. "Your father prized us so much in life. The black ship will run aground to enslave us." With great exertion, he pushed the spar deeper into the sand. This resulted in him dislocating his right shoulder. Undeterred, he switched to his left.

I reached out to stall his effort. "Enough, please, that will have to do." When he tenderly inspected my raw and bloody hands, I added, "Why is there no pain?"

"It is pure, for it was hewn on Sona-Nyl, a place foreign to pain. You are pure, too, Sonya-Nell. Once that black ship becomes impaled upon the spar, it will crumble because you wield it and act as sacrifice."

As if a monstrous walrus, The Call heaved its behemoth hull forward. The beach quaked; shoal rocks cracked. The starboard and port side planks split open, from which oozed a yellow viscous substance that hissed when it touched the sea, fueling the water into a rapid boil.

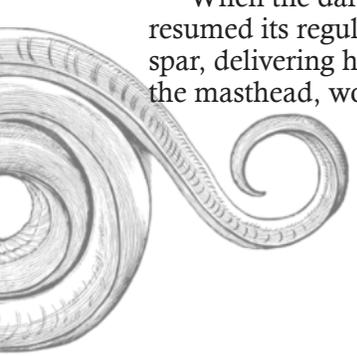
"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wagn'nagl fhtagn," was the refrain from those onboard The Call.

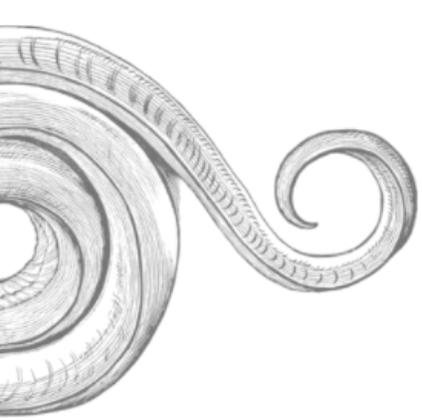
I clung to the spar and imagined it physically melded with me. The captain stood at my back, shoring me up as best he could, emitting sounds akin to an incantation and trilling birds. The tail feathers that rested along my forearms quivered.

Again, The Call lurched its bulk across the jagged rocks. Like a popped boil, the keel ruptured; flotsam and jetsam poured from the gash. The hull sank into the sand, towering over us. Terrified, I shuddered in anticipation of being crushed; even the ship's shadow I found suffocating. But I remained steadfast, for the sake of my father.

Then came the blow, the bestial screams, blessed oblivion.

When the darkness lifted, some detritus littered North Point, but most had washed out to a sea that had resumed its regular tide of frothing, blue-green waves. I recalled sensing my father's heart bursting upon the spar, delivering him blessed relief. Also seared to my memory were the tentacle-like bonds that held him fast to the masthead, worming back into the sea.





A large splinter from the spar remained in my possession, lodged in my ribs. The realization the Captain had not survived gutted me, for his dust powdered my body. The pain subsided as my organs and flesh deteriorated. I consoled myself with the knowledge that they functioned only as receptacles for grief, and, having endured my full share, shedding them was best. I entered the tide and began to swim, my alabaster bones parting the waves, my marrow instinctively knowing the direction to Sona-Nyl.

THE END

Rebecca Nazar's work has appeared in *Innsmouth Free Press* Monster Bytes, *Potter's Field Anthology #3*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Lorelei Signal*, *Champagne Shivers*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, and others. Her comical short stories will appear soon in *Moon Drenched Fables*, *The Baconology Anthology* and *A Moron's Guide to the Zombocalypse*. Stephen King's playground, the state of Maine, is her home. Visit her: <http://rebeccanazar.blogspot.com/>.





You must understand: there is no blood on my hands. At worst, you can accuse me of hesitation. Had I acted more quickly, would my dear friend Dr. Scott Norwood be alive?

ONE DEAD EYE

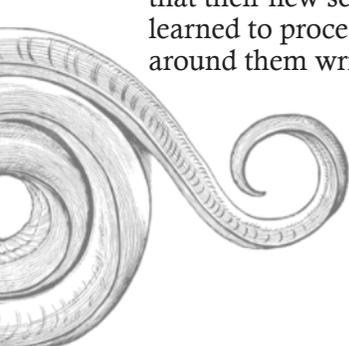
by Avery Cahill

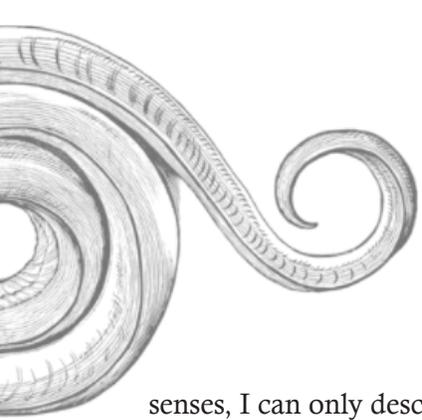
You must understand: there is no blood on my hands. At worst, you can accuse me of hesitation. Had I acted more quickly, would my dear friend Dr. Scott Norwood be alive? But teachers, especially professors, are cautious and bound to Occam's Razor, wherein the simplest explanation is the best. And what explanation other than my own madness could have accounted for the horrors I have seen? But I have learned that Truth and Nature are far more complex than the law of parsimony, and that simple explanations are too often a euphemism for wishful thinking. For my part, you can, at worst, blame me for an unwillingness to believe the visions of my dead eye.

True, in the ongoing investigation of Dr. Scott Norwood's death - which was neither murder, for murder is one *man* slaying another, or suicide, which implies Scott, that vibrant, kind soul and my cherished companion, intended to murder himself - I, Professor Jonathan Marsh, perjured myself, swearing Scott's insanity engendered his demise. Circumstances now compel me to write the truth, for Scott acted in self-defense, a most rational motivation for violence. If this new testimony flies in the face of Scott's suicide note, which the River Bend Daily printed in part, so be it. It is not that his final words are irrelevant, they are misunderstood. I can quote the letter by heart, but one section recalled the dread building in me these past months:

"When I touch my apartment's wall, the bricks feel rough, solid and straight, but look so melted and decayed. My feet tell me one thing, but my eyes another. I fall daily - two or three times. Jonathan, whose voice is so melodious and whose skin is smooth perfection to my fingers, appears as a shifting abscess of molten flesh. Is this what you see? Is this how it's supposed to be? All my life, I have wanted to see, to know shape and color and shade, and what these words really mean. Instead, all I see is horror upon horror. My thoughts are not my own. I wander the streets hunting for food. I cannot control my urge to touch other people, to caress their faces, their eyes. Often, I find myself in bed with no recollection of the day - just a black hole in my mind. Ah, the worms. This isn't right. I will endure it no longer."

I convinced the police that poor Scott suffered from a physiological malady brought on by his newfound sight, since the historical record does not favor the blind who can see later in life. Even in our age of medical science, the recent case studies published in the prestigious *Journal of Psychology* offer no help to these unfortunate people, and do little more than prove that their prognosis is grim. In the last fifty years, five men and two women, blind from birth, gained sight: two from surgical procedures, three by the treatment of the tropical maladies that afflicted them, and two for reasons unknown to science. These unfortunate few learned that their new sense brought not delight but horror. Their occipital lobes, so the psychologist surmised, had not learned to process the signals from the optic nerve. Instead of perceiving discrete shapes, they saw the world around them writhe in a jumble of color and random motion. Though the word properly applies to the aural





senses, I can only describe what these poor souls saw as a *cacophony*. They were autistic with respect to their eyes. None could bear it. The article reported they must walk the earth blindfolded, and even this does not provide complete relief. The very pressure the blindfold exerts on the eyeball triggers retinal stimuli.

This, I told the police, is what happened to Scott. He, too, had been blind, but recently learned to see. I didn't mention that I, who as an adult lost the use of my left eye in the Great War and had never had problems with my good right eye, knew why Dr. Norwood, my dear Scott, had taken his life. I, too, have seen the horrors of Lem.

But, like many woeful tales, this one begins with hope. Scott came to me this August last with a smile and, if I may be permitted to use such a banal expression, a spring in his step. He asked if I had read the paper, and when I said I had not, he took his copy, which he held folded under one arm, and opened it on my breakfast table. Scott moved with such grace and self-assurance, I almost never considered him blind. Although a servant read him the River Bend Daily, I had never seen him react with anything but scorn for that "old fish wrap," as he referred to it. But today was different. He ran a finger down the page to a spot he had fixed in his mind, and bade me read.

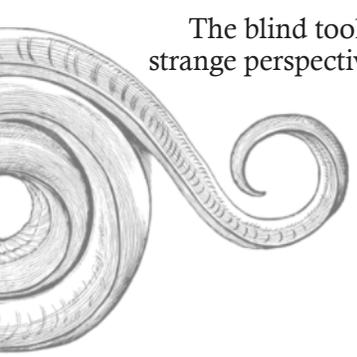
In two days' time, the famous finger of St. Altwerden would be on public display at St. John's Cathedral. Naturally, you recall this very relic had been making international headlines in the Old World for its supposed ability to heal the sick, especially the blind. I thought perhaps Scott was in one of his sardonic moods and having a little fun, because he wanted to take the bus to Milwaukee just to see the spectacle. I didn't want to waste the day on a fool's errand, but Scott insisted and persisted.

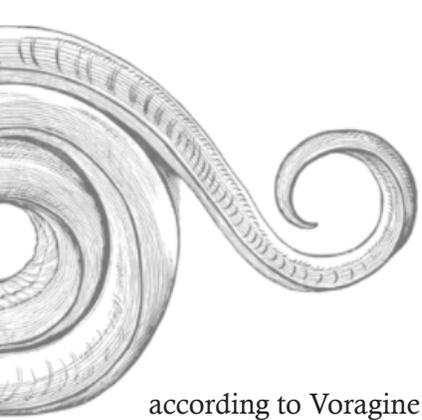


The object of adoration lay inside a cathedral-shaped feretory crafted with a jeweler's attention to detail, spires and all. One side, however, was crystal, serving as a fenestella. The unknown artisan had imbued the work with the same mixture of melancholy, awe, peace, and even dread that true cathedrals possess, but he had added mannerist touches that lent the object a loathsome yet compelling aspect. The twin spires guarding the tiny entrance twisted and listed; their stones appeared to have melted over the years like the warped panes of old windows. The long, thin buttresses created an insectile aspect as if a bloated, glass-sided spider had consumed St. Altwerden's index finger. The artist had chosen some dark, jade-like porphyry I could not recognize to fashion the case. As we shifted in line, the crystals dotting its surface caught the light like muted diamonds. The thing's soft lines seemed to undulate, afflicting me with dizzying vertigo.

Others were sensitive to the miniature cathedral's disturbing properties. Behind me, a man in a gray suit looked pale as a cemetery moon, and ahead of me, an elderly woman caused a sensation when, after tottering for a moment as if intoxicated, she fell to the floor. Immediately, a young priest led her to the pews, where I overheard her complain about sudden and extreme motion sickness. He offered her a handkerchief to mop her sweat-beaded brow and sent an usher for water.

The blind took no notice of the feretory's deleterious effects. This lent me some comfort, for I reasoned the strange perspective of the thing's design and not another physical cause sickened the onlookers. For, you see,





according to Voragine's *Aurea Legenda*, which I read before our trip, the stone for the feretory had fallen from heaven, and I feared it emanated strange radiations like those that killed the noble Madame Curie this past July.

Just after ten, Friar Montiglio, the monk who traveled with the artifact, prayed, calling on St. Altwerden to bestow a blessing upon us. He spoke in Latin, so aside from myself, Norwood and, perhaps, the other priests, no one understood him. I mention this because the prayer never invoked the Father or the Son. Instead he called *in nomine Altverdii*. I joined the others at the *Amen* and waited for him to open the fenestella. The friar then allowed us to approach and receive the Saint's blessing.

St. Altwerden's right index finger lay on a rectangular red velvet cushion trimmed with golden frills. An unpleasant squirming sensation wormed through my stomach, for the finger was curiously life-like: the skin pink and flush, the flesh full without decay or the false, waxy pallor I have seen on the holy bodies in St. Peter's, where pontiffs and saints are displayed in glass coffins. I half-expected the finger to wriggle and the priest to reveal that an assistant, concealed under the altar, projected a finger through a hole.

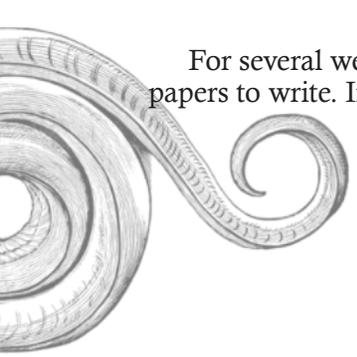
Feigning politeness, a hefty woman wearing a faded floral-print kerchief around her hair coughed into her fist. I realized I had been holding up the line, yet I could not take my eyes from the glass.

After I kissed the finger, I remember well how heat spread through my dead eye. I cupped my left eye in pain and jerked back, bumping the woman behind me. When my eye stopped watering, I removed my hand and blinked, holding my breath in anticipation. Except for the usual ghostly shades of white, gray, and black, the eye remained dead. I cursed my *naïveté*, chagrined a man with my learning could have, even for a moment, fallen prey to the specter of such idle hope. As I walked out to the street, I told myself I had experienced nothing more than a profound psychosomatic effect like those pilgrims who tremble upon setting foot in the Holy Land for the first time, and it comforted me there were educated people among them: doctors, lawyers and such.

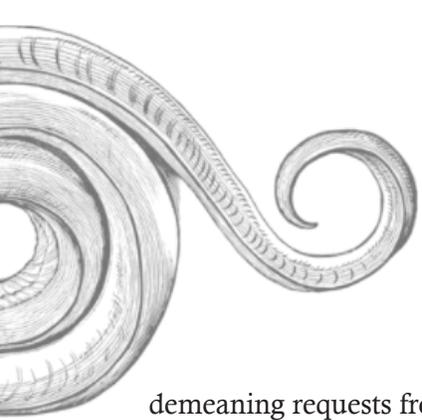
After Scott received St. Altwerden's blessing, we rode the bus with hardly a word. He, too, suffered disappointment, and I wondered how much greater his was than mine, for I still had one good eye. He slouched as he walked home from the terminal, tapping his cane so carelessly he jostled one of the young elms the city had planted along the sidewalk's edge. I recalled how excited and nervous he had been that morning, how flushed his cheeks, how wide his smile. Now I know true horrors lurk all around us, but at that moment I knew nothing so pernicious and ugly as hope.

I put my arm on his shoulder to comfort him. He raised a trembling hand and touched my face, his fingertips delayed at my cheek for a moment. Suddenly, he recoiled.

"This isn't right," he said, and rushed off in the direction of his apartment. I followed his wavering course until he turned left and disappeared in a milky haze. I was mortified then, because of his rejection; I'm mortified now, because I misunderstood his words.



For several weeks, I went back to my routine. There were tests to prepare and grade, books to read, and papers to write. In addition, I handled the usual complaints and excuses from students, and outlandish and



demeaning requests from deans. The semester eased from summer to fall. The trees of Roosevelt Quad blazed briefly in autumnal fire before withering to twisted, skeletal fingers.

During this time, I could not bring myself to speak to Scott, although I longed to commiserate with him over a fine port. If only we could have eased our shared pain regarding this immoral Friar Montiglio, who bilked the faithful with a freakish side-show. I contented myself by composing several complaint letters to the local diocese, but they went unanswered.

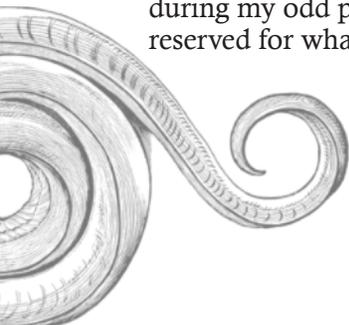
I said the semester was uneventful, but that is not quite the case. Work, I should say, proved uneventful, but my health, because insomnia plagued me, worsened as the weather grew colder. I drank coffee by the pot, morning, noon and night, but chastised myself for this behavior, since I knew the caffeine contributed to the insomnia and the strange dreams I'd been experiencing before dawn, when sleep came at last. Those dreams were worse than the insomnia itself.

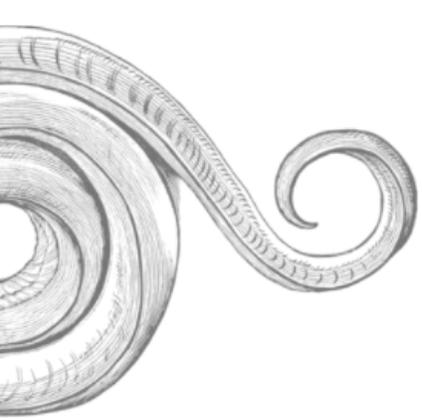
Each night, I woke in a strange land of rolling hills and winding valleys carpeted with a sickly, purple moss. Two moons shone in the sky: one faint and red, no more than two or three bright stars in luminance, the other bloated and green, whose striated, craterous surface suggested neither man nor rabbit, but odd, rubbery fingers or cephalopodous tentacles. Alone, I would wander nightly this treeless land under those unwholesome moons, descending slippery slopes of steep dales and undulating hills. But for small, faint, red stars, the sky was black. I felt I stood at the end of time.

Every morning, I arose in a cold sweat, exhausted as if I had exerted myself for hours. Never much of an eater, I now was ravenous. I ate eggs, waffles, pancakes, and sausage for breakfast, before buying several pastries at Mollie's bakery for the walk to work. I ate throughout the day, never less than four meals, not to mention countless snacks. My waistband, however, remained a thirty-four, and I attributed this to the increased caffeine and my longer, fitful waking hours.

As October advanced, things grew worse. The dreams became so lucid, upon waking I wondered which world was real. I fancied I saw the horrible, purple hills from my dreams overlaid on River Bend's cobble streets and flat parks, a ghostly transparency. During the day, this effect was weak and intermittent, but at night the purple hills of Lem - somehow, I knew the nightmare land's name - coexisted with the street lights, theater marquees and overcast sky. I stumbled as I walked, anticipating the rise and fall of terrain only I could perceive. Once, a local constable, believing I was intoxicated, stopped me during my odd perambulation. When I answered all questions forthrightly, he dismissed me with a pitying gaze reserved for what was once affectionately known as "the absent-minded professor".

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I remember the night perfectly: October the twentieth, nineteen-hundred and thirty-four. The clouds released their heavy burden, washing the color from the city so the world became as lead from the heavens to the earth. That evening, my visions of Lem were strong.

I was walking home after a long stint in the library where I had spent time with Dryden and Wilde, deciding on suitable paper topics for the second semester of Introduction to English Literature. Stumbling as I compensated for the false terrain, and tripping over curbs and cracks in the sidewalk when the purple hills hid their presence, I sought shelter from the rain under a barbershop's frayed awning. As I ducked under the heavy water stream cascading down the awning, a large drop struck my good eye. I shut it instinctually. Though Main Street, the barbershop and the entire town disappeared, to my horror and astonishment, the purple land of Lem remained. My dead eye saw my dreamland.

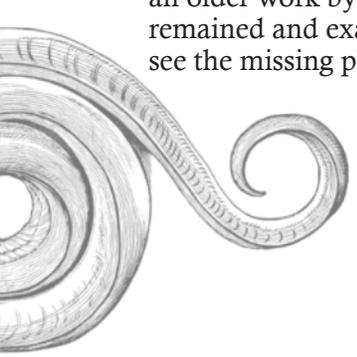
Horrified, I ran home, striking parked cars and crashing headlong into the garbage cans outside my brownstone. Inside, I caught my breath, dried off and made some coffee while I tried to understand what had befallen me. Once in my kitchen, I found the effect lessened, but I could still see the dream world with my dead eye. My good eye, I realized, never once tricked me with these eldritch visions. To my right eye, I was alone in my sparse but cozy apartment, surrounded by my books and papers. Was this madness or the prodromes of ocular disease?

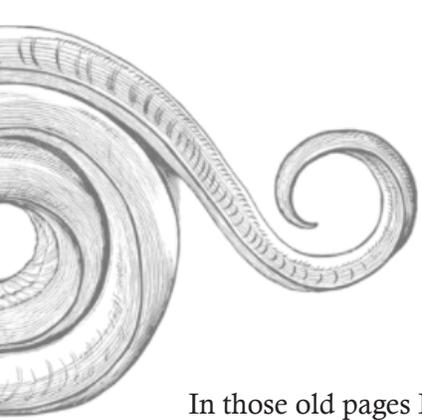
Unwilling to face my possible insanity, I spent the next several weeks studying journals and textbooks, looking for physiological causes for my condition. I exhausted the standard literature available without finding a single clue other than the life-altering probability I was suffering a schizoid episode. Next, I perused the older works in the collection. There, too, I had no luck until late one evening, just before closing, I signed out Banister Richard's *A Treatise of one hundred and thirteene Diseases of the Eyes and Eye-liddes* from the rare book collection. The heavy tome dated from the 1600s and, like the better medical works from that time, was illustrated with meticulous drawings. I found nothing in Richard's book that explained my condition, but I noticed someone had torn out several contiguous pages and their accompanying plates. The librarian, a sober young woman who took pride in her work and charges' care, set about finding out who last looked at the book. After half an hour of cajoling and scholarly outrage, I convinced her to give me the malefactor's name - Scott Norwood.

But Scott was blind. For an old text like the Hundred Diseases, he needed a reader. The university offered him such assistance, but the librarian assured me both Norwood and his coadjutor would have had to sign for such a rare book. There was no second signatory in the log.

I felt the urge to contact Scott. Did he suffer as I? It seemed impossible, but perhaps he could see - although, I presumed, his eyes did not function as he had hoped. I put aside my fear, determined to see him.

As I buttoned my coat, the librarian, bless her diligence, informed me Richard's book was a translation of an older work by a certain Jacques Guillemeau, namely *Traité des maladies de l'oeil*. Curiosity overcame me, so I remained and examined the original manuscript before seeking out Scott. I convinced myself that I needed to see the missing plates, but part of me was glad I had an excuse to delay.





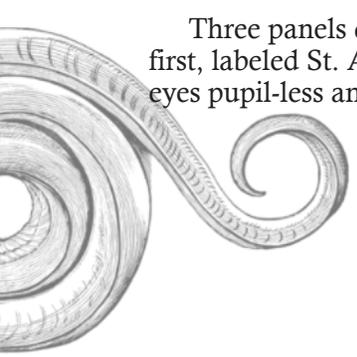
In those old pages I found much Richard had left out from his scientific translation - fantastic and horrible tales of prophecy, possession demonic, and the Second Sight accompanied the sober descriptions of ocular disease. But even Richard must have included some of the fantastic in his translation, perhaps to illustrate the more debased elements in Guillemeau, for Norwood had found and removed several pertinent pages. After I swore on my honor as a full professor in good standing that no harm would come to the book, the librarian left me alone with a key and a promise to return the tome when I finished. I surmise her willingness to leave me was due in part to the horrendous images of diseased and putrefied eyes she saw while looking over my shoulder. When she left, she was rather pale.

I spent hours poring over the Guillemeau manuscript. Since Richard had excised and so rearranged the text, it was no simple matter to locate the missing pages. Furthermore, though Guillemeau wrote primarily in French, he liberally employed Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and even some pictographic languages whose origin remains a mystery, neither Asian, Egyptian, nor Mesoamerican in appearance. I will not describe what other unwholesome discoveries I made, but it will suffice to say that in the most fantastic sections of Guillemeau lay hints and references to other, even darker, works, which remain, I hope, in the custody of that famous collection in Arkham.

Over the course of my studies, the shadows grew long and threatening in those lonely stacks. The tables, chairs, even the wan light from the lamps took on a miasmic purple hue that recalled the reviled land of Lem. The objects around me lost their crispness, their edges translucent, ghostly films, one laid atop another. Fatigue in my good eye produced a terrible headache. My vision tunneled when I focused on the book's yellowing pages. Yet I pressed on, knowing an answer to my affliction might be at hand, a rational diagnosis, one I could present to a doctor who, in turn, would cure me.

It must have been well past three a.m. when I turned the page in a chapter dedicated to the *De Volentate et Oculis* (concerning the will and the eyes) and read a story so unbelievable I would have laughed off the entire tale as medieval hoax, had I not lived through these last weeks or felt an icy trickle down my spine upon reading the unholy name of eternal Chaos.

There exists a race of grubs, the *homunculi*, according to Guillemeau, though he also claimed other names for them, the *X'illith*, the Spawn of the Spawn, The Spores of Lem. Long before our sun cast its feeble light into the infinite black, dread Azathoth's gibbering servants beat the reverberating drums that scattered the Spores across space's endless folds. Wherever they fall, they seek a host, for though they can survive the aether, they cannot long abide the planetary spheres without a body. The Spores infiltrate the host, replacing its body with their own until even the host's memories change as the brain's tissues grow X'illithic. They consume the planet's life, and when the hosts die, they burst forth as ravaging spores to conquer new, doomed suns. The tale went on: for every grain of sand upon Bamburgh Beach, there is a planet; on each of these planets lies other beaches, for each grain in these beaches again there is another planet, so reckoned the number of worlds the *X'illith* consumed. Each host had a weakness, a womb for the spores to grow. In man, so wrote Guillemeau, it was the eye.



Three panels divided the accompanying plate - each black-and-white print worthy of Dürer at his finest. The first, labeled St. Altwerden, depicted a man in a friar's robe extending a hand to touch a kneeling wretch with eyes pupil-less and milky white. The saint's finger was out of proportion with his body, elongated and fluid as



if the bones contained three-fold a human finger's joints. A banner waved in the background. The word *Spes* scrawled across it in gothic lettering. The second panel in the foreground showed the wretch walking along a rolling landscape, the man's eyes now a healthy brown, but he walked arms outstretched as though still blind. In the background, countless others followed, who, like him, walked with arms outstretched. On one hill, the word *Falsus*. The final panel was an anatomical enlargement of the human eye. Inside the eyeball, coiled like ropes, lived a grotesque worm. In the body of the worm the phrase *Corpus Altwerdi*.

Nausea overcame me and I emptied my stomach on the library's floor then, and this I can hardly recall, I ran. I ran through the quad, down Washington, and across the Bayer bridge. I ran through old Federal Park and past the courthouse. I ran from the madness of my discoveries in Guillemeau's blasted tome and for the horrifying fear of what lay ahead. Too late, I ran to Scott's apartment.

The rest you know. At four a.m., my desperate pounding on Scott's door awoke his landlady. When I shouldered through the his locked door, she notified the police, but she never once entered the apartment, at least not until later. Scott had drawn the living room window's shades, and the apartment was dark, save for a reading lamp on a table next to the sofa. But in my memory, that scant, yellow light shone on the table with brilliant incandescence, because it illuminated Scott's note with a circular spot, while its focused beam deepened the gloom over the slumped form that hulked on the sofa and the black pool spreading along the floor. Except for the excerpts I quoted from the Daily, I will not relate the aforementioned note's contents, for they are personal to me and Scott's family, but I will always be haunted by those last words: "This isn't right. I will endure it no longer." Scott, dearest Scott, rejected not me, but the filthy creatures that twisted his senses.

And endure it he did not, for he had taken scissors and cut out the offending orbs. But he was not mad, and you must not think him so. To judge him insane would be to cloak me with the same mantle, and I shall not bear it. He lost his life when he took his eyes, but, I say again, he did the only thing he could, in a moment of perfect sanity. For on the floor in that crimson pool at his feet - Oh, I cannot bear to describe it - two purple worms wriggled, each one a horrible, twisting finger. Even as I watched, they dissolved, subliming into a noxious, yellow cloud.



And what am I to do? I have given this testimony so my colleagues will understand what I must do. No physician can help me; there is no succor in man's science. I still have some hope. Not for a normal life, no, that is gone forever, but for a life. I have called an ambulance. It will arrive anon. Now, I must heat the blade. At least I possess only one dead eye.

THE END

Avery Cahill has worn many hats in his life from working at a cheese factory to Lecturer of Classics. He lived in Japan, where he taught Beatles songs to a Yakuza, and Norway, where he learned that ketchup and pizza don't mix. He is a graduate of the Odyssey Writers' Workshop, and his fiction has appeared in Dog Oil Press. Stop by and say hi. <http://avery-cahill.livejournal.com/>



Mary clutched the small skull to her emaciated chest, as she crawled in darkness across the gritty, stone floor.

MARY, MARY

by Danielle Eriksen

Mary clutched the small skull to her emaciated chest, as she crawled in darkness across the gritty, stone floor.

Right arm first, inch it up the cold. Elbow on fire. Ragged fingers slip into the cracks, iron grip and claw. Left foot props up the knee, scrape and drag and slide it along. Then push Mary, push for all your goddamned worth, and pull, Mary, pull yourself together; you're going to meet him at the Portal and you don't want to be late!

Rest for a bit, then move; ebb and flow.

She knew the waves would not let her lie idle for long. For a moment, Mary lay on her good side, one knee tucked up against her chest, the other leg splayed out at right angles to her pelvis, skinny knees burning against the ice-cold of the floor. She could hear the dim roar of the storm outside. The rumble of the waves resonated with the wet rumble in her chest, her breathing reduced to ragged gasps by the physical trials of her journey.

Do not tarry long, dear Mary.

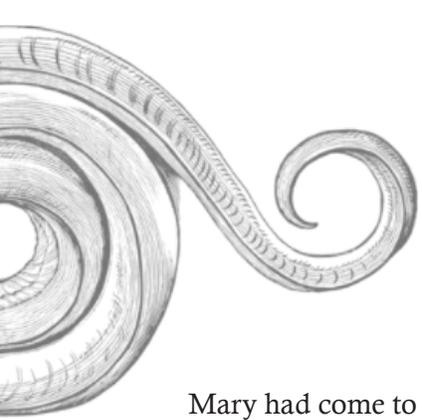
The steady beat and crash of the waves urged Mary on. "Soon, the storm will send its emissary to me." The barely-conscious thought wrapped itself around the tatters. "He will come on the waves, up through the centre and together we will leave this place." The thought strengthened itself round the tatters quite insistently until they resembled something whole.

Together, we will leave this place, echoed the darkness, gaining strength with every beat.

Her emissary was close, so close she could hear him. She must make haste. Mary stirred and slowly, painfully continued her trek across the floor. Its icy roughness now one of her closest companions, made slick in places with days of accumulated fluids. Some of them seeping from Mary, others dripping down the walls and welling up from damp corners of the foetid chamber. The dissonant crash and thunder of waves marked her progress towards the centre. Her black prison had never seemed that big; God knows she had paced it and measured it out countless times before, but it seemed now that she had been crawling forever since she heard his call.

Closer now, a deeper blackness up ahead...the doorway! Lurch and heave, almost there...crack; an unyielding surface.





Mary had come to the Cape by its stormy, tempestuous seas a scant year ago on the British ship Perseverance, hoping to earn a better living than what the overcrowded slums and factories of the East End had offered her back home. It was not long after she landed when she met him, a dashing young officer in service of the Queen. Her Charlie, oh how she loved him, his dimpled smile, strong arms, and the way his deep brown eyes had danced with joy and desire that first night. Once she had been with him, there was no one else. Even the small gold band she had spied on his left hand one night would not keep them apart. Poor Charlie was trapped in an arranged marriage suiting his father rather than him. Soon, very soon, he promised he would leave her, have the marriage annulled. Mary must wait patiently and quietly in the meantime, their love a closely-kept secret until the time was right. She had found gainful employment in a respectable household, near the Castle of Good Hope where Charlie was stationed, refusing to look at other men and working hard in her efforts at becoming a better woman for him. A woman that a man, an officer, could marry with pride...



The sea! She remembered...soon, very soon, she would be leaving via the very same tempestuous seas she arrived on.



The low, rhythmic call of the sea brought her back. Mary was momentarily confused to find herself up against a wall, forehead scraped and pounding. Despite the wetness in her lungs, her mouth was parched. She ran her tongue along a slimy rivulet running down the wall near her head. The corners were good for moisture, always a good drink to be found in the corners.

Lick until the wall is rough, then you'll know you've had enough.

The sea! She remembered...soon, very soon, she would be leaving via the very same tempestuous seas she arrived on. And what an exit it would be! The Castle would shake with her fury; carefully-laid bricks and fortifications would crumble. "He promised, he promised!" Mary's thoughts stirred with rage.

Reach on out, grip and claw with fingers slick, bony and raw. Push with the foot, skin and drag. Deadweight. Clutch the child, he comes with you. One more pull, almost there, a blackness darker than night.

One afternoon, she had felt it, a distinct movement in her belly. She had not been certain up until then and had reasoned out her weight gain to a better standard of living provided by the household she now served. Mary had merely laced herself tighter and tighter in response to her thickening middle. The fact that her monthly cycle had been absent for a number of months had also evaded her. It was only when she felt the kick that reality had set in. She was with child, Charlie's child. She remembered the look on his face when she told him - wild-eyed excitement.



“I have something special in mind for us Mary,” he whispered in her ear during a midnight tryst at the Castle. “Bind this scarf around your eyes, so that it may be a surprise, and hold my hand tightly.” He produced a length of bright red silk from his coat pocket and gently helped her tie the knot. They walked for some minutes, Mary led expertly along by her officer. Cobbles, then bricks, some hard-packed soil, then more cobbles. The muted footfalls of careful boots and shallow breaths the only sound to mark their passage.

“Almost there, Mary, my dear,” he crooned reassuringly, one hand tight and warm around hers, the other firm at the small of her back, as he led her down a set of winding stairs, the air, more stagnant and salty the farther they descended. A rattle of keys, the click of a levered lock, followed by the low protest of a heavy door swinging on unused hinges.

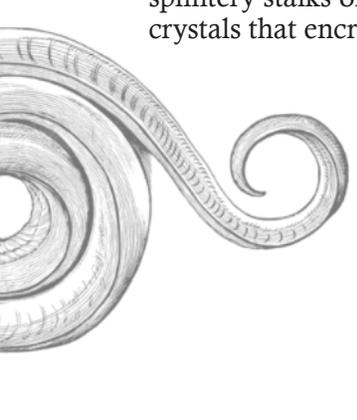
Mary, Mary Higgins, you forget yourself woman!

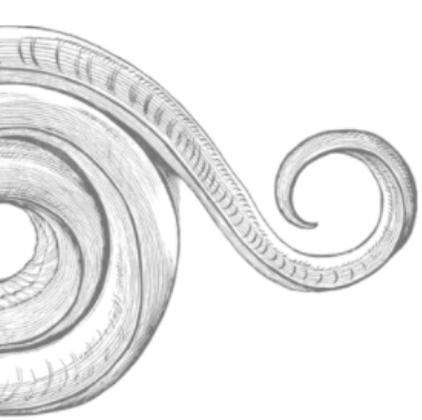
Mary’s head jolted with a start, vivid colours and shapes swirling before her eyes. Like fireworks over the Thames: bright, beautiful flashes to mark the years’ passing. The insistent crash of waves on the outer walls echoed strangely in the chamber, calling to her, urging her, driving her to move.

It had been dry for some time now, how long, Mary could not say. After she used up the last candle stub, her reality had regressed into one, long, pitch-dark night of hell. No, utter darkness wasn’t quite right. Lately, her desperate eyes had begun to discern the boundaries of the room, as well as distinguish between the absolute blackness of the hole in the centre and the mundane darkness filling the rest of her prison.

For a while, he had brought her some food and fresh water, and the odd candle end and lucifer to keep the darkness at bay. He always came at the dead of night. Midnight, she assumed, that was when they had had their trysts, as Charlie was in charge of the pointed bastion named *Buuren* and the graveyard patrol of its walls. Not a soul had heard her cries for help when the heavy door creaked open and, after the initial shock of her imprisonment, she realised they never would. Even if she had shrieked during midday, when all of the Castle’s folk were up and about their business, no one would hear her. The walls were too thick. She remembered him boasting of the exceptional fortifications, which had been added to and strengthened since its initial construction by the Dutch back in 1666. The room where she was imprisoned was also isolated well below ground level and unused due to the damp and flooding. He beat her for her calls and cries, and raped her the first few times, but, after the sixth sporadic visit, he didn’t even look at her; her bruised, filthy body had ceased to provide him with satisfaction. After the baby miscarried, he stopped coming altogether, as the last thread linking them lay in a bloody mess between her legs. Now, all that was left was poor Mary Higgins, crooning wordlessly to herself and the remnants of her child clasped tightly to her withered bosom.

A wet cough rattled and rumbled from deep within her body, rousing Mary from unconsciousness. She was rubbing her cheek repeatedly against a smooth patch of bone that had been gnawed clean during the worst of her hunger. The smoothness was comforting. She liked smoothness. The corners were sometimes smooth with water, but they would always end up rasping her tongue. Everything else was so hard and rough; the chewed, splintery stalks of straw that poked into her ribs, the old blood and excrement cracking on her skin, the salt crystals that encrusted every surface of her prison.





But her child was smooth, smooth and perfect and soon, they would both bathe in the ocean and depart on its stormy currents. The water was rising; she could hear it roaring and beating its way up the hole.

The hope, nay, the promise of departure excited her fevered mind, and to be escorted by none other than the illustrious Emissary of the Seas, well, that certainly was a departure fit for a lady!

Lady and wife, mother of one, leaving soon with our precious son. Now, push, Mary, for all you're worth, hips and torso, diminishing girth. Drag that dead leg, carry your child. Fingers into the cracks, and pull...he is here! The salty spray announces his coming; the Emissary, clothed in ice, white and blue. Son of the Sea and master of all currents.

The sea roared and gurgled its way up the drainage hole in the centre of the room, sighing at last as it reached the top and washed out over Mary's outstretched arm and head. Mary had never imagined the exquisite heat the Emissary would bring. Her lungs burnt in his presence and, with each sucking pull and drag downwards, the fire grew greater. He covered every part of her now, his nimble fingers pulling away the straw and filth until she was clean and smooth and perfect.

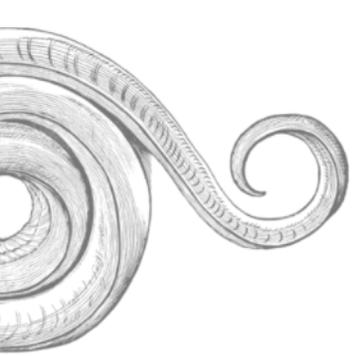
Come, Mary, it is time for us to leave this place.

It was midnight outside Mary's black prison and the storm had suddenly reached its peak. Thick clouds and heavy rain obscured both moon and starlight, leaving the Castle in near darkness, while gale force winds shrieked through the old coastal fort, whipping up the waves that beat mercilessly on the outer walls of *Buuren* bastion. The soldiers on patrol duty scrambled for cover, trying in vain to secure shutters and doors as they went. One officer, caught out during his routine midnight patrol of the walls, was not quick enough, though. His shiny black boots found no purchase on the slick cobbles, and his arms, as strong as they were, were no match for the grasping, pulling fingers of the sea. Crashing waves pounded the breath from him as he tried to call for help and salty white hands dragged him swiftly under.

Icy fingers down throat and lungs, drag the man that killed our son. Suck him down and deeper, still. Crushed. A blackness darker than night.

THE END

Danielle Eriksen lives in Cape Town, South Africa with her husband Kayle, twenty tropical fish and many, many plants. Despite a childhood full of sun and abundantly good weather, Danielle has grown up with a tendency towards the morbid, darker side of life and spends most of her free time crafting the suffering and general nonsense of life and living into dark and somewhat depressing tales.





The red light was on. Laurie reached over reluctantly. Her finger pressed the replay button. SQQUEEEEEEP! Was it her/him? She knew it even before she heard the asexual voice, neither male nor female. Sensual but sexless.

IF YOU WANT TO LEAVE A MESSAGE ...

by G.W. Thomas

The red light was on. Laurie reached over reluctantly. Her finger pressed the replay button. SQQUEEEEEEP! Was it her/him? She knew it even before she heard the asexual voice, neither male nor female. Sensual but sexless.

Laurie listened to the whispering buzz. *Not a human being*, the niggling voice said inside her head, alien, a fish singing a libretto, navels kissing in the dark.

SQQUEEEEEEP! The message ended. She rewound it, listened to it again. And again. And Again. Then she erased it.



She put down her valise by the couch, threw her coat on the chair. The red flashing button greeted her. A sweaty finger jabbed it with anticipation.

“Ahh--” Laurie sighed audibly. The babbling that rose from the speaker was a dull, irritating whine. The words “ankh” and “intestines” were clear, punctuated with loud snorts.

Laurie stripped off her skirt and blouse. She walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower, slipped out of her underwear. Ducking back into the living-room, she bumped up the volume to full. The hall filled with bizarre grunting.

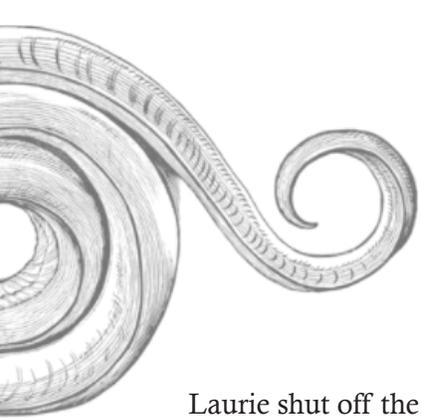
Showering done, Laurie rewound the tape. And she played it again. And again. And ...



The valise remained beside the sofa. The door did not open often now. Occasionally, a form shuffled out to return with a brown paper bag, filled with audio tapes, connecting wires.

On the table in the living-room, a menagerie of wires ran from two answering machines, a reel-to-reel tape deck, and an equalizer. No message that ever came in would sneak past this electronic fortress.

The phone rang. Switches clicked. Reels spun. The brown spaghetti tape captured a soft male voice. “Hello, Laurie? Are you home? I’ve been kind of worried about you. You haven’t been showing up for work lately. All your sick days are gone. If you don’t ...”



Laurie shut off the tape deck, rewound, the man's voice becoming a chipmunk's. The record/ready button was reset.

In another room, a second deck played a cacophony of gibberish.



“Habbabbabba nengggagga *vomit* mmmmmennnengggggagag. Nenganenganenga-voooooooooo-pppeesssshhhh--*dish towel*--habhabhaha...” Laurie howled, beating her dirty fist over her naked breasts. The caked blood and excrement on her leg cracked and fell to the litter-strewn carpet. “Henga-venga-wenga-vooooooooooop!”

A dull gleam came to her eye. Laurie turned her head in a wide sweep, her gaze falling on the silent telephone, wrapped in its wire nest.

She picked up the receiver, began to dial...

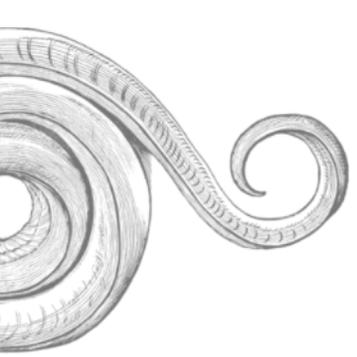


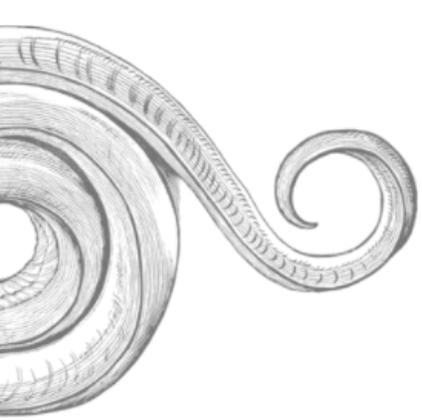
Chris Burman lifted the receiver. What an unusual sound! Was it someone talking? He knew he should hang up. He didn't want to encourage pranks.

But he couldn't. Instead, he sat down, switching the answering machine to record....

THE END

G.W. Thomas began writing in the Mythos in 1987 with “The City in the Sea” for Chaosium’s Cthulhu Now! Since then he has moved into fiction with his collection *The Book of the Black Sun* and his Book Collector stories. He edits the genre magazine *Dark Worlds* which features frequent Mythos tales. His website is www.gwthomas.org.





OUR COVER ARTIST

Francisco Rico Torres was born on September 28, 1985, in Luarda, a small town in the north of Spain. Since he was a kid, he has been fascinated by sci-fi and fantastic stuff, like Conan, Star Wars and everything in between. In 2008, he finished his fine arts studies in the Faculty of Fine Arts of San Carlos, in Valencia, Spain. Since then, he has been working as a freelance illustrator and he has collaborated with his paintings in games like Geek Fight, Dragon Age RPG, Victoriana, Call of Cthulhu LCG, Pathfinder, and more. You can see more of his work at: <http://pacorico.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.mancomb-seepwood.deviantart.com/>.



IN OUR NEXT ISSUE ...

The TOC for our special multiethnic issue, due out June 1, 2010 is a mega-issue with a total of thirteen short stories and one poem. Writers include: Charles R. Saunders, Ekaterina Sedia, Bryan Thao Worra, Sanford Allen and many more. With cover art by the talented artist Cyril Van Der Haegen, you will not want to miss this one!