Innsmouth Free Press

FICTION BY |

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Editorial

When we first devised the special Multiethnic issue, we thought the approach would be simple: take the New England out of Lovecraft. Our reasoning? Lovecraft's fiction focuses on the alien experience and we sought to define what was alien in an interesting way, by travelling to different locations and using different characters than he would have used to tell a story. Lovecraft's troubles with race and gender have been made famous in his very writing. But by raising them, he also asked questions with a variety of possible answers far beyond what he himself might have tolerated. The mark of a great writer is the universal application of his/her work and we wanted to find writers who could ask Lovecraft's questions in new cultural contexts.

We wanted to see settings we had never seen, explore shores that had remained untouched. It was a bit more difficult than we thought it would be to get the slush moving along, but eventually, we received enough submissions that met our objective and pared them down to 13 stories and one poem, which we present here.

The mixture of writers, settings and voices is eclectic, from well-known authors such as Ekaterina Sedia and Charles R. Saunders to other, lesser-known-yet-equally-compelling storytellers. The stories are set in France, South America, India, Canada, and many more

locations. The characters are as diverse as the writers, with Hmong painters and Japanese empresses caught between the lines.

These stories do not just transplant Lovecraft to another setting; they redefine and toy with what it means to be a Lovecraftian hero, to write a Lovecraftian story. We hope this issue will be a mind-bending experience, much like the angles in "Dreams in the Witch House".

We hope it will be a fresh look at Lovecraft and the possibilities inherent in Lovecraftian fiction.

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

‘Tis some tourist just entreating legends of mummies and of lore –
Some late tourist just entreating legends of mummies and of lore –
Nope, nothing, nothing more!

Quoth the Cultist

by Mari Ness

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I in Egypt, weak and weary,

excavated a quaint and curious old tomb of forgotten lore,

suddenly there came a tapping, while I studied a mummy wrapping,

as of someone gently tapping, tapping upon the old stone door –

“’Tis some tourist,” I muttered, “tapping upon the old stone door –

Only that and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember; it was in a stifling December –

and the mummy’s crumbling member could hardly help the creepy décor.

Eagerly I wished the morrow – vainly had I sought to borrow –

Magical texts to ward off sorrow – sorrow for my curses galore,

For my family’s half-fish breeding, which brought to us curses galore –

Making us – a sad eyesore!

And the rough linen uncertain rustling of the mummy curtain –

Thrilled me – filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before,

So, that now, to still the beating of its heart, I sat, repeating –

‘Tis some tourist just entreating legends of mummies and of lore –

Some late tourist just entreating legends of mummies and of lore –

Nope, nothing, nothing more!

Presently, the sound grew stronger; hesitating then no longer –

"Tourist," I said, "oh, tourist, your forgiveness I implore!

But the fact is this mummy wrapping, and the need to do tomb-mapping,

has kept me a bit madcapping – not that I've been catnapping!

No, just focused on my wrapping" – here, I opened wide the door –

Darkness there, and nothing more.

Never one for darkness spurning, all my soul within me burning,

I grabbed up my mummy wrapping and pushed my fish face out the door –

"Surely," said I, "surely, that is something filled with great old darkness –

Let me see if any cultists might be coming to explore,

Let me welcome them and show them passages they might explore –

'Tis cultists, and nothing more!"

With hardly a single flutter, but with many a dreary mutter,

in there stepped a stately cultist of the cursed days of yore.

Not the least obeisance made she, not a minute stopped or stayed she,

But with calls to a dark lady, perched above the old tomb's door –

Perched upon a bust of Sobek just above the old tomb's door –

Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ghastly cultist beguiling my madness into smiling

by the terrifying decorum of the countenance she wore –

"Though you be shorn and shaven, as any cultist who is not craven –

Something else seems graven, written deep into your core –

Tell me what your cursed name is, or which Old One you adore!"

Quoth the cultist, "Cthulhu Corps."

Much I marveled this ungainly cultist would say this so plainly –

An answer full of meaning, so much relevance it bore!

For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being,

Would be so cursed in seeing Cthulhu as a chief mentor,

to name Cthulhu – Cthulhu – as an Old One to adore –

under Cthulhu, forevermore!

But the cultist, sitting lonely on Sobek's bust, spoke only

That one name, as if to prove herself a cultist full hardcore.

Then she, while curses she muttered, crooked one hand – the mummy fluttered –

And to my shock, the mummy uttered, "Cthulhu! Cthulhu now and evermore!"

Yes, that same dead mummy who had not moved in that tomb before!

Now lying still – nevermore!

Startled at the deadness broken by curses so softly spoken,

"Doubtless," said I, "this is why so many the Great Old Ones do abhor –

Caught beneath some once-dead master, which is quite a disaster,

And knowing mummies move faster, and can spread chaos galore –

I can see why some might dislike the thought of chaos galore."

Quoth the cultist, "Cthulhu – score!"

"Cultist!" said I –"Thing of evil! Cultist still, mummy or devil!

By Cthulhu that looms below us, by those gods we both adore,

Tell me now – if it's not too brazen – can you raise a mummy maiden,

to clasp me in its arms, the way no woman has before?"

The cultist smiled, and slit my throat, saying, with an admirable lack of gore:

"Cthulhu now and nothing more!"

The End

Mari Ness lives in central Florida near several lakes and tree covered springs that may be concealing Great Old Ones. Or, maybe not. Her work has previously appeared in numerous print and online outlets, including *Fantasy Magazine*, *Hub Fiction*, and *Farrago's Wainscot*. She blogs, frequently about nothing in particular, at mariness.livejournal.com. She's hoping not to get grabbed by tentacles any time soon.

From the end of the hallway came a *clop clop*. Kris looked to her right into the dark. *Clop clop* again, but closer. Back at home, she'd been able to pick a human shape out of a moonless night if she gave her eyes enough time.

Red Goat Black Goat

By Nadia Bulkin

It had been raining for five days. The Gunawan estate, riddled with wool and dung, was rank. Its position on a hill had saved the mountain villa from the floods wracking West Java, but the moon orchids were drowning and the Mercedes was sinking in the mud. Twenty-some feral goats watched the driveway roll down the slope. Then they started to bleat, because a little human figure was slogging up the hill.

Ina Krisniati was covered in mud by the time she conquered the hill, but by then she was no longer feeling her aches. She had walked two miles, in rising waters and darkness. The small and the weak - frogs, stones, flowering weeds - had succumbed. And Kris had nearly given up too, halfway up the hill. She'd nearly decided to go home to Cililin and marry some fisherman on Saguling Lake. But her grandfather had fought in the war, partaken in the 1946 Sea of Fire - Kris came from strong stock. The goats followed her as she fought her way to the house. They watched with sad, beady eyes as she rinsed her hands in rain and wiped her flip-flops on the mat. When she rang the doorbell, they resumed bleating.

A woman came to the door. She was, to Kris's surprise, not a maid. She had bags under her eyes, but she was dressed like a soap star. Behind her, the house was glowing with spun glass and gold. The warung-keeper in Bandung who told her about the job did say that the Gunawans were born lucky. The woman cleared her throat.

Kris mustered a smile and bent her head. "*Asalaam 'Alaykum*," she said.

It took the woman half a minute to answer in kind. "*Wa 'Alaykum as-Salaam*," she muttered. "Are you the new babysitter?"

Kris nodded.

"*Ya Allah*." Mrs. Gunawan rolled her eyes and stepped back from the door. "What a mess. Don't move." She threw towels at her until she stopped dripping. "You know you're late. And you'll have to wash those, of course."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. The bus I was on broke down. Then I took a wrong turn, back on Tunjukmanis...."

Mrs. Gunawan rolled her eyes. "Right. Well, you're here to watch the children and they're already in bed. I expect you to watch them *constantly*. My husband took off, my son fell off a horse last week, and...." She took a deep breath and flexed her jeweled fingers. "You have experience with childcare, yes?"

"Four little brothers and sisters. It's been tough for my parents, my father was ill...."

Mrs. Gunawan gave her a long look. "Don't even think about sneaking a little extra. I'll make you regret it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You didn't touch the goats, did you? The ones roaming around?"

They had seemed to want her to. They'd been nudging her, blocking her path, making needful little grunts. "No, ma'am."

"Good. Don't. Only the children and I can touch them. Oh!" She cocked her chin up and pointed. Whispers trickled from the second floor. Soon, little footsteps came down the staircase, and little heads popped out of the shadows. "There they are. Number one and number two."

The children looked like a pair of big-eyed *malu-malu*. Two of those shy little primates had once climbed into a power switch center on Saguling Lake and fried themselves as well as the hydroelectric plant. Kris smiled at the children. They did not smile back.

Mrs. Gunawan made no introductions. "Take them to bed," she said, with a flip of her wrist.

The bedroom was so cold that Kris thought there had to be some kind of draft. She checked the windows in vain while the children sat side by side on the bed, eating chocolate goo out of plastic tubes. On the wall, over their heads, hung a protective charm made of wild goat hair.

"I guess it's just cold in here." Kris plastered on a smile and walked back to the children. The little girl was the older of the two. She looked like her mother, especially when she had her chin up so she could look down her nose. The little boy was cradling his arm, which was wrapped in a cast and a sling. "I'm Kris. I'm going to watch you from now on, okay?"

"I'm Putri," said the little girl. "This is Agus. And you're not going to be watching us, because we already have someone who does that." She poked her little brother in the shoulder. "Don't we."

He nodded vigorously, but only after a pause, and when he looked at his petrified arm he frowned.

"Really? And who's that?"

"The Goat-Nurse. She's taken care of us since we were born." She sniffed. "We've never had a babysitter."

"Well, that's fine if the Goat-Nurse wants to watch you too. But your mother wanted someone to come and make sure that you don't hurt yourself falling off horses anymore." She smiled at Agus, who made a quivering attempt to smile back.

"We can't trust people from outside the family," Putri said. "The Goat-Nurse says so."

Kris had wondered such a rich family had no servants. "Well, you don't need to worry about me." She wiped the chocolate off their mouths, the little *malu-malu*. "I'm not going to hurt you."

In the daytime, the children showed off the family's goat herd. These were not the feral goats that roamed the estate and the wild woods beyond - these were fat, gentle livestock, happy to spend their lives in a backyard enclosure before being sold off to butcheries. They passively chewed their grass while the children sat on their backs and braided their white wool. The goat-keeper, Tono, spent most of his time lounging under trees and staring off at Mount Tangkuban Perahu.

"Don't they want more space?" Kris asked him.

Tono shook his head, cracking his knuckles. He'd been digging out the sunken Mercedes. "They're scared of the wild goats. The ones that eat up all the grass."

One such wild goat - thin but fearless, with a pair of odd, gangly legs - was roaming in the bushes outside the idyll of the enclosure. It looked at Kris and there was something not-quite-right about its face.

"Those goats will charge you," said Tono. "But mine are a lot nicer. They know they have it good. You don't even need a stick to corral them."

He had given his herding stick to Putri to play with and she lorded it over the animals like a kingpin. Now and then, she'd bop them on the head for eating flowers or urinating, though it had no effect on their behavior. "I'm the Goat-Princess!" she declared, and her brother saluted her like soldiers saluted the General during parades, like the General saluted the flag.

Tono smiled at Kris, then bit down gently on his cigarette.

Putri refused to surrender the stick when it was time for afternoon prayer, so Tono let her keep it. Only when the Gunawans sat down to dinner did Mrs. Gunawan tell her the stick could not rest at the table. It fell on Kris to put it away.

The upstairs hall light had burned out. There was a window fifty feet away, but a rainstorm had rendered the moon useless. Kris crept down the hall, trying to remember how many doors away Putri's bedroom was. All the door knobs were cold. Oily. The walls felt coated with a wax that smelled of soil and sweat and corpses. When Kris tossed the herding stick onto the floor of Putri's room, it rolled back toward her in affection. The Goat-Nurse, she thought.

It had to be a ghost. Maybe she'd been a babysitter like Kris, some hundred years ago. Maybe she'd been Dutch. A prison nurse. Someone cruel. And maybe something horrible had happened to her, something that earned her such

a nasty name. Maybe she lost her legs in an accident. Maybe they had to sew on a pair of goat legs as rudimentary prosthetics....

From the end of the hallway came a *clop clop*. Kris looked to her right into the dark. *Clop clop* again, but closer. Back at home, she'd been able to pick a human shape out of a moonless night if she gave her eyes enough time. So far, the hallway was a mess of undefined clumps, but they'd straighten out. They'd clear up.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said, but the days when she didn't fear the dark were gone.

Her eyes adjusted and she saw something standing at the wall. It had a face, of a sort. A long neck. Below that was something like a body in a smock, and then - livestock legs. Bristled. Filthy. Complete with cloven goat hoofs. Then the entire shape shuddered and the facades of skin melted back like a drawn veil. Beneath it, darkness came a-crawling.

She glanced up once and saw a curled blackness filling the hallway, floor to ceiling, like smoke but thicker, heavier, almost woolen.

Kris fell all over the tiles, unable to feel her legs. Some distant part of her reptilian brain realized that she had been shaking for the past five minutes. She tried to stand - no, her legs were leaden. No more *clop clop* now, just a rush of overboiled air. She glanced up once and saw a curled blackness filling the hallway, floor to ceiling, like smoke but thicker, heavier, almost woolen. Kris slapped her hands over her eyes.

Maybe you should lose your legs.

Maybe I should have them.

"Kris!" It was like being pulled from drowning. "What are you doing up there?"

Was there a safer world? The monstrous breathing had pulled back from her neck. She looked up through her fingers and the hallway was bare. Just curios lined with velvet. She shoved her numb feet beneath her body and staggered downstairs.

"I hope you weren't in my jewelry...."

The expression on Kris's face must have cut Mrs. Gunawan off.

"The hall light's burned out," Kris said, but she could not hear her own voice. Light bulbs were part of a surface world that was no longer relevant. Light bulbs and dinner plates and chandeliers. From some distant plateau, Mrs. Gunawan told her to tell Tono in the morning - but Mrs. Gunawan was a blur. So was the room. Only the children were in focus, with their bullet eyes and their heart-shaped mouths.

Dark things swirled on the periphery of the flashlight's ray. These things made a pretense of hiding, but it was purely symbolic, part of a great game they were all playing. Kris saw them and so did the children. Agus even traced their movements with his finger, as if they were watching a *wayang* performance.

"I don't think she likes you," Putri said, pulling her sheets up to her chin. "You should be careful."

"I thought all *she* did was take care of you."

"Yes, of *us*, and our goats. But she gets mad easy. Do you know where my daddy is?"

Kris shrugged. She assumed he was off cavorting in Bangkok or Bali. Possibly skulking in a Jakarta lounge popping *shabu*, but she doubted it.

"He had a fight with mama about the Goat-Nurse. Then he walked into the forest. The Goat-Nurse says he's dead. She says he got eaten by a tiger."

Kris swallowed. She thought she heard a *clop clop*.

"She has power, Kris." With a sigh, Putri closed her eyes. "You *have* to be respectful."

Kris went next door. She didn't knock and would never knock on a door in this house again, not when the Goat-Nurse lurked in the walls. The little shape under the sheets jolted awake.

"I'm sorry," Kris whispered, quickly closing the door and kneeling by the bed. "I need to ask you something, okay? It's very important."

Agus chewed his cotton top-sheet.

"Did the Goat-Nurse break your arm?" Silence. "Gus...you need to tell me."

"I really did fall off the horse. He got all scared and went up on his back legs. I fell into the ditch. But the Goat-Nurse didn't catch me. Mama says she's supposed to make sure I never get hurt." After another pause: "Are horses scared of goats?"

The children's mother was smashing peanuts on the sofa when Kris rushed this information to her. Mrs. Gunawan raised her eyebrow. "Why do you think I brought you here?" she said flatly. "The damn Goat stopped looking after them. I don't know why, but...it is what it is."

Kris carefully perched on the edge of another chair. She didn't want to encroach, but Mrs. Gunawan was slouched over, looking breakable.

"The night he left, my husband told me the Goat took one of his brothers. Little brother, long time ago. And I told him - I thought this thing worked *for* your family - and he started," she flailed her hands, "throwing plates."

"Ma'am...have you considered asking an *imam* to come?"

Mrs. Gunawan wiped her eyes and laughed. "She's not a *jinn*. God knows that would have made it easier. *Imam* get rid of *toyol* all the time, don't they?"

Yes, they did - Kris had seen it done, at a sideshow. A morose man brought the *imam* a glass jar, large enough to hold a baby, and said the *toyol* inside had gotten so out of hand - attacking small animals, biting people - that he couldn't use it to run errands anymore. The *imam* proceeded to pray over the jar, slap its lid, and scold the baby-jinn for bad behavior. Then he gave the jar back to the morose man and told him to bury it in the woods and let the spirit be at peace, for God's sake.

"You thought it was a *toyol*?"

"She made the crops grow! She gave us those fat goats in the shed! It was a *drought* the year they found her. Or she found them, I don't know." Mrs. Gunawan crushed a peanut shell. "My husband said the goats just came to the door one day. The wild ones, you know, the ones you shouldn't touch. They just came to the door, April 1962. Like God had sent them."

A few days later, Tono was caught taking money out of Mrs. Gunawan's purse. She drove him to the front stoop. First, he made excuses - she owed him last month's payment, the money fell out and he was putting it back - and then he tried to return the five-hundred thousand rupiah with a gap-toothed smile.

Mrs. Gunawan grabbed Tono by the wrist. He looked startled. "Keep it," she said. "And here. Something else to remember us by." She thrust a thick tuft of goat wool into his hand.

The wool was far too coarse to have been shorn from the sweet, docile goats in the enclosure. Tono made a horrified croak. He tried to drop the feral wool, but it clung to him; he tried to rub it off like pollen, but it spread. "Please!" he cried. "I'm *sorry*!"

She pointed, but it didn't matter anyway. Even if he huddled on the doorstep, he'd still be marked for death. So, Tono went off down the hill, sobbing. His threadbare shirt glowed white under the moon.

"You'll kill him," Kris said. "And you'll destroy Bandung."

Mrs. Gunawan slammed the door and bolted it. "But maybe she'll get a taste for other people." The blood-strained whites of her eyes were nearly unbearable to look at. She had been beautiful, once. "You don't want to die, right?"

Kris shook her head. The windows went dark and the electricity blinked as something large slipped over the roof,

momentarily drowning the house in a deep, digestive rumble. Mrs. Gunawan clenched her jaw so hard her chin shook. Kris cowered.

Then it passed. The walls settled as if exhaling. The water heater and refrigerator hummed, but all else was calm.

"Maybe you should leave," said Kris. "Before it comes back."

Mrs. Gunawan shook her head violently. "*She* is out *there*. *We* are safer *here*."

People had started screaming down below. Kris put her head in her hands. Trees broke and roofs collapsed, but they were only punctuations against the steady roar of the Goat in bloom.

"It's just like the Tasikmalaya earthquake," Mrs. Gunawan said melodically. "That's all. Just another earthquake, just another mudslide…just another volcano, ripping open…"

A gurgling cry arose from the staircase, where Agus stood with his hands clapped over his ears. His mother was catatonic, so Kris hurried to shush him.

"She's out killing," he whined. "I hate the noise she makes." As if the Goat heard him, a gut-wrenching aerial moan burst out from the city. It must have carried all the way to the crater of Tangkuban Perahu. The docile goats, crowded near the walls of the house for protection, were bleating plaintively.

And in her dreams, she would lie in the goat shed, watching an endless herd of feral goats come trampling out of the stalls. Their wool would blanket her.

They didn't see the Goat-Nurse for another two months. Those were not a happy two months, although they were bloodless. Bandung authorities had passed off the Goat's attack as a violent mid-season tropical storm. Twenty-one had died, but they'd been impaled on branches, crushed under roof beams. The only casualty who'd been consumed was Tono, whose head fell out of the sky and onto the front porch the day after.

The children were quiet, nervous. Kris counted the days and held her breath, waiting for a hoofstep or a grunt. And in her dreams, she would lie in the goat shed, watching an endless herd of feral goats come trampling out of the stalls. Their wool would blanket her. They would nuzzle her and bare their teeth and smile.

"She isn't far," Putri said at breakfast. Kris couldn't tell if she was pleased.

That evening Mrs. Gunawan had a visitor: her father-in-law, accompanied by a mute, kowtowed son. He was wearing an old, black button-down suit and centimeter-thick glasses. He took a deep sniff of the air and knew.

"Where is she? Where did she go?"

"Why don't you ask your son?"

"If you chased her away, you ungrateful bitch...."

"Look, that monster - *she* - doesn't belong with us. She hurt my son; look what she did to his arm!"

The elder Mr. Gunawan leaned down and inspected Agus's cast with a jut of his jaw. He smelled heavily of menthol. He was missing several teeth and Agus stared, unabashed, at the black spots eating away at his gums. The old man hissed at the evidence. "That's it? That's all? Do you have any idea what she is?"

"You promised me my kids wouldn't get hurt!"

"I promised that you'd have grandchildren." He knotted his lips in disdain. "Same promise that was made to me."

Yet the old man need not have worried. The Goat came back - on the eve of *Jum'at Kliwon*, no less, Spirits' Night. She descended onto the house and draped her many woolly arms over the windows, blocking out the moon. Then she seeped through the roof and drenched the walls with wool-grease and the dirt of twenty cities, the blood of six hundred. The house had always been hers.

Agus and Putri cuddled into the Goat's familiar warmth. Mrs. Gunawan woke up throwing the sheets back, gasping for air. Kris lay on her stomach like a snake, hoping the Goat would pass her by.

Mrs. Gunawan didn't get out of bed the next morning. They heard her coughing from the kitchen.

"Where's Mama?" Agus asked, while Kris tossed the fried rice.

"She's sick," said Kris. "We should go down to the market and buy her some *jahe*."

"I don't think we should go anywhere," said Putri and that was that.

The house felt unbearably quiet - no Tono, no Mrs. Gunawan. Just a hovering stillness that left the children sleepy and Kris scrubbing oil off a coffee table. The spot wouldn't clean; the streaks kept morphing back into the shape of a goat head. She threw down her sponge. "Let's go outside."

"Why are you trying to separate us from her?" Putri asked, yawning.

"Because she is a danger to you!" She hissed this, because she was afraid.

"She would never hurt us, or leave us. Not like Mama and Daddy."

Kris groaned and helped Agus off the couch. "*We* are going to go for a walk. *You* may stay here with your Goat-Nurse, since you like her so much."

Putri looked disgruntled, almost hurt. In the backyard - they walked and walked, but could never step out from under a great, gray cloud - Agus asked if his sister would be okay.

Kris snorted. "She'll be fine."

"*Agus! Look at me!*"

They looked over their shoulders. Putri had gone up to the second floor balcony and climbed the terracotta shingles until she was standing like a weather vane on the top beam of the roof.

"*Ya Allah*, Putri! Come down from there!"

"You watch! She'll save me!"

"No she *won't*!"

Putri grinned. Then she bent her knees and jumped, flapping her arms, giving over complete faith. As she dropped past the second floor windows, smog emerged from the house and swarmed her little body. The enormous black cloud slowly drifted her down to a nest of grass. For a second, the cloud seemed to have consumed her; then it dissipated, and left the unhurt child behind.

Putri was still smiling. "You see? She loves *me*."

Agus hung back, looking at his own broken arm. Despite weeks of cast-life, the fracture just wouldn't heal. He began to gnaw at his shirt collar - and Kris was about to tell Putri to be nicer to her brother - when Putri reached her hand out toward him and said, "Never mind. Let's go see the goats."

Agus took Putri's hand after only a second of hesitation and the two children walked solemnly through the grass to their inheritance.

Kris woke up sluggish. She had overslept, she could tell. How could it still be dark? She looked at her bedside clock, but it had jammed, apparently, at 5 a.m. The goats must have jammed too, because for once, she didn't hear them mewling through the wall.

She had a flashlight, thank God. She fumbled her way into the main rooms of the house. All the clocks were stopped and all the skies were dark. There was something too velvety about the night, like immense cosmic curtains had closed around the house.

Something was struggling upstairs. A muffled fight, but in a house so silent, Kris heard all. She found Mrs. Gunawan choking in her bed.

Kris rushed over out of occupational instinct - *What can I do for you, ma'am?* - but once she was leaning over the cursed bed, she froze. Between the rows of perfect teeth, behind the bluish tongue, gobs of black wool were filling Mrs. Gunawan's throat. Kris clapped her hands to her own mouth as Mrs. Gunawan thrashed.

"I'll call the doctor," Kris muttered, but Mrs. Gunawan grabbed her wrist and made a wretched croaking sound, like she was trying to scream through the wool. Her eyes were peeled back so far that even the blood vessels writhed. Kris jerked back. In another second the seizures stopped and Mrs. Gunawan's eyes rolled backward. Wool poked through her lips. Kris said a little prayer, but there was no peace to be had.

There was a little sound behind her. It was the children, standing shock-still in the doorway. God only knew how long they'd been watching their mother die. They made eye contact with Kris, then bolted.

She chased the little white figures down the hallway. She called them - "Gus! Putri!" - but they had their backs to her. She'd had nightmares like this: running, chasing and then the children would turn around with hissing, *kuntilanak* faces. Kris caught up to them downstairs and said a little prayer before grabbing their bony shoulders and spinning them around.

But no - they were children. Bitter and breaking, but still apple-cheeked. Kris threw her arms around them, spewing any and all bullshit that would calm them down, but Putri shoved her away.

"We don't need you! We don't need Mama!"

"I know you're sad." Hoofsteps were running rampant upstairs; doors were slamming. She heard a thump that had to be Mrs. Gunawan's body being dragged off the bed. "But you need to stay with me, okay, we need to go get help."

Agus started crying and Putri's snarl escalated into a scream: "The Goat is our real mother! She is *everyone's* real mother!"

Kris bit her bottom lip so hard it drew blood. Then she grabbed hold of Putri's arm and dragged her out the back door. Agus came running after them, practically howling. They were still trapped behind the night-curtain. The yard was torn up, like someone tried to plow it, and Putri kept jamming her feet into little ruts in the soil. Kris kept yanking her forward.

"Come on! You think that thing is your mother, I want you to see what it does to its children!"

More screams. Kicking. Biting. But when they reached the goat enclosure, all resistance stopped. It was too quiet and it smelled absolutely foul. Wet things squelched under their rubber flip-flops and oozed between their toes.

"Look at what it does!"

Kris turned the flashlight on and immediately choked back vomit. There was a lot of red, a lot of bones. Stubby little horns and milky eyes lay scattered in a sea of lush wool.

Agus shrieked and buried his eyes in his hands. Putri said nothing, but as Kris leaned down to shake sense into her - she had loved these creatures, hadn't she? Given them names? - tremors began to wrack the child. Putri was crying.

Kris teared up, too, in relief. They were going to run. They were going to run down the hill toward Bandung and it would be all right. They'd go to a mosque or the mayor and the Goat-Nurse would fade into oblivion. She even had a fleeting thought of taking them home to Cililin. They'd be happier there. They could dive for snappers in Saguling Lake, wake up clear and unburdened for the first time in their lives. "Don't worry," she said, stroking their hair. Yes, they were going to survive. "Don't worry."

"Look! One of them's still alive!"

Near the shed, a little slip of flesh and bones rose on a pair of shaky stick-legs. It moved inch by inch, in trembling jerks. Under the flashlight's gaze, it looked fur-covered - it was certainly dripping blood. But those legs were the rods of a puppeteer; that was the shape of Arjuna pressed against the screen, not the god himself.

Kris told her no. She *screamed* it. She ran after Putri to strain and sideache, but the little girl was damn-near flying toward the shed. Kris pushed her leg muscles harder and they gave, as if they'd been sliced out. She skidded on the grass and landed chin-first in entrails.

The little slip had become elephantine. It was fundamentally shapeless, a lumbering mess of smoke and wool and a hideous desire to consume - and yet, it wore a human face, strapped on like a dancer's mask. It was the grotesque, plasticized face of the feral goats, of the thing in the upstairs hall. Long and misshapen and *false*.

Kris scrambled to her feet. The Goat was at treetop-level now. She was swelling, breathing blood and matter. The human mask bent down toward Putri with its eternal, tight-lipped smile, black wool pouring forth behind it. The child was whispering something - some plea with God? The Goat whip-snapped her into the air.

I love you. I love you. I love you most of all.

"Kris, help me!"

"Reach for me, reach for me, reach for me!"

The faith had been ripped from her eyes. The Goat inhaled, exhaled, and swallowed her whole. Putri did not scream; her mind had already emptied out onto her babysitter, who pulled her own hair and clawed her own skin and unremittingly howled.

The Goat departed. She hovered briefly over Agus like a cloud - he peered up into her frothing underbelly as if hoping to see his parents and sister peeking out - but she had long deemed him unworthy of her love. She moved west.

Then came the feral goats, field-destroyers, farmers' bane, servants of an older god. They ate the blood-red remains of the docile herd with long tough teeth and slurping lips. They licked the goat shed clean. They gnawed off Kris's

legs as she lay face-up in the grass with barely blinking eyes - and then they wandered into the forest, following the scent of the great and ever-wanting Goat.

Agus was left squatting in the grass with his broken arm, begging to be loved.

The End

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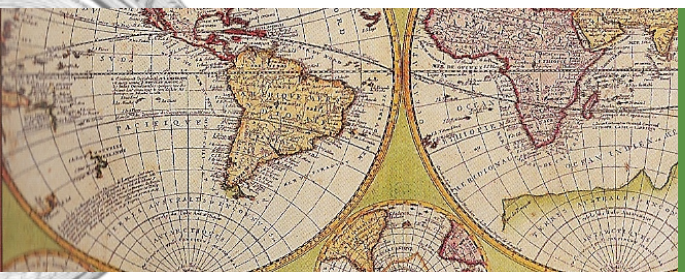


There were demons and those demons possessed eyes which were staring down at the ship malevolently from the cliffs that marked the edge of the world.

Eyes in the Vastness of Forever

By Gustavo Bondoni

Every few moments, one of the lights would blink. It was just an instant and almost unnoticeable because of their sheer number, but João De Menes was watching intently, defying the devil-eyes to come closer. If they did, he would show them the power of a Portuguese right arm.

Magalhaes had laughed at him, simply saying, "If you fear the Indians' campfires on the coast so much, perhaps you should take all the watches tonight," and had then ordered the anchor dropped.

The captain might be an arrogant fool, but João knew the truth: those eyes were watching and weighing, the eyes of hundreds upon hundreds of hungry demons, waiting for the foolish Europeans to sail their ship beyond the edge of the world.

He didn't know what lay beyond the end of the world. Some men told of a magic mist that you wandered around in forever, with no exit and no heaven, while demons feasted on your spirit. Others simply said you dropped off the edge of the planet, straight into the fires of Hell. Still others spoke of eternal blackness, impossible torment

Whichever was true, there were demons and those demons possessed eyes which were staring down at the ship malevolently from the cliffs that marked the edge of the world.

And every once in a while, one of them would blink.

Dawn broke lightless and drizzling, but Magalhaes was adamant: a boat was lowered and a fearful crew selected. It was impossible to fault the captain's courage - he was the first to nominate himself - but easy enough to resent his cruelty. Of the ten men selected, five were the strongest on the Trinidad, while the other five were the most superstitious. Magalhaes was convinced that they could be cured of their foolishness by force and exposure to the fact that what they believed were demons were just natural phenomena.

Predictably, De Menes was among them. He hadn't even bothered to go to sleep following his watch because it was obvious that he would be on the boat. He boarded sullenly, ignoring the wind-driven spray. That wasn't what was bothering him; his concern lay in the fact that he had no inkling as to what devils might await them on the barren patch of rocky land ahead.

The place looked innocuous enough: an empty brown-and-grey shore with low cliffs broken by periodic inlets. But De Menes knew that daytime often found malignant forces dormant, waiting. They were still there, of course,

but they wouldn't show themselves, just feel out the sailors and take them in the night, when their power went unchallenged.

They landed without incident and Magalhaes led them a small distance inland and halted in front of a fire pit surrounded by the bones of some small animal. He pointed at it, looked straight into De Menes' eyes, and laughed.

"Here are your demons João. Hungry savages, from the look of it." Turning to the rest of the men, he said, "Be wary; they can't have gone far. This fire was burning an hour before dawn - I marked it especially."

The men shifted uncomfortably. All were well aware that being harpooned by seal-hunters who'd never seen a European before would only destroy the body, as opposed to the eternal ravages that falling into the clutches of a demon supposed, but it made no difference to them. Death was what they feared and they would worry about their immortal eternities at a later time. They stood straighter, attentive to the approach of any savages.

The natives they'd encountered along the interminable coast they'd sailed down to get that far hadn't been particularly aggressive, but it was never advisable to let down their guard. Everyone who'd ever boarded a ship bound for spice or glory had heard the tales of fearsome ceremonies, strange rituals in pitch-colored jungles and unholy banquets in which Europeans had served as the main course.

They need not have worried, however. An hour after sunrise, a small group of natives approached them from behind an outcropping of rock. They walked slowly, their skin just slightly darker than the pale brown grass which their passage seemingly did nothing to disturb.

As they came nearer, the sailors could discern that every member of the group, composed of three women and two men, was as bare as the day they'd been born, their skin covered with some kind of thick grease or paste, a bright red colour. Presumably, this must have kept out the winds which, this far south, were cruel even in the spring - and would be deadly in winter.

The three women walked boldly to the group of Spanish and Portuguese mariners and spoke in their own language, a tongue that sounded harsh and hollow to De Menes, as desolate as the moaning of the ever-present wind. There was no threat in their gestures. The men were unarmed and the spokeswomen seemed unsurprised to see them

Magalhaes turned to Herrero, a Spaniard who could understand any tongue, no matter how uncivilized. Rumours, given strength by his dusky skin and quick temper, told that the interpreter's affinity for the tongues of the savages was due to his being half-savage himself. Others said it was a gift from the Devil. However he'd come about it, though, the ability had proven both useful and profitable on the journey so far. "Stay ashore and learn their tongue. I will have the ship send you a boatload of supplies. De Menes and Carrizo will stay with you." Herrero nodded. De Menes said nothing. He should have felt fury at the Captain for belittling his beliefs once again, but there was no anger within his soul. He'd known what was coming, felt as though he was walking a predetermined path, with an already-decided ending, albeit one he could not see. All he saw when he thought about it was the greyness of impenetrable fog, an indeterminate future.

He simply walked behind Herrero as the linguist selected a campsite. This was not hard to do, as the whole hillside was dotted with pits, each of which held the remains of some discarded campfire.

The rest of the morning passed peacefully. Herrero had wandered off and was seated in the centre of a group of natives, gesturing, laughing, making gifts of beads and other trinkets which seemed to go down very well with the natives. Soon, they were gesturing for Carrizo and De Menes to join them.

The two sailors did as they were told. De Menes sat down gingerly between a greying old man and a woman who could not have been more than twenty, with jet-black hair. He tried to keep his eyes away from the exposed anatomy of the locals, but the circular seating arrangement made that difficult. Carrizo stared openly, but none of the women seemed to mind.

Herrero was already making progress with the language. Interspersed with the gesturing, there was now a word here, another word there, which seemed to please their hosts, who tried to correct his pronunciation and laughed at his efforts.

One woman, however, was paying no attention to Herrero. The girl De Menes had sat beside seemed to have eyes only for him, and stared the entire time. At first, he thought it must simply have been the close-up view of his light skin and strange clothes, but he soon realized that the girl had not even glanced at the equally-exotic figures of Carrizo and Herrero.

He smiled at her and placed one hand on his chest. "João," he whispered. Her dark eyes invited him to speculate about the rest of her and he tried desperately to keep his own gaze locked on them while she spoke.

"Teuhuech," she replied, placing his hand on her own chest. He pulled it back quickly as she said something else, a rapid-fire string of words in her own language, delivered in a husky monotone. The man on De Menes' opposite side chuckled.

At that moment, a couple of men from the Trinidad arrived, carrying sacks of provisions. "Your tent is down in the boat. If you want to sleep under cover, I'd suggest you get it. We aren't coming back up here."

Grumbling, but relieved to be able to escape from the strange natives for a few moments, Carrizo and De Menes walked down the hill. Herrero, of course, was much too important to be bothered with menial tasks. They joked with the oarsmen as they pulled the poles from the boat. "Magalhaes says we'll be back tomorrow or the next day.

He wants to sail beyond that outcropping." The man pointed to a peninsula some leagues away, "to see whether we can replenish our water."

De Menes' heart sank. They would be alone, without even the comforting sight of the flotilla to keep him sane, on a small spit of land at the edge of the world. But he would not give the tyrant the satisfaction of begging to be allowed back on board. He gestured Carrizo to pick up his half of the burden and set off toward the campsite.
The wind, already a desolate howl, had picked up even more as they began to pitch the tent. By De Menes' reckoning, it was about three in the afternoon, and there were still hours and hours of late spring sunlight remaining. And yet, the sunlight seemed weak, thin, as if its force was being drained by invisible fog. De Menes shivered.

The girl, Teuhuech, realized he was back almost immediately, and joined them just as João attempted to position the final tent pole. He watched her walk in their direction, unable to ignore the fact that there was a lithe and supple body beneath the red paint. He attempted to keep his gaze on her almond-shaped eyes or her dark hair, tied tight against the wind, but wasn't completely successful.

She playfully took hold of the tent pole, her surprisingly-strong grip resisting his efforts to tear it from her grasp and his attempts to twist the pole without making contact with her skin only made the native girl laugh.

Finally, she relented, allowing De Menes and Carrizo to finish erecting their tent, a medium-sized piece of canvas suitable for three men. When it was done, she smiled and crawled inside. De Menes tried to look away, but Carrizo had no such qualms. He stared at the indecently-exposed flesh and then turned to his companion and winked lewdly. "I would go in after her, my friend, but I don't think that would make her happy. You, on the other hand, should hurry before she changes her mind."

De Menes gave him a dark look. While he wasn't a saint, by any means, and certainly wasn't averse to the occasional dalliance with one of the native girls, this one's single-minded determination made him nervous. It was impossible to shake the feeling that there was something deep and disturbing lurking just behind those smiles.

Maybe it was just his dread at having been abandoned by his ship at the edge of the world with nightfall approaching fast. But he felt that his soul and his immortal existence were at the mercy of forces no mortal could ever hope to control.

He shook his head and returned to the circle where Herrero was still holding court. The Spaniard complemented his limited - yet still impressive, considering how little time he'd taken to create it - vocabulary with wild gestures and vocal sound effects. His audience sat at rapt attention.

"I'm telling them the story of our Atlantic crossing," he explained. "Although they seem to believe that we're sorcerers from the sky, because they saw the sails of our ship, and think it looks like a bird."

De Menes nodded and sat on the cool ground, squeezing between two of the local men who'd arrived in their absence. The red paint did little to cover them, either, but it was still less distracting than having Tehuech beside him. As the story went on, more men arrived, none aggressive, all painted red. The girl, disappointment evident on her face as she saw his new seating arrangements, sat straight ahead of him.

The long afternoon's anemic light soon gave way to an eternal twilight, and the men began to drift to the nearby fire pits. Soon, the demonic eyes once more lit the hills, but this time De Menes sat among them. He wondered what else walked the night, connecting the dots between the islands of ruddy light.

The sailors were left to their own devices as night came down and the last vestiges of the day's warmth and cheer were swept away before the howling wind. De Menes had difficulty believing that the savages could bear the chill without clothes and found himself wondering whether they insisted on that same lunacy during the winters, which he imagined must have been merciless in those latitudes.

Their own fire was an unimpressive affair, built close to the tent and casting a small ring of light from which De Menes refused to venture even to relieve himself. He could feel the demon lords watching them from the darkness, present in every shadow and trying to find the doorway that led from their own grey-and-boundless kingdom into the world of the living.

He could feel the demon lords watching them from the darkness, present in every shadow and trying to find the doorway that led from their own grey-and-boundless kingdom into the world of the living.

Knowing sleep would be beyond him, he'd offered to stand guard. So, he sat with his eyes open long after Carrizo and Herrero had drifted into snoring slumber. He cringed at each sound, ready to defend himself, but, when the demon crawled into his tent and took his hand, he could do nothing but follow it out.

It led him endlessly across the stiff grass to the embers of another of the bonfires. By its light, De Menes saw that no demon held his hand, but that Tehuech had brought him there. He knew exactly why. She was still naked, but she'd also scraped off the paint.

He pulled his hand away, trying to remember the way back to his own fire and the security of the tent, but fear had made him an unthinking being, a sheep led to slaughter. He turned back to the girl and a movement above her breasts told him that she wasn't completely bare. A necklace of stone and shells and driftwood danced above her breasts.

Seeing where his gaze lay, she smiled. "João," she said. She removed the necklace and held it towards him with both hands, saying something incomprehensible, and then "João," again.

He shrugged and bowed, allowing her to pass the offering over his head. It caught on one ear, but was soon in place around his neck.

"Thank you," he said, and she smiled back, understanding the meaning, if not the words.

João felt more relaxed. Having accepted her gift, he felt that it would be all right to return to his camp. He turned away from the fire, the afterimage of the embers dancing in his eyes. He waited for them to subside, for his night vision to return.

But, instead of disappearing, the moving lights came into sharper focus, resolving themselves into points of light just beyond the ember's illumination. Eyes that stared unblinkingly back at him, seemingly an arm's-length away. De Menes recoiled from those eyes, his steps taking him straight into Tehuech's waiting embrace.

He knew that the fire was all that kept them away, and that the girl was all that kept the fire alive, and that the creatures of the netherworld were not there to interfere, but to bear witness to a consummation.

The following day dawned bright and clear, memories of the previous night burned away, but De Menes was still surprised to wake inside the tent. He had no recollection of having returned, and his memory of the rest was blurred, as if veiled in grey fog. But it had not been a dream: the clicking of his new necklace as he crawled out of the tent assured him of it.

"Come on, sleepyhead," Carrizo chided. "The sun's been up for an hour, and Magalhaes is back. He found some more savages a little further west and they seem a bit more advanced than these. We have to pull up the tent and return to shore."

The manual labor allowed De Menes to temporarily forget about midnight rendezvous and ghostly eyes and, as he approached the sea and its waiting boat, he felt an enormous weight lifting. Each step felt lighter than the last.

A small party awaited, natives mixed with sailors. The savages even helped to load the boat, only asking a few trinkets and some cloth in return for their unnecessary help, which were given gladly - too often the sailors had had to fight natives who took a dim view of outsiders. Tehuech, among the local group, said nothing and kept her eyes on the ground.

Finally, as De Menes was about to step aboard, one of the older women came forward and said something to Herrero.

Herrero listened, and turned to João. "I'm not really sure what she said, but I think it was 'that man wears a wedding circle', and she pointed at you. Do you know what she's talking about?"

De Menes hung his head. "I think I do." He pulled the necklace back over his head and walked to where Tehuech was standing, heart heavy with dread and remorse. He held it out to her, but she made no move to take it, and refused to meet his gaze, eyes resolutely turned away. Finally, he left it at her feet and stepped back. Still she gave no sign of acknowledgement.

João walked back to the shore and boarded the boat. None of the savages made any move to stop them.

As the Trinidad left the hills with eyes far behind, the crew began to taunt De Menes, asking what had happened, and attempting to get the details of what they imagined must have been one of the more sordid escapades of the journey. But he refused to elaborate and the speculation soon passed into the realm of wild orgies and fantastic pleasures.

De Menes heard none of it. The lewd shouting seemed to him a far-off whisper. As the ship advanced, it grew fainter and fainter.

Even the ship itself seemed to be fading. It had sailed into a fog which became thicker as they sailed through it. The Trinidad's prow became a ghost of itself and soon, even the mainmast, scant meters away, seemed a specter.

A small tremor of panic coursed through him as he realized that the deck beneath him was no longer solid but made of ethereal mist, but he simply shrugged it off. Understanding had replaced fear, and a broken trust was suitably punished. Perhaps the endless, featureless grey at the end of the world would not be as bad as the visions of fire and torment that the hell of his own land promised.

And perhaps, just perhaps, he would be called upon to bear witness in some distant future, thereby remembering what it was like to tread upon the grass at the end of the world, and share the love of one of its guardians.

The End

Gustavo Bondoni is an Argentine writer with over forty stories published in five countries, both online and in print, and a winner in the National Space Society's "Return to Luna" Contest and the Marooned Award for Flash Fiction in 2008. His genre fiction has appeared in three Hadley Rille Books anthologies, *Atomjack*, *The Best of Every Day Fiction*, and others. His work has also been published in Spanish translation. He can be found online at www.gustavobondoni.com.ar, or at http://bondo-ba.livejournal.com/.

His room, no doubt owing to his almost-constant presence and his general reluctance to part from his black robes, had acquired a muggy climate that brought to mind malarial swamps and yellow fever.

The Great Performance of Kadir Bey

By Ekaterina Sedia

When one's every day starts with the tortured howling of the inmates of an insane asylum, one becomes quite resistant to surprise. At least, Abbé de Coulmier flattered himself with the thought that very few things, be they of divine or secular origin, had the power to rattle his calm demeanor. Smiling as cheerfully as ever, he headed outside to the garden, where a visitor was waiting for him.

The visitor was a small, wormy man of the variety that had proliferated to alarming numbers after the Revolution and continued to grow during the Republic. His poorly-fitting clothes had an air of disregard about them, even though they were quite new. But the collar and the cuffs had an unclean feel to them, and the buttons seemed to remain attached to the fabric of his waistcoat via pure strength of will. The too-closely-set eyes of the man darted from the Abbé's face to his hunched back and a slow smile spread on his face like an oil stain. "Good morning, Father," he said. "I have a business with you."

"So you've said in your letter," the Abbé agreed. "You have a friend who is in need of Charenton Asylum's services?"

"Whatever you wanna call 'em," the man said. "This friend...it's a delicate situation. He's a foreign dignitary from Algiers and the strain of his work must've gotten to him, see? He has been negotiating the sea trade treaties or some such. He just needs a quiet place to rest...to become himself again, as it were. But we insist on utmost secrecy."

Abbé de Coulmier knew better than express surprise. The Barbary privateers have been demanding outrageous prices for staying away from the French ships, but, whatever the motive, the Abbé hoped that the piracy would cease. He, for one, was willing to get any help needed to the dignitary. "Of course," the Abbé said. "You will find, I'm sure, that our establishment is quite humane. Is your friend, perchance, a patron of the arts?"

At this question, the Abbé's interlocutor tittered with a nervous laughter. "Indeed, he is."

The Abbé ignored the outburst. "And may I ask, how do you know this gentleman?"

The guest ceased his tittering, exchanging it for a ragged yellow smile. "I happen to be working for the benefit of the Republic. Let no one say that we do not treat our visitors well; let no unkindness mar the negotiations with the Barbary Coast. He asked for a treatment and you are going to provide it."

"In this case, he will much benefit from our therapy. We have been quite successful in using arts to instill greater peace of mind and tranquility into our clients."

"Yes," the man said. "Tranquility is all he needs." He handed Abbé a sheaf of papers in a foreign tongue the Abbé could not possibly hope to understand, despite his extensive training in the languages alive and dead. "He will be arriving this afternoon; hope you are ready for him."

The man who entered the Abbé's office had a striking appearance, even if one ignored the fact that his entry coincided with the cacophony of howling and wailing of the inmates. His skin, a pale olive color, seemed rather dull offset by his long black robes that swept the floor of the office. There was a strange fluidity to his motions; as he walked, he seemed almost a woman gliding across the dance floor.

He sat in the proffered chair and smoothed the length of his robe across his knees. A wave of howling that was beginning to die down resumed again.

"My apologies," the Abbé said. "Usually, they are not quite as vocal."

The man's face expressed neither surprise not annoyance as he gave the Abbé a grave nod and motioned for him to continue.

"We are pioneering a new treatment for mental anguish and exhaustion," the Abbé said. "One of our inmates is a talented novelist and playwright, and he has been staging a number of plays. We also have a resident chamber orchestra and a few of the inmates are reasonably-effective painters."

"Madness," his visitor said. His voice was hoarsely-accented and his words fell from his lips like frozen pebbles. "Madness goes hand in hand with artistic temperament."

"Indeed," the Abbé agreed. "There's a thin line between genius and madness, as they say."

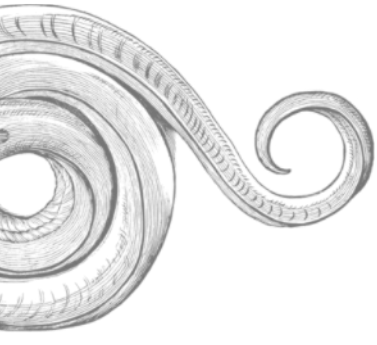
"Also, mediocrity and madness. Tyranny and madness. Boredom and madness. Love and madness. Hate and madness. Madness surrounds you like an ocean in which the flimsy raft of your sanity is tossed from wave to wave and yet, you believe this raft to be a continent."

The Abbé stammered for an answer as his newest inmate rose to his feet. "You can call me Kadir Bey. I would like to see my rooms now."

"The nurse will show you your room," the Abbé said. "Madeleine, will you please…."

A young woman, not yet seventeen of age, entered the office from the atrium where she waited, and greeted the foreigner. "Follow me, Sir," she said.

And in the swirl of the black hem, Kadir Bey exited the office, his hidden shoes clacking on the hardwood floor of the hallway.



"A very disturbed mind," the Abbé said to himself. "Quite remarkable. I should talk to Marquis and find out what he's planning for his next production."

Abbé de Coulmier and Marquis de Sade walked along the shaded alley of the garden, crushed brick of the path crunching under their feet. It was a peaceful day, still cool as befits May but infused with the sweet promise of early blooms and the buzzing of the eager-but-still-sluggish bumblebees over the first sprays of lilacs.

"So, you see, Marquis," the Abbé said, "I need your cooperation. I do not think Kadir Bey is a music-lover – especially not since he walked in on our wind quartet practice and all of them started playing this terrible tune."

His companion, a still-lively man in his sixties, smiled. "How terrible?"

The Abbé shivered. "Quite awful, actually. It sounded like a roomful of cats trying to sing a funeral dirge."

The Marquis laughed. "Oh, my dear friend. I always knew that our musicians were blessed with healthy lungs but very little talent to go along, but this is just too amusing. Do you think their exertions have scared the new arrival?"

"He seemed to enjoy it," the Abbé confessed, perplexed. "But goodness me, I'm not adding another musician if I can help it. And I'm certainly not letting anyone encourage the ones we already have."

Both men shook with laughter, until the Marquis, overcame with merriment, gasped and wiped a tear. "I suppose I could accommodate you and your swarthy protégé. I'm in the middle of a very whimsical play."

"It's not - "

"No, of course not," the Marquis interrupted. "I know your prudish bourgeois tastes all too well."

"Not to mention that I am a man of cloth and it would be unseemly for me to support anything morally dubious."

"Not at all; this play is about numbers."

"Oh," said Abbé de Coulmier. "I did not realize you were interested in science. Perhaps you should speak to Kadir Bey – like all Muslims, he seems very interested in sciences and electricity, and builds all sorts of contraptions in his rooms. The nurses refuse to enter it – his contraptions shoot lightnings and Madeleine has been stung pretty badly. Perhaps you could use one of them in your play?"

"Numbers, not galvanism," the Marquis said irritably. "All numbers have a hidden meaning and my play tries to uncover some of their secrets. Take number 999, for example."

"What about it?" the Abbé said and looked up into the transparent sky, washed clear by the recent rain. He then turned his gaze to the rows of cypresses lining the alley and the inmates and the nurses strolling across the greening

lawns and along the shady alleys. He looked anywhere but at his friend, who once again seemed in thrall to his bizarre obsession. "What about 999?"

"It's a combination of two prime numbers," Marquis de Sade said heatedly. "Three, repeated thrice, and thirty-seven. I don't need to explain the significance of three to you, do I? Especially repeated three times."

"Of course not," the Abbé agreed hastily. "Trinity thrice-blessed. I understand."

The Marquis rolled his eyes, but didn't argue.

"And thirty-seven?"

"It's a factor of 666, the number of the Beast," the Marquis said, lowering his voice. "And it also figures prominently in the Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth. And it is the thirteenth prime number." He gave the Abbé a penetrating look and nodded significantly.

"But why 999?" the Abbé said. "What made you chose it among the myriad of other numbers, no matter also rife with hidden significance? Why not pick three, or nine, or twenty-seven?"

"I do not choose," his friend replied with great dignity and turned toward the main hospital building. "It came to me in a dream and now, I must decipher what it means."

"Of course." Abbé de Coulmier hurried after his friend, trying to pacify his ire. "I was merely enquiring. So, do you think there's a role for Kadir Bey in your play about numbers?"

The Marquis smiled. "Of course. He can play an Arab mystic."

"That would be perfect," the Abbé said, great relief written on his good-natured face.

Kadir Bey proved to be an uncomfortable inmate. He shunned fresh air, and seemed interested only in obtaining metal and glass pipes and vessels, and combining them into strange devices that left the Abbé doubtful not only of their purpose, but of their very right to exist. His room, no doubt owing to his almost-constant presence and his general reluctance to part from his black robes, had acquired a muggy climate that brought to mind malarial swamps and yellow fever.

Even more disturbing was his general effect on the staff and other inmates; the staff, resilient to all sorts of mental malaise, complained only of vivid nightmares every night after a chance encounter forced their eyes to meet Kadir Bey's – coal-black, burning with a low smoldering fire of persistent madness. But the inmates, attuned as they were to many subtle influences beyond the recognition of a person in robust health, such as moon phases and the direction of the winds, howled and threw themselves against the bars guarding their windows and the walls that contained them; their blood smeared over the plaster where they banged their heads repeatedly and their speech,

often uncertain to begin with, disintegrated into mad ululations and desperate sobs every time Kadir Bey left the confines of his rooms or fired up one of his devices.

The artistic types fared worst of all – the musicians played plaintive, wild tunes, and the painters painted feverishly, depicting roiling fogs and stormy seas, with strange and gigantic monsters peering secretively from hidden depths; they painted the vortices in the very center of creation, where a bulbous, monstrous creature with the placid face of an idiot reclined in repose. The Abbé's only hope was that once the rehearsals started, the strange Algerian's attention would be drawn away from his electrical experiments – the Abbé was convinced that the galvanic discharges in the air, coupled with the sardonic demeanor and exotic appearance of Kadir Bey, were the cause of the unrest. That he was the cause of it, the Abbé had no doubt.

The suffocating malaise of his presence reached even outside of the Charenton Asylum; Abbé de Coulmier could not shake the suspicion that Napoleon's proclamation of himself as an Emperor was the result of the sinister influence of Kadir Bey. The further betrayal of the First Council of the Republic shook the Abbé to the bone and he decided to insist on the early start of the rehearsals. If he had only one thing to believe in, it would be the unshakable conviction of the healing power of the arts. Perhaps if he succeeded in jolting Kadir Bey out of his dark and brooding melancholy and preoccupation with electricity, perhaps then his influence would lessen.

As he moved to situate himself in the chair with greater comfort, the hem of his robe billowed and the Abbé felt a quiet dread creep along his spine, trailing cold sweat in its wake.

He went to visit Kadir Bey, studiously avoiding his malignant gaze. Kadir Bey had politely put aside the glass alembics that he was filling with green and pungent liquid, and sat down, preparing to listen. As he moved to situate himself in the chair with greater comfort, the hem of his robe billowed and the Abbé felt a quiet dread creep along his spine, trailing cold sweat in its wake. The foot of Kadir Bey, of which he caught only a passing glance, appeared to be a black and polished hoof.

The Abbé shook his head. Just an illusion, he thought; it's just a narrow black shoe seen at an unfortunate angle. Still, the dread remained.

"What can I do for you today?" Kadir Bey said in his gravelly voice. "Although I do suppose that I should start by thanking you; this place is exactly what I needed. The collection of minds here...." He smacked his lips in mock-relish. "I wish I could stay here forever."

"Do you mean that you will be leaving us soon?" the Abbé asked, all of his will directed at expunging any unseemly hope from his voice.

"Soon," Kadir Bey said. "But not before I attend one of Marquis de Sade's plays. I hear he is quite famous."

"The circumstances of his fame are rather unfortunate," the Abbé said. "While I do not approve of the subject matter of his books, I do not believe that they warranted imprisonment."

"Imprisonment is just a matter of perception," Kadir Bey said. "Why, if the prison is large enough, one might not even notice one's unfortunate fate."

The Abbé nodded. "But some prisons are small enough to notice. The Marquis' work here, however, has been by no means scandalous. Would you like to participate? If you are as fond of plays as you say, you absolutely must delight in participation rather than simple observation."

"It is a wise man who knows when to choose one over the other," Kadir Bey said. "I believe I would like to participate, yes. Expect me at the rehearsal."

Abbé de Coulmier did not have the heart to attend the rehearsal himself, but waited anxiously in his office for the Marquis' report. He was too uneasy and distracted to read, although he did spend a few desperate minutes staring at the bookshelves, the leather-bound book spines all alike, the letters on them incomprehensible squiggles to his overburdened and anguished mind.

The Marquis knocked on the door earlier than expected, his usually pink and animated face sagging in a scowl.

"How was the rehearsal?" the Abbé said.

"Just awful, but on the other hand, interesting," said the Marquis, and sank into an offered chair languidly. "It went well for a while, until your strange protégé showed up. And then...."

"They howled," the Abbé guessed.

"No. They gibbered."

"Gibbered?"

"Yes. Gibbered."

"Did it stop?"

"Eventually," the Marquis said and heaved a sigh. "Ah, my dear friend, it was a wonder to behold – he raised his hand and all fell silent; only one of the nurses, the one playing the Muse, sobbed a little. And he spoke his lines, only they were not the ones I gave him."

The Abbé nodded sympathetically. "Indeed. Did you have any luck correcting him? He strikes me as a stubborn man."

"No," the Marquis said with a puzzled smile and played with a linen cuff of his shirt distractedly. "They were... better than mine. Although I would be damned if I could recall what they were about now."

"Oh, my dear friend...," the Abbé started with a genuine remorse. "I should've warned you of this man's unholy influence."

The Marquis looked through his friend to some infinitely-removed point far beyond the asylum's walls. "You know what else he said? He said he studied numerology. He said 37 was a prime factor of my death. What do you make of that?"

"Gibberish," the Abbé said without conviction. "Perhaps we could hurry the play; he said he would leave as soon as it is over."

"Perhaps," the Marquis said. "Or perhaps there are secrets he could share with me."

The Abbé put a calming hand on his friend's elbow. "I believe that he is a disturbed soul and perhaps you would do well not to inflame his neuroses further."

A pale smile twisted the Marquis' lips. "You're afraid that we will be like two madmen, urging each other to howl at the moon. But do not worry – he is like me, a political prisoner, no doubt trying to escape the vile tyrant who has recently usurped the abolished throne. It was an asylum or prison for me, and I suspect that it is the same for him."

"You've seen the effect he has on people."

"Weak souls, no doubt shaken by a great mind. He told me of his experiments."

The Abbé shook his head. A great sadness filled his heart, the sadness he felt every time he realized that his pleas and warnings would have no effect. "I will not be distraught when he leaves," he said. "And I only hope he does not destroy your mind while he's staying here. Just be careful at your rehearsals."

The Marquis did not answer, his faraway gaze trapped in places strange and unreachable by a sane mind. The Abbé prayed that Kadir Bey leave without causing further harm.

On the day of the premiere, the Abbé was galvanized by the air of anticipation that permeated the hospital. Several visitors and inmates' families had arrived that morning, and the grounds rang with female laughter and the delighted squeals of the children. The Abbé could not remember the last time the Charenton hospital had felt so animated, so alive, and so close to normalcy.

The inmates involved with the production had gathered in the main hall, becostumed and jittery with anticipation. The Marquis, clad in his military uniform, commanded the proceedings with his usual air of purposeful intensity. But the Abbé's gaze was drawn to the tall figure of Kadir Bey, who stood by himself on the stage still bare of decorations, with the exception of a small table upon which Kadir Bey erected an elaborate contraption. The device bristled with copper piping and dark, green mass bubbled within the round glass vessels. The contraption hummed and discharged sparks as Kadir Bey, dressed as an Arab mystic, a tall conical hat sitting upon his high brow, his robes decorated with alchemical symbols, fiddled with the device, making it produce smoke and lightning at the twisting of the metal knobs embedded in its sides.

Apparently, the Marquis had given in to an urge to allow Kadir Bey use one of his devices as props. The Abbé himself was less enamoured of the idea, even though the inmates seemed calm. The Abbé could not shake the suspicion that the contraption was somehow responsible for the good spirits of the inmates, and that a mere twist of a knob would send them into a howling frenzy or a tortured marionette dancing. Kadir Bey seemed a true magician then, a real wizard pulling the strings of human hearts and minds with the same ease as he manipulated the shining knobs of the infernal device.

The inmates started to set the stage, and the actors dispersed, mumbling their lines. The Marquis seemed deep in conversation with Kadir Bey. The Abbé had no other recourse but to take a seat and to prepare for the premiere to commence; he prayed for it to go quickly and not to cause further anguish.

The visitors and the inmates not employed in the play took their seats and the attendants blew out the lanterns in the hall and lit the ones surrounding the stage. The Abbé did not pay attention even though he usually relished the Marquis' wit and his gift for dialogue, but right now, he was too preoccupied with anticipation of Kadir Bey's entrance.

Halfway through the first act, the attendants dimmed the lanterns set by the stage, and several inmates dressed in all black, their faces hidden behind dyed gauze, wheeled Kadir Bey's contraption onto the stage. It shone with a sickly-green light that fell across the faces of the spectators like the pall of death. The Abbé felt the same dread he had felt before as the faces around him were transformed by this unearthly glow into hungry, ghostly apparitions, who stared at the stage with black holes carved in their faces.

Kadir Bey entered, still costumed as an Oriental mystic, but the Abbé knew that the play had been abandoned, and the patrons and the inmates were in thrall to his terrible machine and his heavy gaze. Kadir Bey started to speak and the dark sound of his harsh voice scraped at the Abbé's heart. He covered his ears with his hands, but they had as little power to stem the tide of loathsome voice as a grass blade could resist a hurricane. Tears streamed down the Abbé's face as the musicians in the audience rose to their feet and played a soul-rending, piercing melody on their flutes.

The contraption belched lightning and spat out long tongues of greenish light. As if by command, the audience stood, staring at Kadir Bey as he stepped to the center of the stage, raising his hands palms up. The eyes of children, women and men saw nothing but the terrible apparition.

The Abbé broke through the fog of the spell with a great mental effort. "Who are you?" he shouted, his voice too weak to rise above the electrical crackling and Kadir Bey's words.

But the Algerian heard, and turned to face the Abbé. He walked to the edge of the stage with his usual fluid motions, the hooves concealed under his alchemical robes clacking on the dry wood with quiet clarity. The humming of the contraption fell to a barely audible hiss, and Kadir Bey's voice boomed, amplified by the sudden silence. "I have a thousand names and nine hundred and ninety-nine aspects. I am the Crawling Chaos, the Dark Demon, the Black Wind. I hold great knowledge, and I want sacrifice."

"Go away," the Abbé pleaded. "These people have nothing to offer and no use for your knowledge. Seek those who take interest in such things, not the poor lunatics who have nothing to give you!"

"I want your knowledge." The Marquis, clear-eyed among the blind throng, stood next to the Abbé.

The Abbé grabbed his friend's sleeve. "My friend, do not believe this monster! Haven't you learned? These creatures never keep their promises and once you let them into your mind, they never leave you alone."

Kadir Bey listened to their argument and the madmen gathered around them started to whimper, followed by those who were sane. The Marquis pushed his friend away. "What knowledge can you give me?" he spoke to Kadir Bey.

"I can give you the second prime of your life," Kadir Bey said.

The Marquis laughed. "Child's play. It's two – two by thirty-seven is seventy-four. I will die in ten years. What else?"

The Abbé could stand it no longer. Not just his friend but the inmates entrusted to the Abbé's care, their friends and relatives, would fall prey to the unholy creature if the Abbé did not do something. While Kadir Bey's attention was diverted, the Abbé scrambled up onto the stage, reaching for the device.

Kadir Bey moved to stop him, but already, the Abbé heaved the contraption above his head and smashed it into the narrow face of the demon. The glass splintered and the tubes popped, spilling the foul liquid. Kadir Bey stood for a moment, stunned, and slowly sank to the floor – at least, the Abbé thought so at first, before he realized that Kadir Bey was not sinking but disintegrating into great clouds of black acrid smoke.

"What have you done?" The Marquis tried to grab at the fog, but it slithered between his fingers and filled the entire room. "You've ruined my play!"

People cried and coughed, and the insane music of the flutes resumed again, as the dense wisps of the fog wound about people's faces, stealing the last shreds of their sanity, and slithered out of the windows, below doors, through the chimneys, until it was gone, and the Abbé was left face to face with his sobbing friend and the room filled with howling, gibbering madmen.

Abbé de Coulmier took the Marquis' elbow and pulled him to his feet. "Get up, my friend," he whispered. "Get up; this is not the way for a director to behave."

The nurses rushed in, attracted by the noise, and stood at the doorway like statues, terrified by the visions of devastation wrought. The inmates and their families wailed and sobbed, scratched their faces and violently attacked anyone who moved too close. A young woman screamed and tore at her child's eyes with a clawed hand, as an

elderly gentleman, whose clothing betrayed a distinguished position in life, banged his head on the marble tiles of the floor, and thin streams of blood ran between clumps of his thinning gray hair and across his face.

Two well-dressed children grasped each other's throat and despite their yelps of pain, their eyes remained hollow; so did the eyes of everyone else in the hall, turned from the theater to a battlefield.

The Abbé waved at the nurses. "Help them!" he commanded and, as the women bustled around, trying to pacify the inmates and their families, he kneeled down next to the Marquis.

The Marquis looked about him as if he had just woken up from deep sleep. He then turned to the Abbé. "How was the play?" he asked, his pale eyes wide.

"It was quite a performance," the Abbé answered.

The End

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She was covered from neck to toe in flowing black robes made of a fabric that had the reflective luster of silk but could not be silk, for at the same time, it seemed to suck in all light around it.

The Doom That Came to Yamatai

By Travis King

Beneath the summer sun, sweat beaded on Kazuai's forehead as he marched along the earthen path leading to Empress Himiko's audience chamber. He wiped the moisture away with the sleeve of his hempen tunic and reminded himself that he would not be required to endure the woman's dreadful presence for long. He would report on the success of his troops and then be dismissed. The Empress, as usual, would not ask for details, leaving that to her younger brother, Prince Ojin, who, as her vice-regent, attended to the everyday affairs of the realm of Yamatai.

With great deliberation, Kazuai ascended the steps to the veranda. He rapped twice on the door. Within seconds, the door slid open, and Kazuai stepped inside. Nothing had changed since the last time he had been there.

Although there were no torches or oil lamps, the chamber was nevertheless brightly lit. The source of this illumination was a fist-sized ball, an artifact of Empress Himiko's magic, which hovered above, inches from the ceiling. It cast its rays equally throughout the room, highlighting the ornate tatami that covered the floor, as well as the many decorations mounted on the walls: the silken tapestries that stretched around the walls at eye level; the bronze shields, with their grotesque etchings, that hung on either side of the room; and the skulls, both animal and human, strung together and suspended on ropes or, in the case of the large totemic rams' heads, mounted directly on the walls.

To Kazuai's right stood the girl who had opened the door. She was one of the Thousand Young - the cadre of maidens who served the empress. Despite her beauty, she was unremarkable, for no maiden who was not beautiful was chosen as a servant of the Empress. With her short black hair and monotonous buff gown of unadorned silk, she was indistinguishable from any other of the Thousand Young. Kazuai barely gave the girl a glance out of the corner of his eye, focusing instead on the two members of royalty at the other end of the room.

Prince Ojin stood tall, his hair cut short, his beard neatly trimmed. He wore a tunic and trousers of silk, that material allowed only to members of royalty and their retainers. Unlike the servant girl's, his attire was a beautiful violet colour and elaborately brocaded. Kazuai's heart skipped a beat as he beheld the Prince in all his majesty, but he did not allow his eyes to linger. He settled his gaze directly ahead to the dais behind Prince Ojin and to Empress Himiko, seated there on her sturdy oaken throne.

She was covered from neck to toe in flowing black robes made of a fabric that had the reflective luster of silk but could not be silk, for at the same time, it seemed to suck in all light around it. It was an assault on the senses and only one of the reasons Kazuai did not enjoy being around the Empress.

Her hair matched her garments and, once it spilled past her shoulders, it was impossible to separate one from the other. Contained within the blackness was a pale face, which, like those of her servants, was beautiful. She was said

to be nearly one hundred years old, but she had not the lines to show it. Her skin was as smooth as any maiden's, but none would mistake her for one, for there was age apparent in her visage - in the way she held her lips tightly together, and in her arsenic-coloured eyes, which were cold and sinister, like a sword that had seen many battles.

"Come closer," the Empress commanded, her voice an audible manifestation of the aspect contained within her eyes.

Kazuai removed his bear-fur shoes and complied. Had Himiko not been the Empress - indeed, had she been the lowliest of peasants - still, he would have heeded the command. Her power was great and tinged the air with a palpable energy, a static charge like that felt during a lightning storm - that is, if the lightning were formed not of fire but of ice.

As he stepped forward, the young servant slid closed the door behind him. He approached the Empress with the grace of a Tsushima cat and, when he stood within ten paces of the dais, he offered her a deep, formal bow and gave the required greeting: "Your Imperial Majesty, I am greatly honoured to appear in your presence." When he rose from the bow, he made certain not to establish eye contact, for it was considered disrespectful.

The Empress did not respond, merely focused her gaze upon him. Even though his own gaze was focused at the empress's feet and he was not watching her eyes, Kazuai could feel them upon him, scrutinizing, penetrating through his thick clothing and his taut, muscled skin, deep inside to where his spirit resided. His body tingled - not pleasantly but not painfully either - as the empress used her magical powers to read his thoughts. It was a revolting feeling, this invasion of his privacy and integrity, and yet another reason he preferred to avoid the Empress. Many said she wielded the powers of a shaman - but no other shaman he had encountered had such abilities and he sometimes wondered about the woman's true nature. Her magic, he was certain, came not from the gods but demons.

"Your opinion of me matters not," the Empress suddenly said in response to his thoughts and Kazuai berated himself for allowing them to rise to the surface. "What matters is that you serve and you have served me well. I have delved into your experience of the recent military campaigns to the north and I commend your success. I expect the same in the future. Soon, this entire island will be under the dominion of the Yamatai Empire. All kings and queens, all clan chieftains, all shamans will bow before my might.

"I have no further need of you at this time. You are dismissed. You may accompany the Prince to his chambers to discuss in detail these martial affairs and to...enjoy his company, as I know you do. You have been long without companionship on the battlefield."

With these words, the Empress rose from her throne and descended the stairs at the rear of the dais, disappearing from sight.

Kazuai breathed a sigh of relief. He realized his forehead was again covered in sweat and again, he wiped it with his sleeve. Then, with a buoyant spring, he covered the few paces that separated him and Prince Ojin.

The Prince took Kazuai's right hand between both of his own and said, "I have missed you. Let us do as the Empress directed. Come with me to my chambers."

Kazuai nodded and, with a small, droll smile, he said, "Of course, my prince. As you command, so shall it be."

Ojin chuckled. "I have missed your humour, Kazuai. It is rare in this place." He let go of Kazuai's hand and headed for the door. Kazuai followed half a pace behind.

He maintained that distance through the palace grounds, displaying the proper deference for the sake of any who might see them. Only once they had reached the Prince's chambers did he relinquish decorum, as Ojin did the same.

They embraced each other tightly, and Ojin brought his lips to Kazuai's, planting a passionate kiss upon them as they parted. Within seconds, their tongues were engaged in a sensual dance, like those performed by participants in the spring fertility rites. Ojin's soft beard tickled the smooth skin of Kazuai's face and Kazuai reveled in the familiar sensation for which he had yearned during his months on the fields of battle.

Lost in the pleasure of the moment, Kazuai did not notice Ojin leading him into the next room and to the mattress that lay on the floor therein, so he was surprised when lucidity struck and he found himself not only on the mattress, but with his clothing half-removed. He hurriedly finished the task the Prince had begun and then unfastened the Prince's robes and peeled through the layers to reveal the man's body.

Kazuai dusted Ojin's chest with kisses and worked his way down Ojin's belly. The lower Kazuai progressed, the more pleasure the Prince derived. The gasps, moans, and tremors made this quite clear to Kazuai - as did more tangible manifestations of the Prince's arousal. Kazuai found himself aroused, finding his own pleasure in his lover's, and his physical state soon matched Ojin's. For the next few hours, they made love, both fast and hard, and slow and tender, giving in to all the emotions and desires that had built up over their months apart. When they were both finally spent, they simply lay together on the mattress, embracing and caressing in silence.

Ojin finally broke that silence. "You are so beautiful, Kazuai. Your face has lost some of the youthful roundness it had when first we met, but you remain otherwise unchanged."

Kazuai's eyes darkened; his smile faded. In a somber tone, he said, "It will not always be so. I am twenty years younger than you, true, but I will not always be young. Will you still find me beautiful then?"

"Always," Ojin said. "Until death parts us."

A tense silence followed.

"It troubles you, my prince, that death shall have the final word over our love? All the more reason to enjoy it while we live. Death comes to us all."

Ojin waited a beat and then said, "No. It does not, I'm afraid."

Kazuai shot Ojin a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

The Prince closed his eyes for a few seconds, then opened them again. "If only I could tell you, my dear Kazuai, but...to do so would invite dire consequences."

"I'm afraid I don't under - "

Kazuai was cut off abruptly by the clamour of gongs and drums from outside, the alarm signaling that the town - perhaps even the palace itself - was under attack. Obeying his martial training without thought or hesitation, he jumped to his feet and dressed quickly, all the time hoping he would have time to run to his quarters and retrieve his armour.

"What's happening?" wondered Prince Ojin as he, too, slipped into his clothes. "There have been no reports of an army on the march."

"Assassins, perhaps. Or a small assault force. I know not. As you said, there have been no reports. Even if an army were traveling through the countryside and avoiding settled regions, sentries would have seen signs of their passing and sent messengers."

"We must protect the Empress from whatever is out there," Ojin said, sternly. "The palace guard will be assembling. There is none better to organize the defense than you. Hurry, Kazuai. I will meet you outside shortly, and I will make sure the palace troops know to obey your command."

"Yes, my prince."

Kazuai rushed from the Prince's chambers onto the palace grounds and encountered a commotion, but he noted that it was orderly commotion, that everyone was responding to the alarm as trained, and he continued to his quarters to don his armour and retrieve his weapons.

A short time later, he was outside again, ready for battle. He saw that the palace guard stood in rank and file at the gates, pikes in hand, awaiting orders. The Prince must have spread the word already that Kazuai would be leading them. Before he could do so, however, he had to know what his warriors would be up against. He climbed the ladder of the guard tower and gazed out at the town of Narashita that spread beyond the gate. He thanked the gods for good fortune as he noticed that the enemy troops had not yet reached the town - though he could see they were within an hour of doing so. The alarm must have been raised in response to a message of their approach and not an attack, as he had feared. Kazuai could not see the banners of the approaching army and, as he descended the ladder, he considered who might wish to attack. His mind raced with possibilities.

It could not be an army from the north, seeking vengeance. Those kingdoms' armies had been thoroughly routed. The kingdoms themselves were occupied by the Empress's forces. Besides, he and his own troops had returned only a day before; they would have noticed had such a large host been following that closely behind them.

Perhaps the army had come from the great nation of Izumo to the northwest. They had borne a grudge against Yamatai since that great battle years ago. Moreover, their leaders consorted with demons and, like Empress Himiko, had use of magic; they easily could have employed such powers to send an army as far as Narashita without detection. However, Izumo had seemed satisfied merely to stave off the army of Yamatai and, in the intervening years, had never sought revenge; indeed, spies within the kingdom of Izumo had made it clear that the people of Izumo were uninterested in expanding their borders. Unless something had suddenly changed, it was unlikely the army was from there.

That left Ito, a powerful kingdom to the south. They were one of the dozens of kingdoms that made up the Yamatai Empire and, until recently, they had been loyal to Empress Himiko. Over the last few years, however, the newly-enthroned king of Ito, an impetuous youth named Kenzo, had challenged Himiko's authority, claiming that she was not a legitimate heir to the throne. Although he was not a blood heir to the previous emperor either, he claimed to have just as much right to rule - and, despite the fact that Himiko had expanded the empire greatly, he claimed also to be better suited to the task. It was entirely possible King Kenzo had sent this army in an attempt to wrest power from the Empress. It was also possible - just barely - that an army from the south could have traveled this far without being detected.

As soon as Kazuai's feet hit the ground, he spun and said to the men gathered before him, "They are King Kenzo's troops. They must be."

"Indeed they are," said a familiar voice. Startled, Kazuai looked to his right and saw that Ojin stood only a few paces away. "So says the man who raised the alarm," the man continued, as he closed the distance between himself and Kazuai.

Kazuai bowed. It was no secret that he and Ojin were more than merely master and vassal - their romantic relationship was an accepted fact - but it was still necessary to display such deference in public. "My prince," he said.

"I have spoken with an attendant who brought word from the farmer who first caught sight of the army. The upstarts have finally made their move against the Empress. They will not succeed. The palace guard will march out immediately. Your troops have not yet disassembled since returning from the northern campaigns. They have been ordered to prepare for battle. They wait at the edge of the town, where you will add them to our forces and command the entire army. We will also raise the citizenry of the town and send to nearby settlements for all able-bodied men and women. We are outnumbered at the moment, but we will soon have an army just as mighty as that which attacks. In addition, we fight for the Empress, and because of that alone, we will prevail!"

Prince Ojin's last sentences were directed at the entirety of the troops assembled and, as soon as he stopped speaking, the troops cheered.

"We will prevail," said Kazuai, accepting it as an order not to be defied. Then, raising his voice above the din of cheers, he barked, "Open the gates!"

Half an hour later, the army was in the midst of the fray and, although he was the greatest warrior in the kingdom, even Kazuai was susceptible to a spear, such as the one that struck him in the back as he fought and caused him to collapse to the ground in blackness.

As he regained consciousness, Kazuai could hear the voices of a man and a woman. He could not make out most of the words though, in his groggy state, and caught only the end of the conversation - the woman's voice saying, "Remember, though, that you took an oath those many years ago and I rewarded you handsomely in return. Would you lose your gifts and my protection over the love of a single mortal?"

A door closed, and Kazuai brooded over these words, but he found no meaning in them. When he opened his eyes a moment later, he saw Ojin's bearded face hovering above his own as the elder man knelt beside him. Dismissing the conversation as, perhaps, the last segment of a fading dream, he smiled, and Ojin responded in kind.

"Thank the gods you have awakened. The healers were not sure you would. But I held out hope and have prayed that it might be so, and I have been nursing you here in my chambers waiting for this moment."

"I am a high-ranking warrior of Yamatai," Kazuai stated. "It would be unwise for me not to live to see another battle." He chuckled. His laugh quickly turned into a fit of coughing and, when he regained his breath, he continued, "Despite the fact that I feel as though I am dying."

Ojin's smile turned to a frown. "The healers say you *are* dying, Kazuai. A spear pierced just above your heart, grazing it and, although they removed the weapon and were able to clean and close the wound, a splinter remains lodged within the organ. Blood seeps out with every beat."

It was Kazuai's turn to frown. He held the expression for a moment and then relaxed his visage and changed the subject. "How long has it been since I was wounded? How did my soldiers fare in battle?"

"It has been two days," Ojin replied. "The men and women of Yamatai fought bravely and we have sent Kenzo's troops into retreat, carrying with them a message of warning that should they attack again, the Empress will not take it so lightly and will spare no mercy for the kingdom of Ito and its people. She will wipe it from the land."

Kazuai chuckled again and managed not to cough. "Our might is strong, our warriors brave, but I doubt we could raze the entire kingdom to the ground."

"No, we could not - but the Empress' might is greater than that of every man, woman, and child in Yamatai."

"Her magic, you mean."

"That...and more."

Kazuai looked blankly at Ojin.

Ojin continued, a pained look on his face. "I have been sworn to secrecy regarding the Empress' true nature and the extent of her powers. If I were to tell you - "

"You would lose your gifts and her protection," said Kazuai. In response to Ojin's befuddled stare, he added, "I heard the Empress speaking to you as I awoke."

Ojin nodded.

"I always felt there was much more to the Empress than meets the eye," Kazuai said. "I have wondered many times if she might be in league with demons such as those with which the leaders of Izumo are in league."

Ojin shook his head. "The powers of the gods and demons of this realm pale in comparison to Empress Himiko and her kind."

"Her kind?" Kazuai wondered.

Ojin pursed his lips and Kazuai could see that he was pondering whether or not to reveal more.

"You need not tell me, Ojin. I know not what gifts you would lose; I know not what protection your sister, the Empress, would - "

"You don't understand, Kazuai," Ojin interrupted as he leapt to his feet and gesticulated wildly. "Lies, pretense - that is all this is! Himiko is not my sister and I am no prince!"

"I - I don't understand," said Kazuai. He shifted his position slightly, tried to prop himself up on his elbow, but he collapsed and a cry of pain escaped his lips. He clutched his heart.

Ojin knelt once more beside his lover. "Kazuai!" he said and he stroked the young man's cheek.

"I...am fine. What did you mean when you said you are no prince?"

Again, Ojin hesitated. His eyes begged Kazuai to give him a way out, to tell him once more that he need not speak on the subject. But Kazuai was too curious by now; he would do no such thing and his intense, questioning gaze made that clear.

Ojin sighed heavily. "Very well," he began. "The gods and demons and spirits we know - the *kami* of this Earth, of the High Plain of Heaven, and of the Dark Land - they are young and weak compared to the little-known Outer Gods who roam the vastness of eternity beyond our comprehension. Scores of these gods dwell amongst the stars and have descended to our world throughout its history. Some dwell here now."

"And Empress Himiko draws her power from these...Outer Gods?"

"No, Kazuai," Ojin said. Then, lowering his voice to a whisper, he continued, "Empress Himiko *is* a god."

"I - I don't understand."

"She is no woman, Kazuai. She has assumed the shape of one, but she is, in truth, an ethereal being - a *god*."

Kazuai was taken aback at Ojin's assertion. It was inconceivable, yet the older man's intensity made it clear he believed it to be true.

"And...you?" asked Kazuai.

"As I said, I am no prince; I am no brother to the Empress. I act the role, for I am her priest. I was once an apprentice to a powerful shaman and, when he died, I took his place. He taught me the lore of the Outer Gods, and

showed me how to summon their minions. He was not powerful enough to summon the gods themselves, but in that I was successful. I gave earthly form to the goddess Shabu-Niguratsu, contained her essence within the body of a young maiden and, for the last one hundred years, I have been her servant."

"One hundred years?" Kazuai was incredulous.

Ojin nodded. "Immortality," he said, "was one of the gifts Shabu-Niguratsu bestowed upon me after I summoned her to this realm. She seeks dominion over this world, beginning with Yamatai, and then the entire island of Wa. In her ethereal form, such dominion would be impossible, and in her corporeal form, her powers are diminished. Therefore, it has befallen me to aid her endeavor and, to that end, she has endowed me with immunity to death."

Kazuai tried once again to shift his position and once more, he fell into a fit of coughing and pain. "If only...she had endowed me...with such a gift...or would, at least, heal this wound."

Ojin's visage seemed to grow even more melancholy. "She could quite easily heal you," he said. "She is a demanding mistress, though. She has chosen to look upon this as a test of my loyalty. I can either remain her priest and co-ruler for eternity without you or ask her to restore your health and lose all that she has given me."

"She would have you choose between your love for me and your oath to her?"

Ojin nodded.

"That is cruel," said Kazuai, "but it is a matter of honour. You cannot choose me, Ojin. Let me die."

A wry smile twisted Ojin's mouth. "I have chosen already, Kazuai. I have told you her secret."

"But I am dying. Surely, there is no danger in revealing it to me."

"It does not matter. I have broken the oath."

"She need not know."

"Ha! There is no way to keep it from her. Surely, you have felt that penetrating stare of hers - that taint she leaves upon the spirit as she gazes into it and takes from you your thoughts. It is likely she knows already. She keeps a part of her mind close to mine at all times."

Kazuai nodded. "Yes, I understand. What will you do, then?"

"He will be released," said the Empress, sliding open the door violently, "from his service - and from his life!"

Ojin and Kazuai both looked upon her imposing form as she entered, their eyes riveted on her every slight movement as she drew near to them.

"How dare you defy me!" she said to Ojin. "I am your mistress!" She raised an arm quickly, gracefully, and with fluid movement grabbed Ojin by the neck and raised him off the ground.

Kazuai stared. His heart picked up its pace in response to fear and distress as Ojin rasped and choked, his flow of air cut off by the woman's - *goddess*', Kazuai reminded himself - violent grip.

"Weak fools, you humans are. Subject to the whims of this emotion you call 'love'. It makes you work against your own better interests, even to the point of choosing death over eternal life and power. You could have been a prince of the world, Ojin." She relaxed her hand to allow her servant to respond, though she still held him above the ground.

His throat only slightly less constricted than it had been, Ojin struggled to form his words, yet he managed not only to form them but to release them with a vitriolic tone. "Kazuai *is* my better interest. I would rather have death than eternal life without him. Had I to do it over again, I would never have summoned you here; I would never have become your priest."

Shabu-Niguratsu, in the guise of Himiko, smiled gruesomely. "But you did, Ojin. You brought me here, gave me this form, devoted your life to me. Now, you have betrayed your oath, shown me where you true devotion lies." She gestured at Kazuai. "With that pathetic mortal over there. You have chosen this path. Your deeds are done. Your life is finished. I am here because of you, but I can endure without you."

Ojin managed a humourless laugh and told her, "No. You will not."

Shabu-Niguratsu was taken aback by the comment and a perplexed expression passed over her face.

"My former master - the shaman who taught me all I know of magic - instilled in me a great sense of safety and responsibility," Ojin explained. "The second rule of spirit-summoning is to avoid inviting what you cannot also banish."

"You cannot," said Shabu-Niguratsu, "and you would not. Not after serving me for a century."

"I can and I would." Ojin's steely gaze invited no doubt. He murmured something unintelligible and the woman dropped him as she collapsed to her knees in pain.

Shabu-Niguratsu writhed, her human body filled with agony. "You will die, also," she said, her eyes pleading for mercy. "Without my magic, the years you have lived without paying the toll will demand the life energy you owe."

Ojin continued his incantation.

"You are not my only servant. The Thousand Young - they are spirits as well, spirits I have placed in human bodies. They will find another with power like yours to summon me to this realm once more."

Ojin ignored the woman, certain she was simply trying to distract him. He turned his head slightly and looked directly at Kazuai. Though Ojin's brown eyes had assumed a golden hue, a sign of the power coursing through

him as he banished the dark goddess from the earth, Kazuai could see the intensity of Ojin's love. He was saying goodbye.

"I love you, Ojin. Our spirits shall meet in the world beyond."

Ojin smiled and returned his gaze to his former mistress.

"*Iâ!*" he yelled. "*Iâ! Shabu-Niguratsu!*" Then a string of unintelligible syllables escaped his lips.

Kazuai saw a blue light shimmering around the goddess. It radiated outward, growing larger, as the body she inhabited shriveled and died. Within seconds, the glow encompassed the whole room. It was almost blinding. He closed his eyes, but the light still penetrated through his lids. It lasted only a moment longer, though, and when darkness returned, he blinked and looked toward the bodies on the floor before him.

"Ojin," he said, mustering as loud a voice as he could and clutching his heart as a reaction to the pain he felt from doing so.

Ojin did not stir. He was dead, as Shabu-Niguratsu had said he would be. And she was dead, too - or, at least, the woman who had housed her spirit was dead. Surprisingly, Kazuai found he cared nothing for his former empress, the woman to whom he had sworn fealty, nor to Yamatai, which would be plunged into chaos without a clear successor to the throne. All he could focus upon was the death of his lover. Tears formed in his eyes as he remembered he, too, was dying and that he would be spending his remaining time without the company of the one person in the world whom he truly loved.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and lay still. He wanted nothing more than to die immediately. He had been trained to regulate every facet of his body, including what, for most people, were involuntary functions; success in battle often required such control. He forced his heart to slow and, over the next few minutes, he became light-headed and short of breath. He could feel himself dying.

He closed his eyes and smiled, remembering the words he had spoken to Ojin just before he had banished Shabu-Niguratsu. The two would meet again as spirits, he was sure.

This thought comforted him as his life seeped away, but in the last seconds of his fading life, it was replaced as the darkness of death was replaced by an intense, shimmering, blue light and he heard a voice - the distinct voice of the woman he had for so long known as Empress Himiko.

"I shall return," it said. "*I - shall - return!*"

The End

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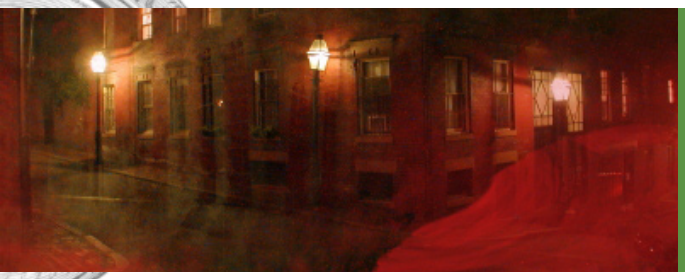

Tou Ger admitted he'd had trouble sleeping that month, no doubt an effect of adjusting to the damp New England climate after so many years in the Midwest. He had vivid nightmares alternating with bouts of insomnia.

A Model Apartment

By Bryan Thao Worra

Yam zoo ntshai tsam tau me.

Yam phem ntshai tsam los ze.

Something good, you fear you'll get too little.

Something bad, you fear it will come too close.

- Ancient Hmong proverb

I.

The elders believe the tragedy that befell Kazoua Vue in New England was avoidable. As incontrovertible evidence of this position, they repeat the ancient Hmong folktales and modern news stories of those who live too far from their families, and the horrific fates those foolish people meet.

Her funeral was conducted with singular quietude in her hometown of Milwaukee. Few of the gentle young painter's remaining family wished to discuss the details, an understandable position given the disquieting nature of it all. But a reasonably consistent picture of the events in Arkham emerged for those who pried deep enough into the dark matter.

At the behest of her family, the last of her effects are scheduled for a discrete incineration next week in a remote corner of the city. After this, none will speak of her, and it will be as if she had never been.

Arkham is one of those changeless places of Earth - a quiet, almost mythic city in New England. The sleepy Miskatonic river cuts through the centre of the city directly to the coldest fathoms of the Atlantic, if one follows far enough.

It is home to Miskatonic University, which over the years, weathered innumerable bizarre incidents and scandals, survived devastating fires, even the great flood of 1980 that swept away so many of Arkham's oldest architectural fixtures.

It was here that fabled figures like the alleged hag Keziah Mason had fled during the frenzied witch-hunts of old. Those of a scientific mindset may recall that the tragic Pabodie Expedition to Antarctica had its beginnings in Arkham's shining halls.

Morbid turn-of-the-century painter Richard Upton Pickman, best known for "The Lesson" and his ghastly "Ghoul Feeding", often visited Arkham in his early years when he wasn't in Boston. This was well before he became an enigmatic recluse who went the way of Ambrose Bierce and Frederico Garcia Lorca.

Kazoua always had an unnatural, almost unhealthy, attraction to Pickman's work. It could have been worse. She could have been ogling Warhol, or even Kadinsky, or that hack Pollack.

Fleeing the war in Laos, she and her family came to America in 1984. There was some brief time spent in the Thai refugee camp of Ban Vinai beforehand.

While lingering in the squalid compound, they met an idealistic young US AID worker who'd been an art history minor fond of Bacon, Goya,and Dali. Through him, Kazoua first saw many of those bizarre images that scholars believe were so influential on her and her style.

Her family began their American odyssey in Providence. There were several other Hmong clans present there as well, including Thaos, Khangs, Hers, and several branches of the Yangs. Though accommodating enough, Rhode Island and her non-Hmong residents were still as alien to them as the moon.

Many Hmong converted from their traditional animism to Catholicism, but it is worth noting the Vatican permitted them to still practice a select few of the traditional rituals of old, particularly funerary and marriage rites.

In the spring of 1986, Kazoua's parents journeyed to rejoin her father's brothers in Milwaukee. There the families could support one another as during the war and long before. They established a modestly-successful Asian grocery store, Lao American Market, near Vliet Street, and many remember when she became the first in her family to attend college.

Much to their dismay, she majored in art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, insisting she could make a good living at it.

When her macabre painting, "Yer's Family, A Tiger's Perspective" sold for a considerable sum to a prominent Milwaukee art collector, most of her critics were silenced, although many elders continued to insist a proper Hmong girl would simply get married and forego such useless luxuries as a college education.

II.

On September 17th, 1999, Michael Stuczynski, one of her closer associates, opened his art gallery *Diabolica* near Murray Avenue. He invited her to showcase her work there for a month. Entitled "Despair-Diaspora", it was an ambitious solo show featuring 42 canvases, including her oil paintings and mixed-media projects. Her ostensible theme was traditional Hmong folklore and the role of memory.

By the most generous accounts, it was something of a disaster when it opened in November.

Most non-Hmong viewers dismissed it, largely from a lack of familiarity with the figures being referenced. Others more familiar with the Hmong expected something more akin to the Kohler Center's earlier exhibition of traditional textiles and silverwork, and not the gory spectacles Kazoua Vue presented.

Hmong audiences, on the other hand, abhorred its fixation on the spirits and demons of the past, such as the Dab, the dreaded Poj Ntxoog and the terrifying Zaj in all its reptilian glory.

"Despair-Diaspora" was taken down in December without much fanfare, and if the harsh critical reception of her work had any effect on the sensitive young Kazoua, she did not outwardly show it.

There were two significant outcomes of the exhibition at *Diabolica*.

The first was her new resolve to return to the New England she remembered so fondly, to undertake an artistic rejuvenation. She would study the work of artists like Pickman there and find peers who understood her vision. The second outcome was meeting Tou Ger Khang, a dark-tempered young man with whom she fell hopelessly in love.

What she saw in the dour, sullen boy remains anyone's guess, but academically he was promising, demonstrating a particular aptitude for high-level physics and mathematics. The two married in Milwaukee in the traditional fashion not long after they met and Tou Ger was amenable to completing his studies in New England with her.

They were accepted into Miskatonic University for Fall 2001. It seemed a positive turn in her fortunes.

III.

Their move to New England occurred without incident. There were the usual best-wishes and tears but nothing beyond the ordinary. They drove a small U-Haul from Milwaukee, taking I-90E most of the way, passing through Cleveland, Buffalo and Albany, where they stopped to visit a few distant relatives, happily catching up on news and family gossip.

Ordinarily, the trip is a fast 18 hours, but the two took their time and it became a four-day trip to the East Coast. There were numerous photographs taken then, but most are lost.

It was raining heavily when they finally arrived on Wednesday, March 7th, 2001. They'd come early in order to acclimate to the city's nuances before beginning their classes in earnest in September. As most will remember, it was a very cold, wet month for the entire region then.

Some might have been deterred by the gloom. For Kazoua, she took it as an uplifting sign, a symbol of rejuvenation, regeneration and reconnection with things she felt missing in her life. She remembered it raining when she left New England the last time, so it felt like coming full circle.

Ever an efficient one, Kazoua had inquired ahead of time of possible living quarters on campus and was informed that the official dormitories were still filled with students, but many reputable landlords in the area could easily accommodate them.

Happily, there was a recent opening in the White Rose Apartments, nestled conveniently a few blocks from the central campus. The landlord, Janos Dombrowski, informed her a tenant had to relinquish his apartment unexpectedly to return to Vienna. However, in his haste, he left behind several fine furnishings that seemed a pity to discard with the weekly rubbish.

Dombrowski noted that the apartment was nearly immaculate considering the neighbourhood - an excellent deal. If they wanted, Dombrowski would leave the furniture for them, to spare them the expense of refurnishing it.

Upon hearing Kazoua was an artist, he also waived the security deposit for them in exchange for one of her paintings when she arrived, being an amateur artist himself who understood such circumstances. He expressed hope that she would join the local art club, for they always sought fresh voices. Things were looking up for the young couple and it seemed the stars were truly in their favor.

IV.

For a brief time, Kazoua's work took on an almost sunny disposition. The effect, while not quite jubilant meadow creatures frolicking beneath some saccharine sun, was still jarring to her few long-time acquaintances she kept contact with and ultimately alienated them even further from her.

But in her first months there, no one perceived any insurmountable problems in her life or any trace of that sad dementia that was to mark her final days.

On the weekends, she and Tou Ger took pleasant day-trips to nearby cities like Innsmouth or Boston. In particular, they were on the lookout for a good bowl of *pho*, which was still very hard to come by in Arkham proper.

Dombrowski took a personal interest in helping the young couple enjoy the city, inviting them to various community gatherings he'd read of in the Arkham Observer. Kazoua and Tou Ger accepted his offers on several occasions, curious to see the local attractions. They even attended a few meetings of the notorious French Hill Art Club, whose members were pleasant enough, although not entirely of the kindred disposition Kazoua hoped to find.

There were, at any given point, ten to twelve members of the French Hill Art Club in attendance. Advancing years kept many of their more prolific members from venturing out with any regularity. A notable standout was the bloated Mr. Thurber, who had the despicable look and decrepit aroma of a dilettante artist, arriving consistently liquored-up, his frog-like eyes constantly drifting towards Kazoua's cleavage like some mad suckling calf.

Herbert Carter was a little less loathsome, a fragile-featured man who dressed all in white suits during the spring and all in black during the winter, every year without fail. He was a minor Arkham phenomenon as the locals waited to see when the season had changed based on his attire. Thurber often scoffed at Carter, questioning whether he was an artist or a fashion plate.

Normally a pleasant and polite girl, Kazoua soon tired of regaling traditional Hmong folktales and beliefs at every meeting to the pallid members of the club, who viewed her stories as quaint, exotic grist for their mediocre work. They had all been starving for genuine inspiration for untold ages. Eventually, she politely severed her ties with them, claiming she needed time to focus on her art and studies. Many were tremendously disappointed and several asked her to keep in touch individually.

Kazoua became notorious for losing phone numbers during this time.

It was not long afterwards that poor Dombrowski took ill in mid-July. The constant rain had taken its toll, and his wife found him in the basement delirious, raving incoherent and horrible things about the universe.

The physicians advised admission to the local asylum, but Mrs. Dombrowski instead had his nearby nephew from Innsmouth, Eric Gilman, come to manage the affairs of the White Rose Apartments. Dombrowski was confined to his bed with sedatives, some small canvases and some paint with which to pass the time. This ultimately had little effect on Kazoua and Tou Ger, however, who'd begun to have problems of their own.

V.

It is from this point that the particulars begin to unravel into an indescribable mess of tangled implications, hearsay and unreliable accounts, and even the most stalwart investigators will find themselves stymied by the 'details' that led to Kazoua's doom.

Among the more certain elements was the noticeable presence of vermin within the walls of the White Rose Apartments. Several of the tenants, to Gilman's dismay, came to complain of the constant scurrying and scratching of the unseen boarders, who were most active after midnight.

Mr. Von Kempelen, on the 3rd floor, remarked that these did not sound like common field mice, but lumbering Norwegian wharf rats determined to keep him from sleeping soundly. Mrs. Samsa also complained of the rodents and, while she had not seen them, had heard them and took solace only in that they had dealt with a peculiar cockroach problem she'd been having. The curious bachelor Trelkovsky spoke of moving, perhaps back to Paris, if matters were not resolved. Gilman promised to look into the matter immediately and contracted Delapore Exterminators to set things aright.

In a brief visit with his parents, Tou Ger admitted he'd had trouble sleeping that month, no doubt an effect of adjusting to the damp New England climate after so many years in the Midwest. He had vivid nightmares alternating with bouts of insomnia. His mother left him some traditional herbs she'd grown in her garden in Milwaukee as a remedy.

Correspondence between Kazoua and some of her cousins in Albany from the time indicates she too had problems with the pests, but was more repulsed by the ineffectiveness of her apartment to let proper natural light in for her painting. An almost obsessive perfectionist when it came to her art, she realized that the angles at which the windows had been set would never allow sufficient light, even on a good day. Instead, a lazy haze perpetually permeated the space, dissipating only with the setting of the sun.

A review of her letters outlined a particular encounter with Gilman, who apparently knew nothing of this sort of thing, merely shrugging and offering to lend her a few used lamps from the janitor's closet.

Exasperated, Kazoua agreed to take them. She accompanied Gilman to the basement, which had recently flooded a few weeks earlier.

Most of the mess had been cleaned up, but the noxious scent of mildew and mold had begun to seep in. Unlocking the closet door, Gilman intimated he was a superstitious sort, wondering aloud about the wisdom of building the White Rose Apartments on this lot.

When Kazoua pressed him to explain, he mentioned the Dombrowski family had been Polish immigrants who owned the property at the turn of the century. But the death of a student boarder, Walter Gilman (no relation), and an awful gale in 1931 irreparably damaged the house both physically and in reputation so much so that his forebears gave up on the wretched building and focused their entrepreneurial attentions elsewhere.

There'd been some nattering about witchcraft because the supposed-witch Keziah Mason had once lived there, but that was just fireside nonsense.

In the early 1990s, several of the Dombrowski brothers, most of whom were now into real estate, looked into building a new apartment complex on the old lot, which had once again gone up for sale. It seemed like karma. It was a second chance for the family, who never forgot their father's forlorn stories of this failed house, and they cheered their idea as if they were pioneers out to settle the West.

To them, this lot was a symbol of the American dream. They became obsessive about it. Price was no object, and it was the only time they let sentimentality guide their decisions, although it nearly bankrupted them.

Despite complaints from the anemic popinjays of the Arkham Historical Society, they built a remarkably modern apartment building, banishing the memory of their family's previous failure to a mere footnote in their fortunes. Construction went surprisingly well, without accident or injury, almost as if the whole project had been blessed from above.

But in recent months, some great shadow had fallen upon the property, starting with the relentless March rain. Gilman advised Kazoua to avoid extended conversations with Mrs. Dombrowski if possible. Gilman bemoaned his constant bickering over the management of the property with the madwoman.

Kazoua took her lamps and resolved to avoid all of them except on the 1st of the month to pay her rent.

VI.

Interviews with her neighbors suggest that around late August, Kazoua and Tou Ger began arguing vociferously over the inconsequential. Over the next few weeks it escalated, until the police were called to intercede on September 3rd, 2001 because of the disturbance they were making.

According to the police report, Kazoua accused Tou Ger of hiding her art supplies from her and defacing her most ambitious canvas to date, an epic depiction of the first Hmong shaman, Shee Yee, against the malevolent Nzeu Nyong and his hordes of evil spirits. Tou Ger claimed to know nothing about it, calling her an irrational lunatic and a witch.

Police noted several glasses, eggs and similar fragile objects had been smashed against the walls in the frenzy, but did not feel the situation warranted more than a warning.

On another note, Kazoua's sister in Milwaukee, Dia, says her sister was never one to have comfortable sleep. She was a known insomniac, and several of her uncles suspected her of being haunted by a particular long-standing curse on the women of their family.

During the funeral, Dia mentioned that while she was alive, her sister would frequently call (lamentably, collect) to discuss the terrible dreams she'd been having, conveying images so awful that Dia had to plead with Kazoua to stop relating them to her.

Their father, Pheng Vue, wanted a well-known shaman in Rhode Island to come out to help her and exorcise the apartment in the proper custom, which he knew Kazoua and Tou Ger had not done prior to moving in. Kazoua rejected the solution for uncertain reasons.

VII.

The last works of Kazoua Vue are described as her greatest and the darkest of her brief career, when she at last began to eclipse mighty Pickman himself. Most survive only in fragments, broken scraps of canvas or singed sketches, but even these scant pieces tell of a powerful voice emerging from a long sleep.

Some of her iconic language is more easily apprehended - primal spirals, crude stars with flaming eyes, jagged mountain ranges of purple and blue. Others resemble glyphs invoking ancient Egypt, pre-dynastic Qin or the Enochian script of the mystic John Dee. But some remain far more elusive, indecipherable by coherent minds.

Not all was abstract: Kazoua created self-portraits akin to a more surreal Kahlo, and a disturbing series of portraits depicting the deceitful Poj Ntxoog "throughout herstory." Her paintings of this awful creature possessed a terrible

verisimilitude. One could scarcely imagine it to be a creature of myth, thanks to her all-too-keen brushstrokes. More imaginative minds might believe the Poj Ntxoog came to pose, but such circumstances would be absurd.

When asked about her peculiar choice in subjects, Kazoua replied that she saw the deeper symbolic significance of these misunderstood spirits and that Hmong women could learn greatly from the Poj Ntxoog's example. She seems to honestly have believed the image of the shape-shifting Poj Ntxoog could be rehabilitated through art, as happened with ancient Lilith, the Great Mother, Goddess of a Thousand Names.

Most traditional accounts of the Poj Ntxoog describe them as dwarf spirit women with long, terrible hair and feet that face backwards to fool the unsuspecting. Every now and then, villagers in Asia's highlands will still report killing a Poj Ntxoog. One account described the creature as having six vaginas, a long, thin neck, deathly-pale skin, and a mouth so dark you cannot see her teeth. The bodies always seem to disappear shortly after death. Others say the Poj Ntxoog consort with tigers and have magic powers, possessed of an inexplicable desire to trick and deceive humans.

A relative, wishing to remain anonymous, said Tou Ger, upon seeing these portraits, was so repulsed he told her to stop painting the evil things, lest they be called forward to admire themselves. Kazoua responded violently, calling him unspeakable things. He was so shocked to hear her speak like that to him that he shrank into the meekest of creatures, avoiding his own wife during all hours except bedtime.

VIII.

Around this period, Thurber from the French Hill Art Club came, some suspect courting, Kazoua at her apartment while he checked in on the poor Dombrowskis.

Thurber had been researching his old notes and found some material of a very special interest to the young aficionado of Richard Upton Pickman. At first, Kazoua expressed little interest, but relented, for Thurber offered nothing less than a visit to some of Pickman's hidden studios, both within Arkham and on the North End of Boston. He even had what he claimed was one of Pickman's original brushes, which he presented to her as a present. It was too tempting to resist and soon, Kazoua traveled alone with him to those sordid locations, which were mostly ruins and dusty boards more than anything these days.

They would return from their jaunts caked in mud and dirt that reeked of old worlds civilization was all too happy to leave behind. If Tou Ger objected, it is not documented. She became quite spirited during this time, as did Thurber. Carter remarked that Thurber seemed quite the cock of the walk.

On October 30th, however, Thurber burst into the evening gathering of the French Hill Art Club, alone and shirtless, gibbering, frothing, and raving. Carter and the rest of Thurber's peers tried to calm him, but he savagely beat them back. It was a grotesque sight and they were quite happy when he fled into the dark night.

When asked about the matter, Kazoua replied simply that they had gone to a studio and apparently, Thurber was discontent with what he'd seen. Kazoua, on the other hand, found it quite pleasant, and couldn't understand

Thurber's response. Carter noticed Kazoua had an odd bruise on her neck, but was disinclined to pursue the matter further. Kazoua also noted she would be having no further contact with Thurber, as he had behaved in an altogether ungentlemanly fashion unbecoming an artist.

Thurber was never seen again.

The French Hill Art Club does keep his name on the members list, however, should he ever turn up, although he will still owe the appropriate dues.

IX.

Eric Gilman clearly recalls the month of November, 2001 because Kazoua dressed in the elaborate traditional clothing of her people the entire time, as if preening for an unknown audience. She did not seem to entertain company, however, so it was quite curious. She was radiant, although within her eyes, he noted perhaps the first sign of her coming madness.

Her hair grew increasingly long and wild and her voice took on a strange melodic quality, ethereal and remote. Humans may as well have been ants to her. She grew more pale as the month went on.

Although Gilman now believes he misheard it, when he called out her name one evening upon meeting in the hallway, she corrected him that it was "Keziah". Given the tonal language of the Hmong, most concur she was merely correcting the way to pronounce Kazoua, as was often her habit with the Dombrowskis when they'd first met.

Mrs. Samsa complained of strange laughing and an eerie, almost-inhuman whooping coming from the Hmong couple's apartment, especially late at night. Gilman was reluctant to approach Kazoua, and drafted a note he slipped under her door. For a time, the noise stopped.

In November, Tou Ger was cleaning for the holidays alone in the apartment. He made the dreadful mistake of disturbing a massive rat warren. Many must have just given birth to their litters, for that is the only reason to explain the savage ferocity with which the pests attacked him so mercilessly.

The vermin had scurried away to the safety of the shadows by the time Trelkovsky broke open the door to assist his pitifully-screaming neighbor. Kazoua arrived minutes later. She'd been out visiting one of Pickman's old studios. They found Tou Ger on the floor, a whimpering lump of flesh with terrible gashes across his entire pathetic body.

Trelkovsky suggested taking him to the hospital, but Kazoua dismissed the idea because the couple had no health insurance. It was nothing a few bandages and some traditional Hmong herbal medicine could not cure. She thanked Trelkovsky for his help and walked him to the door.

Tou Ger was put to bed and few heard from them for a while. On December 23rd, 2001, as Kazoua was traveling to Boston, an awful commotion came from the apartment - unearthly screaming and that strange shrieking, whooping and wailing. The violent sound of breaking furniture in the apartment prompted neighbours to call the police.

As Gilman hastily opened the door for the officers, witnesses in the hallway report they saw a strange swirling swarm of brown-furred things unlike any rodents they'd seen in their lives; slithering, writhing and nipping at Tou Ger Khang, who, blinded in agony, accidentally stumbled through the fragile window of his apartment to his death, his face half-torn away from the gnawing and scratching. No one could get in touch with Kazoua until Monday morning.

Arkham police later concluded the creatures to be nothing more than common rodents, however peculiar their behavior, and encouraged everyone to put speculation to rest. They claim the ultimate cause of Tou Ger's death was a virulent viral hemorrhagic fever from his earlier rat bites. Mrs. Dombrowski and Gilman lowered the rent for Kazoua in consideration of her loss.

In a decision that greatly upset everyone, Kazoua had Tou Ger's remains cremated quickly and without consultation. It was an unbelievable break from Hmong tradition.

In a decision that greatly upset everyone, Kazoua had Tou Ger's remains cremated quickly and without consultation. It was an unbelievable break from Hmong tradition. She said cryptically it was for the best and he deserved a chance for his soul to rest. She then withdrew from the outside world and it isn't until March, 2002 that any further details of her life can be spoken of with any certainty.

X.

The evidence is supposed to speak for itself. But what was going on then? As with many of the great mysteries surrounding the lives of troubled artists like Modigliani, Lautreamont and the like, the complete details can only be speculated at, and the strangest elements become only so much trivia when they do not fit into a tidy, comprehensible explanation.

In March, 2002, an ambulance was summoned to the apartment of Kazoua Vue. Many expected the worst, but the EMTs emerged, not with Kazoua, but an elderly Hmong man she identified at the time as her uncle, who was having tea with her and inexplicably collapsed from a severe stroke in her living room.

Other Hmong knew him as a prominent shaman renowned for his healing skills. Animists in Providence recall he once defeated a Poj Ntxoog near the village of Sam Neua, and attributed many other incredible feats to him. Kazoua invited him over to help her artistic research regarding more esoteric elements of Hmong spiritualism and was deeply saddened by his seizure. It was a great loss for the community.

On April 12th, 2002, Gilman needed to discuss repairs with Kazoua to fix all of the rain and snow damage the White Rose had suffered in the year prior. And this was when he made the terrible discovery.

There was no answer to his knocking, so he'd let himself into the apartment. There was a foul odor, and all the shades were drawn. At first, Gilman believed the noxious scent was a fetid buildup of mildew and garbage. He called aloud for Kazoua and heard a loud bumping noise from the room she used as her studio.

Walking over with trepidation, he screamed when he saw the awful sight: on the floor lay the corpse of the diminutive woman who once was Kazoua Vue. But the rats, those damned, infernal rats had made a meal of her, stripping away all of her flesh and most of her organs. Except, strangely, her perfect, beautiful right arm, which still clutched a ornately-carved brush.

As he leaned closer, he could see, no, it was made from a hideously-gnawed human bone. He then looked up and saw the last canvas she'd been working on. He was horrified to see the gruesome painted images of three ghastly women staring directly at him and Kazoua's corpse, their mouths salivating in anticipation. Their evil filled him with dread, as if viewing some ancient enemy.

Perhaps it was only the effect of the chemical fumes and the stench of decay in the room, but Gilman swears he saw the hands in the painting move, as if probing for a way to escape the confines of the painting's feeble geometry. He heard a quiet shuffling from a dark corner of the studio, then a bump.

And then he realized what was truly wrong: He might not understand art as well as his mad uncle, but he knew enough about composition to know there was space in the painting for *four* figures. A missing figure.

The one slowly rising, shuffling, crawling towards him. The one moving with a pulpy, liqueous lurching noise, slow and murderous. Its head, or whatever pale, lumpy appendage it might call as such, was turning right towards him. Walking backwards.

And he fled, needing no further satisfaction of his curiosity. Something shrieked.

XI.

When the police arrived, they found nothing but a corpse. They dismissed the more imaginative aspects of Gilman's account as stress and shock. Hallucinations.

Curiously, it may have been an effect of the chemicals in the air, but the initial coroner's report indicated that she had been dead since at least November. But that is ridiculous, for obvious reasons, and was corrected on the proper certificates to something more reasonable.

Gilman tries to forget it all now with a daily bottle of scotch and a box of cigarettes, and sleeps with the lights constantly on back at his shabby apartment in Innsmouth.

Local mystics debate over their lattes whether the roots of this incident emerged from Kazoua's traditions or New England's, or something far more ancient and transcendent of time and space, who cares nothing for earthly dreams, let alone American ones.

Kazoua Vue and Tou Ger Khang's stories have slowly been eased out of human memory, because sometimes, it is better to forget, the elders say. Humans often forget that forgetting, too, can be a blessing of the heavens, no matter where they're from.

The Dombrowskis still have difficulty renting the apartment out.

The End

Bryan Thao Worra is a Lao-American poet, short story writer, playwright and essayist. An NEA Fellow in literature, his work appears internationally in numerous anthologies, magazines and newspapers, including *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Illumen*, *Astropoetica*, *Outsiders Within*, *Dark Wisdom*, *Journal of the Asian American Renaissance*, and *Mad Poets of Terra*. He is the author of the speculative books of poetry *On the Other Side of the Eye* and *BARROW*. You can visit him online at http://thaoworra.blogspot.com.

Bats don't have eyes, do they? Blind as a bat. They use sonar, or echolocation, those sound waves when they fly. The last one I killed had slits for eyes. But this one got eyes like...like that black goldfish I once had.

The Bats in the Walls

By Juan Miguel Marín

HouseByTheSea75 is online. 11:25 am

TagalogMantraOM is online.

TagalogMantraOM: Wassup HouseByTheSea75? Got my email?

Me: Yep. Your current Best Friend Forever writes inspired by the "very commonplace incident of the cracking of wallpaper late at night, and the chain of imaginings resulting from it." Sorry, but your fictional rats in the walls can't compare with the real bats in my attic. No cracking wallpaper but plenty of bats fluttering around within the walls, crashing and banging against them. Keeps me up all night. Your new BFF may like spending time at this old beach house. I'm sure it will result in an inspiring chain of imaginings.

TagalogMantraOM: I e-mailed you that as answer to your question. You ask, why read fiction when "reality can be so much more mysterious and fascinating." I answer by quote-texting Him, those "of broader intellect know that there is no sharp distinction betwixt the real and the unreal."

TagalogMantraOM, aka Ramon Aguilar, knows I don't care for fiction, yet, every month, he insists I should read his current "best spiritual fiction ever." In turn, I insist he should read whatever historical scholar I'm currently hooked on. Last month, he kept sending me Stephen King passages. I quote-texted Erich Von Daniken back at him. Now some pulp writer took the spiritual king's place.

TagalogMantraOM: I still can't understand why you live at that old house when your parents' condo is also by the beach.

Me: It's close to the Jesuits' library. I can walk over there any time, day or night. By the way, since you're into science, check out http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/353277.stm. Told you Lemuria was real. Anyways, got to leave for class. TTYL.

HousebytheSea75 is offline.

Class does not begin until later, but I wanted to finish the book on underwater archaeology. Couldn't keep my eyes off the pictures comparing the recently found ruins under the Devil's Triangle, aka Bermuda Triangle, with those under the Indian and Pacific oceans. The author, a Bombay University geologist, argues the granite and old-metamorphic rocks submerged under Ceylon and South India conceal ruins similar to those archaeologists call

the "Bimini Road". Ramon thinks it is just a sea rock formation that looks like a paved road. I disagree. If there's a triangle with San Juan, Puerto Rico at one vertex, Bermuda and Bimini Islands at the other two, why can't there be one right across our home? Dravidian civilization once reached this outermost peninsula. Tamil mystical poems draw from Dravidian texts to describe Lemuria as occupying a triangular region.

We both saw last night's documentary and listened to scholars debate whether the Bimini Road forms part of the long-lost Atlantis. One of them identified it as a Lemurian road. But Lemuria, if it ever existed, was way over here in the Pacific. For sure, that road must be the ruins of something. I should ask Brother Pedro or Brother Niels. The Jesuits running our highly selective prep school require us, "the most intelligent sons of the South Asian elite and future contributors to society," to be as highly educated as them. Maybe I can impress the brothers with my interest in history. Or at least, I could get one of them to talk about something interesting in Classics or English class and spend less time on boring grammar drills.

"Brother Pedro, did you see last night the classical archaeology documentary?" I asked, contorting my face to its most serious appearance. By the smirks of my colleagues, I could tell I wasn't entirely successful.

"We don't have a television at our monastic house," he answered. "Our religious congregation encourages its members to read, walk or spend time with another brother during recreation hours. What was it about?"

"Classical Sanskrit sources discussing South India's geographical relation with the Caribbean."

(Not exactly true, but close. It was mostly about evidence showing indigenous people once communicated with extraterrestrial civilizations.)

"It claimed that under the Atlantic Ocean, one could find the ruins of Atlantis," I added.

Raising his brows, he said, "Did they also discuss purported evidence of extraterrestrial civilizations?"

"Uh...only as a hypothesis."

"All right," he said, his intonation announcing that he fell again for the interesting question trap. Since he began to ramble, I mean lecture, I opened my laptop.

"We can trace folktales about the Devil's Triangle, located in the middle of the Atlantic, back to the early colonial period. The triangle crosses the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, title of Jean Rhys' famous novel. You read gothic *Jane Eyre* for Brother Niels' class. Well, Rhys' novel re-tells *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the mysterious madwoman in the attic, the one who sets Rochester's house walls on fire. As you know, Rochester marries a West Indian woman, only to discover that she carries madness in her blood. Rhys' feminist re-telling elucidates the origins of her madness."

TagalogMantraOM is online. *1:16 pm*

"Leaving fiction behind, during the colonial period, the time that produced the Jesuit *ratio studiorum*, the one that now requires that all of you future Jesuit high school graduates take Greek and Latin, our Jesuit predecessor Athanasius Kircher decided to find out how much of world folklore and mythology reflected reality and how much reflected imaginative literature."

Brother Pedro approached the shelf and took one of the centuries-old volumes and opened it about the middle. I liked that about this school: a real Jesuit education, ancient textbooks included.

"Kircher never thought of Atlantis as fanciful post-Platonic creation. Instead, he approached the myth as a hypothesis to be confirmed or disproved by actual expeditions. By the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries reached all corners of the earth. Kircher's Jesuit brother, Hippolito Desideri, became the first European scholar of Tibetan culture. A few decades earlier, future saint Francis Xavier and his companions reached here and founded our school before travelling across the rest of the South Indian peninsula and the East Indies. These and other Jesuit missionaries gathered data leading Kircher to conclude that massive underwater formations, some of them probably depicted in the documentary yet not submerged during his time, could not be explained away as the result of stone randomly polished by erosion. This map you see here, drawn from Egyptian sources, inspired him and many of his contemporaries, mostly Spanish conquistadors, to seek those ruins, the most famous being Juan Ponce de León, admiral under the Spanish Emperor Phillip the Second. As I assume you know, Juan Carlos, your home country was named after Philip."

"Certainly. It is well known back at home," I said.

TagalogMantraOM: U at Bro Pedro's?

Me: Yep. Did you know the Philippines got their name from a Spanish emperor?

TagalogMantraOM: Of course, Mr. History Buff. Everybody knows that.

Me: I had no idea.

TagalogMantraOM: You should. As the only Filipino boys in this school, we have a duty to represent our country. You're supposed to be the one with the brains. I'm the one with the looks. ;)

Me: Nope. I got the brains AND the looks.

TagalogMantraOM: Ha ha. So, you got the brother to ramble?

Me: Only for a few minutes. He figured it out. Oh wait. He's still rambling. Ponce de León "set out to Bimini in search of the Fountain of Youth, but never found it." Didn't we see an X-Files episode showing Ponce de León found the fountain of youth? The admiral lives now in Florida as a half-plant/half human hybrid. Wait, the brother's back to the Sargasso Sea.

"Many ships were lost probably due to the heavy accumulation of sargasso, marine algae, which ensnared ships. Moreover, maritime winds there either do not blow for days or, when they do, they form hurricanes. Hindu folktales from where we live, mostly written in the vernacular Tamil, but also some Sanskrit sources, have similar narratives.

They all go back to the Platonic dialogues. And since you all wish to read Plato's Critias and Timaeus someday, you'd better learn your Greek and Latin declensions now. So, open your textbooks to page 126. Rahul, identify all the words in the first passage declined in either the accusative or the genitive...."

Me: Wanna come with me to the public library? I need to pick up Plato and a Scott Elliot guy to read at home tonight.

TagalogMantraOM: Sure. ttyl

TagalogMantraOM is offline. 2:30 pm

TagalogMantraOM is online. 12:01 am

Me: Scott's story sounds as fictional as your pulp writer, though at places, he sounds convincing. Quote-texting him:

"...For readers unacquainted with the progress that has been made in recent years by earnest students of occultism attached to the Theosophical Society, the significance of the statement embodied in the following pages would be misapprehended without some preliminary explanation. Historical research has depended for western civilisation hitherto, on written records of one kind or another. When literary memoranda have fallen short, stone monuments have sometimes been available, and fossil remains have given us a few unequivocal, though inarticulate, assurances concerning the antiquity of the human race, but modern culture has lost sight of or has overlooked possibilities connected with the investigation of past events...."

He accepts the myths of Atlantis, and the supposedly earlier civilization of Lemuria, as historically true. He quotes Plato's commentator and testifies by the prophets of the Egyptians, who assert that these particulars [which are narrated by Plato] are written on pillars which are still preserved, Atlantis is neither a mere myth nor unadorned history. Plato mixes what he read about with what he knew firsthand. Athenian citizens, devotees of the goddess of wisdom went to war against the Atlanteans, devotees of the sea god Poseidon.

TagalogMantraOM: I doubt the Egyptians happened to call their sea god exactly like the Greek god. Seems everyone thinks their gods are the only true ones.

Me: I agree with you there. Anyways, the eldest of the child gods, the titan Atlas, Poseidon's twin, was made rightful king of the entire island and Poseidon's domain the ocean beyond the extremity of the island towards the Pillars of Heracles, was hence called "Atlantic". The other four pairs of divine twins - Ampheres and Evaemon, Mneseus and Autochthon, Elasippus and Mestor, and Azaes and Diaprepes....

TagalogMantraOM: I should read it then. I'm stuck on level three of Age of Mythology. Poseidon turns into a crazy psycho and I have to unite Greek, Egyptian and Norse civilizations to battle against him.

Me: Shit. They're back at it again.

TagalogMantraOM: Who's at what again?

Me: The bats in the walls. But their chirping has changed.

TagalogMantraOM: Ha ha ha. You should read the story I told you about. You going insane, dude.

Me: No, man, really.

TagalogMantraOM: Really what?

Me: The bats.

TagalogMantraOM: The bats what?

Me: Their crazy twittering, tonight sounds like, like words.

TagalogMantraOM: Ha. ha. That's pareidolia: you are finding patterns where there are none.

Me: I know. But shit, they really sound like words. They're saying.... Can't understand a word of it. Pun intended. :)

TagalogMantraOM: They do sing in syllables. Check this out. http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/10/071018123525.htm

Me: That's really cool. Though these are creepier. Their syllables seem to form the word "Juaaaanqui."LOL.

TagalogMantraOM: JUANQUI??? LOL. They calling you by your nickname? Only your ma and your grandma call you that.

Me: I didn't hear anything when last week one of them dared out to come out of its bat-cave, bat-hole, whatever, an opening in the ceiling, then flew into the lighted room. Probably seeking food. They drink blood, right?

TagalogMantraOM: Just the big vampire bats. The small ones just eat fruits. You got the big ones? You shouldn't be sleeping in the attic.

Me: Oh no, these are furry little creatures, look like flying mice. At least the one that flew out did when I killed it with a broom. A bleeding, dying mouse. Poor little fucker.

TagalogMantraOM: You are despicable. The Buddhas must have deducted like a thousand points from your karmic account. By the end of this Kali-Yuga, you will still be reincarnating. Have fun watching Kali destroy the world.

HouseByTheSea75: There they go again. JUAANQUI. lol. Sounds like a ghost movie, now. I should just put some poison on that hole in the wall. Get rid of them once and for all.

TagalogMantraOM: You'll be reborn as a laboratory rat. A guinea pig. Worse, a furry little rabbit at the mercy of those who test new razors at Gillette.

Me: Aright. It's past midnight. Too late to try to convert me to vegetarianism again. ZZZZZ. Gnight.

TagalogMantraOM: Sweet dreams.

HouseByTheSea75 is offline. *12:22 am*

I get the ladder and climb up to the bat hole, but can't see anything inside. Yuck! There's some kind of drool coming out of it. Bat's pee? No. Smells more like fish. And now, there's a little something crawling out, more like slithering, its drool making the floor slippery. I should get the broom and kill the flying mouse-thing.

Wait. Are those eyes? The mouse-thing's eyes look like those of the dead fish in the supermarket. Bats don't have eyes, do they? Blind as a bat. They use sonar, or echolocation, those sound waves when they fly. The last one I killed had slits for eyes. But this one got eyes like...like that black goldfish I once had. Felix.

I loved him for days. Then he bored me to death. Felix wasn't like a puppy you can play with. Just stared at you with bulging eyes or opened its mouth to blow a bubble at you. Then it got that disgusting disease, its scales peeling off to reveal the pale skin of a badly-cooked fish, a fish permeated throughout with bacteria and contaminants. Gross. I had to flush the ugly thing down the toilet. And now this new little fucker looks almost like Felix.

Juaaaanquiiii!

That thing sure called my name. Pareidolia my ass. I better get the broom.

There's more liquid draining out of the hole. The stench is vile!

Plop!

One of the bats fell to the floor. Hey, wait a minute, that's not a bat. That is really a fish. With wings. Flying fish?

Plop!

Another fell out. And another. And another. And another two. Now, I own an attic infested with batfishes. If they keep flapping their wings and splashing in that puddle, they are going to mess up all my walls. Idiots. Someone please tell them fish can't fly.

Juaaaanquiiii!

Did that one opened his mouth and say something? If you're some kind of monster fish, at least communicate telepathically. You are not equipped with either lungs or vocal chords. You need them, you know? Plus, let me be the one to tell you. Fish can't fly. If you all are indeed flying fish, all you can do is jump out of the water and hover above the sea for a few seconds.

Juaaaanquiiii!

That one did open his mouth. Oh God, that other one is really flying.

Actually, that's quite impressive.

Plop!

They all fell to the floor.

OK. Show's over. Since you are out of the water, will you please just suffocate? You'll make my killing job easier.

Juaaaanquiiii!

Those glassy eyes do look like Felix. They, and Felix, have better-looking eyes than the dead seafood at the supermarket. For sure, Felix was much nicer to look at. His eyes were so much more...enthralling.

Suddenly, these ones here start chirping, like, well, like bats. They pick up to the air, flying around in a perfect circle, and glide back inside the wall's opening.

OK. I admit it. I'm impressed. Just for that, I won't kill you today. I'll sure have to clean the smell or my room will stink for days.

I get the mop instead of the broom. Clean up everything and back to my books and maybe a nap before starting grammar homework.

Their twittering grows softer, more like a murmur or whisper. I can barely discern one of them peering deep into my room. Its eyes, bulging, disembodied, remain perched upon the edge. Its pupils, dark, abyssal, make me immobile, transfixing my soul.

Exhausted. I can't sleep yet can't stay awake. I'll have to deal with the fish later. Soon will be sunrise. Latin homework is due in a few hours. The Jesuits keep the library open all night for insomniacs in need of a refuge. I should go there. Or maybe I should stay. The little creatures' song now sounds like a lullaby. Like an ancient lullaby from the time of yore, the era of Atlantis. Of Lemuria....

I need some coffee.

I love this library. Thanks, Saint Francis Xavier! Few other places have wireless-enabled desktops with access to any book in European virtual libraries, the latest, fastest computers bought for the sons of South Asia's richest men, next to dusty old tomes penned by Jesuit brothers, copies of the original ones at the Bibliotheca Vaticana. Right there lies

Matteo Ricci's Xiguo Jifa, the Art of Memory, used by the sixteenth century missionary to China to seduce those studying for exams, required of anyone aspiring to join the Confucian elite. And on top of it lies a collection of epigrams taken from Hindu wisdom texts, used by the first missionaries to prepare for debates with Tamil religious leaders. And right on top of it lies some tome with no title on the spine. And right on top of it lies…a freaking fish!

I succumb to dizzy slumber. The infernal ichthyoids flutter their vestigial wings and alight on *Athanasius Kircher. Opera. Physica Curiosa by Gaspar Schott, also Jesuit. Liber Monstrorum by Anonymous. Original Latin and Anglo-Hibernian Latin version from the Beowulfiana.*

Who the hell are these…people? *Incestuous copulations between beastly mermaids and batrachian cephalopods*. Mmm. Are these akin to what Bro. Niels calls the Grendel archetype from the Beowulf narrative? As an infant, the future warrior Beowulf emerged from his underwater cradle only to return again to kill Grendel's mom. Someone scribbled in modern English:

> *Seize as your bow the great weapon of the Upanishad / And set in it an arrow sharpened by meditation. / Draw it with a mind that has attained the ultimate essence. / The target cannot die: kill it. / The mantra OM is the bow, the arrow the self. / The god its target, it is said. / It must be pierced by one who is not careless. !!!!!!!!*

That's from the Hindu Upanishads we read for comparative religion class. As for the Latin, I could try to translate. *Incipit liber monstrorum de diversibus generibus*. Thus begins the book of monsters of various kinds. Can't remember if *monstrorum* is in the genitive or the accusative. "Out of the dark corners of the earth you begged me to reveal whether these various kinds or monsters are to be believed in [have faith in?]…the monstrous offspring raised throughout the deserts and the islands of the Ocean and the recesses of the farthest mountains…who strike the greatest terror of fear in humankind…." My weak attempts at translation may not be entirely faithful to the author, but at least I can capture the horror of the pitiful Jesuit."Quivering, you have cast me into the cesspool among the ones of the deep, from these darkest corners of the earth towards another vast abyss of the flood."

Can't concentrate. My unfocused eyes only stare at oblivion. Their glazed eyes do focus. On me. Damn you, rubbery bat-wannabes, horror pet-shop escapees. You feel superior just because your membranous wings allowed you to crawl from your tanks and now sweep all over my tomes of ancient lore. Only God knows from what foul fish tank you escaped. You still reek of that putrid water from which you were born. Stop drooling over my grimoires, you sloppy frogs! Yes, your bulgy scabby eyes betray your obscene, sloppy frog origins. Frogs slopping like blubbering deformed babies once locked away by your own mothers so that your contagious cutaneous disease would not infect her healthy offspring. Yet, you escaped your confinement and then rejoiced when your mother and siblings noticed the peeling of their own skin.

Juaanqui!

Perchance these creatures arose only as a figment of my imagination, conjured by the remembrance of Felix in order to haunt me. When regret embodies itself, it chooses its form from among the many offered by Hell's morphological cornucopia. Why not choose an extra-dimensional ichthyoid incarnation?

Juaaanqui, return with us to the era of Atlantis and Lemuria.

WHAT? Now, that did get my attention. I am fully awake now.

We are not your beloved Felix, but we are his friends. Felix wishes to see you again. He wants you join him in the land of Lemuria. Others have done so before you. You just have to follow your fish.

The creature crawls between the pages of a book whose spine reads *Weyer and Liber Officiorum Spirituum*. Mmm. A book titled *Book of Spiritual Works* cannot be too bad. The fish opens the book to:

> *Vepar, alias Separ, Dux magnus & fortis: Similis syreni: Ductor est aquarum & navium armis onustarum. Ut mare jussu magistri turgidum navibusque plenum appareat, efficit: contra inimicos exorcistæ per dies tres vulneribus putrescentibus vermesque producentibus homines inficit, à quibus tamen negotio absoluto sanantur omnes.*

So much Latin gives me a headache. So, "Vepar, aka Separ, magnanimous and strong overlord, similar to mermaids, commands the seas and the armored, sailing navies. At the command of his master, he makes the sea...turbulent (?), full of ship...apparitions (?). To kill men, he only takes three days." (Only!) Difficult to keep reading. So, "something, something" about exorcists, "whose wounds he putrefies with maggots." The author adds the wounds can be healed.

See, all your pain shall be healed.

All over the floor, fish drool, or rather, urinate. Gravity pulls down the liquid and drains it into a shallow pool. I stare until the fish between Weyer's pages opens its mouth and pukes a...lamprey! The newborn parasitic eel imitates its mother and opens wide its toothed, funnel-like, sucking mouth. Yet, instead of vomiting, it bares its fangs and jumps into my left hand, puncturing my skin. I grab the disgusting fish-worm by its tail, but it slips away towards the puddle. Bloody pus oozes out of my wound.

Wash your wounds in this holy water.

Hesitating, I immerse my trembling hand into the foul-smelling pool. The pain subsides. Feels like oxygenated water when it fizzes on your skin. Its effervescence brings to the surface tiny bubbles which hiss when touching dry skin. As the brine seeps into my blood, it reveals that the bubbles consist of memories, a homeopathy of histories. Adopting the ancient method by which homeopathic alchemists elaborate watery remedies, the constant dissolution of herbs until nothing but the memory of the solute remains, ancestral sea creatures produce brine so as to preserve those memories of Atlantis and Lemuria threatened by human amnesia. The Atlantic and Indic Oceans were one once. They both occupied the same spatial and temporal locations until the conjunction of shifting tectonic plates with serendipitous chronological structures distanced them into distinct historical-planetary sectors. Only when future stars are right will archaeologists, to their horror, see that the Atlantic ruined roads and walls belong to a Lemurian civilization awakening from its disturbed somnolence. Plato, that unrepentant Grecophile of the past, baptized Lemuria with the name Atlas, the cyclopean titan who led a rebellion against the celestial divinities and attempted to usurp the throne of the Eldest god. The Elder gods suppressed the rebels, and the Eldest, Zeus, cursed the Titan thus: "Henceforth you shall be named Atlas, for you will need to become Endurance to bear upon your shoulders the heavenly spheres you so coveted." Afterward, as narrated by Plato, the primordial Atlantis-Lemuria, "suffered excessively violent earthquakes and floods. And after the onset of an unbearable day and a night, its

entire warrior force sank below the earth all at once, and the Land of Atlantis likewise sunk below the sea and disappeared, and made the ocean in the region unnavigable and unexplorable."

Since Lemurian seawater granted me the gift of tongues, I am now able to read aloud from the *Book of Monsters*:

> *Imo fuit Cham filius Noë, qui primus post diluvium cœpit malignos invocare spiritus, invocavit autem Byleth, & composuit artem in suo nomine, & librum, qui multis mathematicis et exorcistis est cognitus. Fiebant autem holocausta, libamina...*

"In the beginning, necromancers offered sacrifices and burnt offerings unto him. To call him up, they exercised an art, saying that Solomon the Wise made it. False! It was Cham, Noah's son, the first among the survivors of the Flood to invocate the spirits. He conjured *B'l'th*, and made an art in his name, and wrote a book, known only to mathemagicians and exorcists." It is these mathemagicians and exorcists of whom Plato wrote: "they created dwellings astonishing in its size. Starting at the sea, they excavated panels three hundred stadia in depth, and fifty stadia in length up to the outermost sea, making water trickle down a channel wide enough for the largest ships to pass through its harbor. The walls surrounding the Acropolis they invested with black aurichalcum, which made them glitter like darting fire." I close the book and...behold!

Though dazzled by the black aurichalcum's brilliant darkness, my vehement gaze ascends the Cyclopean ruins of Lemuria. Once the prison of a Titan, now a resplendent fortress. At its highest peak lies a golden aurichalcum bowl. Within it, my beloved Felix, now Felicitous, the Joyous One, revels in manic dreams. For, as foretold by ancient Sanskrit texts: *That is not dead which can eternal lie; and with strange Kali-Yuga cycles even death may die.*

Then, to my horror, I watch as Lemuria's dream-image slowly dissolves in the sea mist.

WHY!? - I ask the fish, who ululate the answer:

You need to accelerate the process before it is too late.

My already-healed wound reopens. It oozes again yellowish-greenish pus, which turns into a darker hue and slowly mixes into the brine.

Drink it!

I pour the mixture in my healthy hand and imbibe the concoction, summoning all my strength so as not to vomit it along with my entrails. I hear a distant voice calling my name from deep beneath the sea. *Juaanqui!* The brine permeates my outer skin first, then my intestinal interior skin. I walk towards the wine-dark sea. Rosy-fingered dawn walks not far behind me. Everyone I meet across my path looks askance at me, their paranoid glances revealing their disgust at my mutated exterior skin. Ignorants. Never, never reject someone because of their deformity or appearance! Diseased skin is nothing but a sign of an inner transformation of the soul becoming a more spiritual essence. A festive procession of fish accompanies me, not gliding through the air, but sloppily slithering through the sand, rejoicing every time my feet and their fins splash those puddles left behind earlier by the receding foam. The shore's froth recedes. Now left behind, not puddles, but a decrepit treasure chest snatched from the claws of some pirate cursed to breath forever under the Wide Sargasso Sea.

Behold your seaworthy vessel!

Though I barely fit within the Lemurian handicraft, I step into it. A sudden gust of claustrophobia hits me when it closes, making a noise similar to the one made by a closing latch. Yet, the fear subsides when the swaying of the sea transmogrifies, first the treasure chest into a rock-a-bye crib, and then the bat's chirping into a lullaby, a lullaby no one alive has ever heard before. Soon, I will obliterate from my mind the alarmed voice telling me water is coming inside and be able to depart towards Felicitous and the land of Lemuria, where we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory!

Juan Carlos Marín

Home Profile Friends Inbox

Sent September 24 at 8:01 am:

RAMON AGUILAR Where the hell are you?

Wall Info Photos Boxes

Posted September 25 at 7:23 am:

Student at Fr. Francis Xavier's prep school disappears - www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com

According to police reports, Juan Carlos Marín was last seen yesterday morning coming out of the school's library. Times of India interviewed a Jesuit who teaches at the school. Fr. Niels Amundsen believes Mr. Marín spent the night reading a book titled *Book of Spirit Office Holders*, also known as *Pseudo-Monarchy of Demons*. Some neighbours claim to have seen reddish-brown puddles and dead bodies found at his apartment, but police do not suspect foul activity. Lab results showed the mysterious liquid contained nothing but seawater and some blood belonging to several dead bats lying on the floor.

THE END

Juan Miguel Marin is a candidate for the Doctor of Theology degree at Harvard University. He specializes in the history of mysticism and gender/sexuality studies. His latest articles have appeared in the *Journal of Men, Masculinities, and Spiritualities*; the *Harvard Theological Review*; and the *European Journal of Physics*. His mother and grandmother raised him in Puerto Rico together with chickens, two rabbits, a dog, a cat, a little brother, a black goldfish, and several bats in the walls.

The creatures were smaller, now. One stuck against the windshield. Then another. Estelle kept the bus moving as they piled on. She had to crane to see between their webbed wings, clawed feet and hungry red mouths.

Estelle Makes the Casino Run

By Pamela Rentz

Something strange darted into the road. Estelle drew a big breath and slammed on the brakes. The cries rang out all the way to the back of the casino bus, or "luxury motor coach", as the Tribe's advertisements referred to it. The creature scuttled into the dark. The coach skidded sideways on the two-lane mountain highway. Estelle couldn't remember what the bus driver training video had said about controlling skids. She stood on the brakes and held the wheel firm and sent out a prayer to the Creator to keep her safe as she was the only provider for two small Karuk Indian children and a Karuk elder mother with health issues.

The bus slid to a stop almost perpendicular to the road. It blocked traffic in both directions. Estelle checked for oncoming headlights, but the road was deserted at this late hour. The smell of burned rubber floated through the coach.

"I thought we was gonna take off into the river." An elder named Charlie Beck sat up front behind the driver's seat. He slid one hand off the other. "Just like that."

"You're in good hands, Charlie," Estelle said in a wavering voice. She cleared her throat. "Everyone okay?"

Estelle put the bus in park and got up from her seat. A mix of tribal members and locals, most of them elders, stared back at her.

"They train you to drive this thing?" Someone called.

"Of course," Estelle said with feigned confidence. The bus company had given her twelve hours of video tapes. She'd watched them all twice. She wasn't the best choice for this job, but she was going to make herself the best choice.

"Let's go," someone else said. "We got gambling to do."

"Nothing like a busload of folks with slots on the brain," Charlie said with a laugh. "Your first run?"

Estelle wiped the sweat off her neck and sat back down. The giant steering wheel was slick under her hands. She took her time, easing the bus back and forth, until she was facing the right direction again.

"You Louise's daughter, right?" Charlie scooted forward so he could speak right into her ear.

"I am," Estelle said. "You should probably sit back. I'd hate for you to bump out." She braked hard at the next curve to illustrate her concern.

Charlie barely shifted in his seat. "Why you going for this job?"

"What do you mean?" Estelle said. "Because I'm a woman?"

The bus headed into a light fog. Estelle double-checked the headlights. They seemed too weak to do their job. She squinted into the darkness, carefully following the curve of the road.

Charlie laughed and shook his head. "Just like your Mom. Prickly."

"Yeah?" Estelle said, smiling. "This job was her idea. She said they needed a night driver and that I could pass the drug test." Estelle loosened her hands. She'd been squeezing so tight the wheel ridges were imprinted on her palms.

"Why not you?" Charlie said. "Indian preference."

"And they pay fifty bucks each way. That's a hundred bucks for about four hours of driving. I can't make that kind of money doing anything legal." Estelle gave him a quick smile in the rearview mirror above her head. "Plus, I can gamble while I'm there. Mom thought I could double my money."

"I know, right?" Charlie said.

"So," she said, keeping her voice casual. "Did you see that thing?"

"Not really," Charlie said. "Lots of critters in these mountains. I got a bear getting into my watermelon patch. I pay the grandkids a dollar each to sleep out there with a shotgun."

"I don't think it was a bear," Estelle said.

"No," Charlie agreed. "But it was something."

Estelle settled into the rhythm of the road. The bus felt solid in her hands. She pushed the gas until they were moving at a good clip. The image of the thing flashed in her mind and she pushed the bus a bit faster. The driver's seat vibrated under her and a worrisome clinking sound came from beneath the bus. She slowed down again.

Charlie relaxed back into his seat. The other passengers settled, too. There was the quiet rustle of food wrappers and a few muted voices. The gray mist thickened. Nothing but the lights from the bus illuminated the mountain road. Estelle wondered if she'd just imagined it.

The night had started uneventfully. She'd picked up the bus from the Tribe's storage shed and collected the passengers in front of the Tribal Health Center. The casino was two hours from town, out on the Interstate. She

would deliver the group to the casino for a free midnight buffet and fistful of playing coupons. She would bring them back after a continental breakfast.

According to the mile counter, they were about halfway, but according to the clock, it seemed they should be closer. A shadow flashed at the edge of the headlights. It looked like a person in a frog costume loped alongside the bus. Suddenly, it sprang sideways and plastered itself against the glass. Its head split apart to reveal a bright red mouth and tiny sharp teeth. It squealed at a pitch so high it hurt Estelle's ears.

She started to hit the brakes, but after the earlier almost-disaster, changed her mind. She fumbled among the buttons and controls until she found the windshield wipers. The thing look surprised, if that were possible, before it was scraped off into the darkness with an unhappy shriek.

A young man hurried to the front of the bus and knelt down beside the driver's seat.

"What was that?" he asked. "My girlfriend is freaking out."

"A big branch," Estelle said, confidently. "You are?"

"Kevin," he said. "A big branch with teeth?" He leaned so close Estelle could smell booze on his breath.

"Or an owl," Estelle said. "What's your point?"

"Have you seen a thing like that before?" His need for reassurance made Estelle even more jumpy.

"Many times," Estelle said. "Looks scary, but won't bother us. Get back to your seat. And maybe knock off the sauce?" She pointed to a sign above her head to indicate the list of forbidden activities, which included swearing, loud music and alcoholic beverages.

He muttered something under his breath and returned to his seat.

The monotone voice from the training video filled Estelle's head. She hadn't made much of it at the time, but it had offered a vague reference to roadside distractions and warned that drivers should keep driving no matter what. Never let the bus stop. Don't let anything or anyone on or off. Keep the windows shut.

Her back was damp and stuck to the seat. "Charlie? Is it hot in here?"

"It's okay, I guess." He patted a tissue to his forehead and Estelle took that to mean he was warm. She clicked the heat down a notch.

There was a thump from the top of the bus. Two small square portholes were built-in for emergency escape. The one above the driver's side creaked as if someone were prying it open from the outside.

"Shit. Is someone up there?" Kevin called from his seat. "Stop the bus."

"Don't," Charlie said, softly, so that only she could hear.

"I don't think so," Estelle said. Kevin's alarmed face was clear in the rearview mirror. "Stopping isn't going to do nothing but make it worse and turning back just gets us back where we started."

"Who said anything about turning back?" one of the elders said. "Just get there, already."

"Something's out there," Kevin said.

"You watch too many movies," Estelle said. Kevin was stressing her out. "Emergency exits are sealed shut from the outside, so relax." She wondered if that were true.

There was movement at the edges of the headlights again. Shapes moving alongside the bus barely visible in the fog.

"If there's anything out there, it's more afraid of you than you are of it," she said repeating one of her mother's phrases. "And it can't get in here. Keep your windows sealed shut. Are the windows sealed shut?"

Kevin had successfully freaked out everyone. The passengers whimpered a quiet assent and Estelle nudged the speed up a notch. The rattle under the bus started again. "Crap," she said, easing off the gas. There were no other lights on the highway. She hadn't seen another car since they'd left town.

Estelle clicked the high beams on and gasped. The highway ahead was packed with creatures. They squatted along the side of the road and leapt back and forth with wicked-looking barbs on their bodies. She clicked the lights to regular view.

"I saw that," Kevin gasped from behind her.

Estelle jumped. "Get back to your seat or I'll open this door and kick your ass right into it."

Kevin crept back to his seat. "There is something out there," he told the passengers.

"Stay calm," Estelle said, swallowing back her own dread. "Nothing bad has happened on this run. It won't start tonight." She glanced back at Charlie for reassurance, but he had his eyes closed. She wondered if this was why the Tribe had such a tough time keeping a driver.

Estelle checked the mileage. They were only a half hour out. Twenty-five minutes if she kept the speed up.

THWAP! The bus shifted side-to-side.

"It's on the window," Kevin said. "Right here on the window."

Kevin's girlfriend sobbed and then gagged. Several others joined her. Then the smell hit the front of the bus. Like a thick vapor of rotting green garbage.

Estelle's eyes watered. She pressed her sleeve to her nose to inhale. "Charlie, what do I do?"

Charlie slowly opened his eyes. "Just drive the bus."

Estelle didn't feel any less panicked.

"Don't look at it," she told the passengers. She resisted the urge to punch the gas. Something thumped under the wheels and she and the passengers collectively shuddered.

"It's looking at me," Kevin's trembling voice said.

"Then shut your eyes, dammit," Estelle said. This bus drive couldn't be over fast enough. No one needed a job that bad.

Another THWAP! A big one clung to the bus door and used its long skinny fingers to pry at the opening.

"Stay back!" she yelled. Her purse held about seventy bucks in change she hoped to convert to rent money while she was at the casino. She unhooked it from her seat and flung it at the door. It WHOMPED! against the glass with a satisfying thunk and the thing dropped away with a squeal.

They rode like that the last twenty miles to the casino. It felt like a hundred and twenty miles. One after the other, the creatures threw themselves against the windows and glared at the passengers through wide, yellow eyes. They licked the glass with their pointy tongues. They screeched and their webby hands sucked against the glass. The passengers shook and huddled together, some shrinking under their coats. Estelle snapped the heat off, but the bus grew hot and the fetid scent choked the air. She avoided inhaling until she got light-headed.

Charlie remained calm. He could have just as easily been enjoying a leisure tour. Every few minutes, he'd lean forward and say something like, "You're doing great. Just drive the bus."

At last, the mountain road straightened out and forest gave way. The sight of a distant red glow made Estelle's stomach flop until she realized those were the lights of the casino.

"We're almost there," she said.

The creatures were smaller, now. One stuck against the windshield. Then another. Estelle kept the bus moving as they piled on. She had to crane to see between their webbed wings, clawed feet and hungry red mouths.

About a mile from the casino, they began dropping off, some with a bone-chilling wail of disappointment. The last one, barely the size of her hand, flew off as she pulled into the half-empty parking lot. She drove the bus to the circular drive and hugged the curb, stopping right in front of the giant double doors.

Warm yellow light glowed from inside the casino and, when she opened the bus door, a rich savory smell, like prime rib and baked potatoes, wiped away the lingering foul scent.

A handsome and vaguely familiar-looking man with a long black ponytail stepped onto the bus.

"Welcome," he said to the passengers with a friendly smile. "I hope you're hungry." Even his voice was mesmerizing. "The midnight buffet awaits. We've got over five hundred dollars in free play we're giving away at the raffle."

Excited voices filled the coach. The passengers scrambled for their bags and sweaters and exited quickly, barely stepping on the paved walk in their hurry to get inside.

"Good driving," Kevin said, as he helped his girlfriend climb down the stairs. "Sorry if I acted weird."

Estelle waved. "No problem."

The man turned to Estelle. "I'm the night manager, Grayson," he said shaking her damp hand in his cool one. "You the trial driver?"

"Estelle," she said.

"Any problems on the road?" He looked as if he were sharing a joke with her.

"Estelle's a steady one," Charlie said. "Give me a hand?"

Grayson helped him off the bus. Charlie hobbled into the casino.

"You're planning to come in, too, aren't you?" He handed her a coupon for a hundred dollars of free play.

"For the driver, too?" Estelle took it, surprised. The slip of paper tingled in her hands. She'd start with the quarter slots. She liked the Lucky Seven machine and the Five Draw Poker. She forgot why her heart was beating so fast. She grabbed her heavy purse.

"I can park this thing for you," Grayson said. He took the key from her hand. "Don't worry. I'll find you when it's time to go."

Estelle hurried from the bus. She had every cent she could spare on her and she couldn't wait to get to those machines.

The End

Pamela Rentz is an enrolled member of the Karuk Tribe of California and works as a paralegal specializing in Indian Affairs. She is a graduate of Clarion West 2008 and was published in *Asimov's* in April 2010. She can be found online at: www.pamrentz.com.

I see little flickers of nervousness flair up around Boris. Whatever it is he has planned - we're getting dangerously close to it. I wonder if these frat boys are unknowingly lining up to be the main course of some ritual sacrifice.

Death on the Fine Line

By Daniel José Older

It's just past eleven pm on December 31 - that dizzy, in-between time when we're not quite here but not yet there - and Haight Street is flooded with college kids. Some of their faces are pockmarked with zits, most are bleary with alcohol and all of them look like they're waiting for something important to happen. They flash a theatrical array of expressions - everything from regret to ecstasy to total abandon - but I'm not fooled. They're bored out of their minds. I can tell because I'm dead - well, partially-dead anyway. And when you straddle a fine line like the one between life and death - let's just say, you can tell certain things about people.

Music is wafting out of a bar across the street - a kind of watery blues that evokes dentists' waiting rooms. The mostly-white college kids are roaming up and down the block in packs, playing out a whole mess of different plotlines from the daytime dramas. The one black dude around is wearing about twenty-five jackets and has no teeth. He's full-swing trashed and yukking it up with the yuppies for change. Me? I'm a kind of tan gray - a neither-here-nor-there colour that matches my condition. It would be a jarring skin tone to notice on someone, but I tend to just blend in.

I dip into a brightly lit tobacco store for some Malagueñas and a pocket-sized rum. The rum goes into my flask and one of the Malagueñas goes in my mouth. I light it as I walk back out into the street and weave through the crowds. When I move quickly, no one notices my strange gait or the long wooden crutch I use to favour my right leg. I've gotten the flow down so smooth I almost glide along towards the milky darkness of Golden Gate Park. There's too much information here in the streets - each passing body gives up a whole symphony of smells and memories and genetics. It can help pass the time if you're bored, but tonight, I am far from bored. Tonight, I am hunting.

It was two weeks ago when the Council Of the Dead, San Francisco Chapter, reached out to me to let me know there was some vague, unaccountable nonsense going on in the Haight. Because I'm an inbetweener, and the only one anyone knows of at that, the dead turn to me when something is askew between them and the living. Usually, it's some mundane shit like a suicide-gone-wrong or someone revived that shouldn'ta been. Clean-up work. But every once in a while, it gets really hairy - like the guy with no head that wouldn't die. In fact, not only wouldn't he die - he cut loose and started roaming the damn streets of San Francisco in all his headless glory. That's when I go hunting. These are the times when I forget that I was ever even dead for those few dangling seconds. Whatever questionable degree of life or humanity pertains to me - I know God put me on this fine planet to hunt. Plus, I'm good at it.

But the Council was all kinds of vague about this one. No real explanation about anything - just a photo of a man,

slid across the table with icy fingers. "Something is going on in the Haight, Carlos. Do your thing."

And me: "Care to elucidate further?"

And them: "Nope."

And what can really be said to that? They're dead. They don't have to elucidate shit.

I don't mind, though. Makes things more interesting. So, I nodded, pocketed the picture and walked out the door.

I swig on my flask and head for the park, because it's only there I can clear my head and honestly, I hadn't counted on this tremendous flock of New Year's revelers jamming up all my otherworldly insights. I perform a graceful semi-swagger to avoid a ponytail guy who is plowing through the crowd to find somewhere to puke his guts out. He's wearing too much aftershave and looks like he spent three hours trying to make his hair look that carelessly tousled.

Then I see my mark. He's standing perfectly still in the middle of all that hootenanny, laughing his ass off. He's pale like an overcast day and has those semi-closed eyes common to mischievous Russians in spy movies. Unquestionably, the cat is dealing with some supernatural, uh, issues. Layers of grief, anxiety and fanaticism are swirling around him like ripples in a pond, peppered with a distinct aroma of...what's that? Ah, yes: guilt. And yet, he's chuckling madly.

I duck into the entranceway of another bar. The bouncer shoots me a look that says, *Why the fuck you movin' so fast, cripple?* I ignore it, tug on my Malagueña and observe my prey. The smoke fills me with insight and allows me to relax into the thrill of the chase. He is feisty, this one. Let's call him "Boris". His head is full of plans - a map that keeps drawing and redrawing itself, a checklist, an incomplete letter. There's something else, too: a solid chunk of his subconscious attention lingers on a scrap of thick paper in his pocket - probably some piece of whatever diabolical plot he's enmeshed in. He has all the makings of someone up to no good, and yet - I can't help but feel drawn to this laughing wraith. For all his mysterious schemes and whatever chaos he's trying to let loose on my city, he's having a good time, and after all, it is New Year's Eve.

I'm not sure if it's that or the curiosity that gets the better of me, but instead of just ending him right then and there, I walk up and offer the dude one of my Malagueñas. Just like that. The very idea of doing this is so ridiculous that it shudders through me like the tickle of an invisible hand and pretty soon, we're both standing there smoking away and laughing like idiots.

That's when it hits me: the guy's not dead. Here I was, assuming that because the SFCOD brought me in, I'd automatically have another zombie type on my hands, trying to make it back or otherwise disturb the delicate balance of life and death. But this fellow has a beating heart. He's breathing. His memories aren't closed books the way dead memories are. And yet, by the look of things, he's not fully alive either. I step back a little to take him in, not even trying to conceal my intentions, anymore. *He is like me*. Another inbetweener - and not just one of these half-formed, not-quite-here, purgatorious mo'fos: Boris is full-fledged, flesh-and-blood alive and dead at the same time, both and neither, and from the looka him, he's been that way for a while.

We're definitely in the same curious predicament, but unlike me, Boris's not at all concerned with blending in. In fact, he's determined to stand out. "Whaddup, douchebags and douchebaguettes?" he hollers at the crowd. I'm mortified and fascinated at the same time. A few passing revelers chuckle, but most ignore him. A blond lady rolls her eyes as if she's being hit on for like the four hundredth time tonight. "Why so serious?" Boris yells into the sky. I found the one other being like me in the universe and he is a total jackass.

Still, I am in the mood for some fun, so I decide to let this play out a little. Also: I'd like to know more about these devious plans that keep swirling around Boris' tipsy head.

"What's your name, man?" I slur, playing up the rum on my breath.

"Elvis." Okay, an obvious lie. "You?"

"Bob," I say. Two can play that old game. Then I realize with a start that he may well be reading right through every move I make just like I'm reading through each of his. The shock of this makes me feel momentarily naked, but then I quickly gather myself together and rebuild the wall of deceit. I have never dealt with someone like me before and I have no idea how vulnerable I am. I must tread cautiously.

"Why so serious?" Boris says again, this time at me. He's still laughing.

"Not at all," I say. Then I swig from my flask and he swigs from his.

He's waiting for someone. The realization comes clear like a whisper inside my head, and I can't help but wonder if the same voice is murmuring, *He's onto you* in his. Then Boris checks his watch and looks me dead in the eye for the first time. "It's time. Let's go." His glare is penetrating and reveals nothing to me. A total blank.

"All right," I say, launching into the crowd alongside him. We move quickly, with purpose. He either already knows I'm extraordinarily agile or he didn't even notice the crutch. I'm dodging a hodgepodge of hipsters and homeless rich kids, keeping my eyes on Boris's paisley cap bobbing up ahead. He's still laughing and calling people "douchebags" and I have no idea whether I'm giving chase or being led into a trap. Or both.

We break from the crowd, cut a sharp right down Cole and end up beneath an ancient willow tree on the panhandle. The narrow strip of park is deserted except for a few loping stragglers from the party on Haight. It's a cool night. The light rain isn't falling so much as hovering in the air around us in a teasing little cumulus.

"This is the year, people!" Boris yells at no one in particular. "The time, she has come! People, get ready!" He kicks an empty beer bottle into a nearby bush, upsetting a family of night birds. I should just kill him now, because I have no idea whether he'll go down easy given that he's like me. I'm bracing myself to make my move when I see a few figures working their way through the shadows from the direction of the university.

"That you, broham?" one of them calls out as they enter the panhandle. "Broham"? Is that Boris's real name? I try to make myself as unnoticeable as possible, but we're a party of two, and we're both inbetweeners. "Who's the dude, man? Thought this was a secret and shit."

"It's cool, Bradley," says Boris or Broham, or whoever my new friend/prey is. "He's with me." No one's ever said that about me. I'm flattered and repulsed at the same time.

Brad is tall and thick. His blond hair is close-cropped in a military buzz cut. Of the crew behind him, three are basically Brad clones with different-color hair, one is an Asian Brad and the last little guy is definitely Indian/Pakistani or maybe Puerto Rican. Or half-Black. Whatever he is, he gets randomly searched every time he's within twenty feet of an airport.

"Okay, bros, let's do this thing," Brad says. Shady supernatural shenanigans in the Haight and it involves a bunch of frat boys? Curiouser and curiouser.

We make our way along the panhandle. Asian Brad falls into place beside me. "Michael," he says, extending an awkward hand as I amble along.

"Carlos," I say, nodding but not touching his hand. People tend to notice how chilly and dry my skin is. And I tend to pick up way too much information about folks when we touch. Sometimes, it's better not to know.

Michael's forced smile fades. "Are you going to, you know, help show us, uh, the other side?"

"Whose big idea was this, Michael?" I say.

"Well, Brad gathered us together late one night at the house. Said he had a big opportunity, a chance for us to see things no one else had seen. But only for his most trusted guys, right?"

"Right."

"Said he'd met this dude, no name or nothing, just this dude, and that he was going to take us to, you know: the other side."

I make that half-grunt noise that signals ambivalence and Michael's starts looking uncomfortable, like maybe he revealed too much. He quickens his pace to catch up with the others. Darkened Victorians peek out from behind swaying trees on either side of the panhandle.

When we reach the wide-open roundabout at the entrance to Golden Gate Park, I see little flickers of nervousness flair up around Boris. Whatever it is he has planned - we're getting dangerously close to it. I wonder if these frat boys are unknowingly lining up to be the main course of some ritual sacrifice. Boris seems just erratic and volatile enough to try and pull off such a stunt. But then, a few flatheads getting glazed wouldn't warrant so much concern from the Council Of the Dead - and they certainly wouldn't waste my time with it. Boris checks his watch and then looks up into the misty night sky. It's eight minutes to midnight. I try to tune into the gathering storm of excitement that's about to explode all over the city, but it's just a faint glimmer to me.

We enter the park, move quickly through the fresh-smelling darkness. The Brads fall into a nervous silence. Boris is a fortress - he's giving up nothing to me, so I let my thoughts chase the ridiculous mini dramas and power plays between our collegiate companions. Then I remember: in a shady grove on the outskirts of the Shakespeare Garden,

there is an *entrada*: an entranceway to the Underworld. And of course, the timing is perfect: *entradas* are really only accessibly to the non-dead at midnight, and this midnight in particular, the air would be even more charged with culminating spiritual energy. The majority of San Francisco's ancestral souls are out and about tonight, enjoying their own morbid festivities. You can almost taste the bursting molecules in the air.

As if to confirm my suspicions, we turn off the main road and duck down a narrow path through the trees. But what would an inbetweener be doing with a bunch of college kids at an entrance to the Underworld? *This is only the beginning*, the voice that knows things whispers. *You who are neither here nor there keep the secrets of both worlds*. And secrets are a valuable commodity. My man has fashioned himself into a traitorous tour guide of the afterlife. I close my eyes and imagine the Land of the Dead overrun by fat pasty tourists, thousands of bubbly Brads and Bradettes, snapping pictures and sipping frappuccino-whatevers. Crap - I really shoulda taken him when it was simple. Now, we've arrived at the garden. The *entrada* is a gaping void beneath drooping tree branches. It's not black; it's just emptiness. The air is crisp with new rain and a murmuring breeze. If Boris touches that void, it's game-over - he'll disappear into a relentless, hazy maze of wandering souls. The frat boys would be shit outta luck - their magical romp through the Underworld would have to wait - but Boris would be safe from my expert problem-solving hands.

I start to push my way up through the crowd of Brads. With about ten feet to go before the *entrada*, Boris makes a break for it. My elbows shoot out in either direction, crack into meaty midsections, splinter ribs. With a little added encouragement from my shoulders, the home team is collapsing to either side of me and I sprint forward in a ferocious, lopsided lunge, unsheathing the blade from my crutch as I go. It leaves my hand like a bullet. For a second, all anyone hears is that terrible whizzing sound of steel cutting through air, and then the even-more-terrible sound of tearing flesh. That sound means I win, but for once, it doesn't feel so good to win. Boris collapses heavily, an arm's length from the *entrada*.

Without breaking stride, I pull my blade from the ground beside Boris and launch myself back towards the college boys, cutting the air and hollering gibberish at the top of my lungs. They leave in a hurry, limping and carrying each other along like the good guys in war movies. I return to Boris, who's bleeding out quickly. *If he can die, I can die*. It's a sobering thought. I have so many questions for him, I don't even know where to begin, and his life force is fading fast. He makes like he's about to speak, but just gurgles. All of his attention, all of his waning energy, is focused back on that little scrap of something in his pocket, but his eyes stare right into mine. He knows I can read him. He's pointing it out to me. I gingerly reach into his pocket and retrieve what turns out to be a photograph of a girl.

I can't remember the last time I said this, maybe I've never said it, but this chick is fine as hell. Not just fine, though - there's something about her gaze, the way she holds her chin, the shadow of her collarbone, that makes me want to find her and tell her everything, *everything*. It's a corny snapshot: she's got one hand up in the air, two fingers out in mock-gangsta style, lips pursed, eyes mellow like she just smoked a fatty. Looks like she's in a park, maybe even this one; a few trees are scattered in the scenery behind her.

"Sister," Boris gurgles and I quickly wipe the hungry glow off my face. "She is...caught up in this too...." When he says *this*, his head jerks towards the shimmering emptiness beside us.

"This what, man? What is this?"

"Closing the gap," Boris whispers. "The living and the dead...don't have to be so far apart. Like..." he takes a deep, death-rattled breath.

I manage to hide my impatience for about three seconds. "Like what?"

"...like us. You and me and..." Another excruciating pause. "Sasha."

Sasha. The hand holding the picture feels like it's on fire. I raise it up to his face. "Sasha," I say, failing to disguise the hope in my voice. "She's like us? She's in-between?"

I almost break into a dance when Boris nods his head. Suddenly, the park seems very luminous and beautiful at this hour. The night birds are singing, and somewhere, a few blocks away, Haight Street is rocking to the New Year's revelry of two hundred middle-class white kids.

"Please," Boris is saying when I return from my reverie, "find Sasha. Keep her safe..." Done. No problem. How else can I help you today, sir? "...from the Council."

"Uh...,"I say, trying to slow my thoughts. "City Council?" Did you know it's possible to really irritate a dying person? Even an already-mostly-dead dying person. I don't recommend it, though. Boris looks like he's thinking about using the last of his life force to make a grab for my cane-blade and cut some sense into me. "Right, right," I say quickly, "The Council Of the Dead." He nods. "San Francisco Chapter." My boss. Surely, he must know this. But whatever Boris does or doesn't know is quickly becoming a non-issue. He gurgles again, flinches and then relaxes as death completes its finishing touches. At least he won't have far to travel.

After gently placing Boris's body into the *entrada*, I wander aimlessly around the park, working my way through the whole pack of Malagueñas and all of my rum. There are too many thoughts in my head right now - if I venture out into the city, it'll mean instant input overload. T*he living and the dead don't have to be so far apart*, Boris had said. Why are folks always so cryptic right before they croak? Like us. There's an "us". All I've ever known of the afterlife has been the rigid bureaucracy of the Council, and at first, that had been a relief from the rigid bureaucracy of the living. And then I just made friends with being the lone intermediary between the two, but now.... When the Council's icy fingers slide the photo of Sasha's pursed lips and sleepy eyes across the table to me, I will nod my head like I always do. Then I will find her. I will honour the dying wish of her brother whom I murdered and protect her from myself. And then I will ask her out.

The End

Daniel José Older's spiritually-driven, urban storytelling takes root at the crossroads of myth and history. With sardonic, uplifting and often hilarious prose, Older draws from his work as an overnight 911 paramedic, a teaching artist and an antiracist/antisexist organizer to weave fast-moving, emotionally-engaging plots that speak whispers and shouts about power and privilege in modern day New York City. His work has appeared in the *Freezine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *The ShadowCast Audio Anthology*, *The Tide Pool*, and the book *Sunshine/Noir* (City Works Press), and is featured in Sheree Renee Thomas' Black Pot Mojo Reading Series in New York City. When he's not writing, teaching or riding around in an ambulance, Daniel can be found performing with his Brooklyn-based soul quartet Ghost Star (www.myspace.com/ghoststarmusic). Read some of his ridiculous ambulance adventures at www.raval911.blogspot.com.

The candle flames lashed, and the idol seemed to ripple and move. The air was heavy, as if the eight million men who'd died in the mines were there in spirit.

The Mountain that Eats Men

By Caleb Jordan Schulz

The purple liquid dribbled over the lip of the cup like a heavy sludge. Vincente Garcia took a long drink. The *chicha* slid down his throat like wet cement. Around him, men, women, and children danced. Vincente set the cup down on the makeshift bench. He scowled at the reveling *campesinos*. The *fiesta* of Pachamama couldn't have come at a worse time. He'd been working for a week with nothing to show for it and couldn't afford a day off. But no miner worked during Pachamama. He slumped his narrow shoulders.

"Don't look so morbid," said Fidel Nunéz.

He picked up the cup and drank. He and Fidel had been friends since childhood and had worked in the silver mines of Cerro Rico for years.

"I don't know how much longer I can take this."

"Don't talk like that."

"I may have to find another job."

"Right - you and a thousand others."

"I can't keep on working for nothing."

"Your luck will change."

Vincente shivered and pulled his woolen poncho closer. He peered up at the sky where a cloud had passed in front of the sun. At over thirteen thousand feet in the Bolivian Andes, when the sun shone, it could burn your flesh. When a cloud passed, it chilled your bones.

A cheer went up from the crowd. Vincente turned and watched as two men arrived pushing a pair of wheelbarrows.

"Ahh...," said Fidel. "Just what you need."

"What's that?"

"Come on." Fidel pushed away from the bench and Vincente followed. They, along with a dozen others, approached the men with the wheelbarrows. Lying in the barrows were a pair of llamas. One of the men dumped the llamas onto the ground. The animals breathed, slowly, but did not move.

Senõr Mades, the *Jefe* - the boss - stepped forward. A cigar hung from his lips, trailing smoke. A cleaver shone in his hand. He bent down and held it at the llama's throat. "May its blood protect us. May its blood bless our work," he said, slicing deep.

Blood spurted from the llama's neck. Men rushed in, scooping the warm blood into their hardhats. Fidel did the same and, after a moment, so did Vincente. Hats of blood in hand, they walked to the rough-hewn entrance to the mines.

Fidel stepped to the entrance. "For our protection. For our fortune."

He threw his hardhat at the wall and blood splattered across it.

Vincente eyed the entrance. It was like a gaping maw, hungry for more.

"For our protection. For our fortune."

He tossed his hardhat and blood splashed across the doorway.

They collected their dripping hardhats and backed away. Other miners took their place, doing as they had done. Fidel took a swig of *chicha* and offered it to Vincente. Vincente took it, but did not drink.

"Will it work?" he asked.

Fidel shrugged. "I don't know."

Vincente watched more people fling their hardhats full of blood. He tried to drink the *chicha*, but couldn't. The mug looked just like a cup of congealing blood.

At the end of the next week, Vincente approached Fidel. It was past nightfall and the stars pierced the sky. Vincente wiped grime from his face and flung it to the ground.

"I can't do it anymore, Fidel." Vincente shook his head. "I haven't anything left. I ate my last piece of bread this morning and I have nothing left to sell."

Fidel passed his cigarette to Vincente, who took a deep drag. "Cerro Rico is a tough mountain to work."

"But day after day, I find nothing."

"Garcia - the mines are over five hundred years old. The Spanish took most everything. What little is left is hard to find. You must be patient."

"*Españoles bastardos*." Vincente stared down at the city of Potosi far below. Lights lanced the darkness like a thousand fires burning. "The llamas didn't help much, did they?"

"There's been no cave-ins since Pachamama."

Vincente shrugged. "There's been no silver since Pachamama, either."

"If you want better results - you have to go down to *El Tio*."

"Things aren't that bad."

"No?"

"No. Besides, I don't believe in that sort of thing."

"You must believe. Up here, we worship God, but down there, in the mines, there is no God. Only *El Tio*."

"Doesn't that anger God?"

"No," said Fidel, "because God and *El Tio* have divided the world. God looks after everything above ground and *El Tio* gets everything underneath."

"Why?" asked Vincente.

"Because the mines are closer to Hell."

Vincente frowned.

Fidel slapped him on the back. "Cheer up. Things will get better."

Vincente looked up at Fidel. "You really think I should go down there?"

"What've you got left to lose?"

Vincente didn't have to speak. Fidel already knew the answer.

By the time Vincente reached the fourth level, his hands were shaking like leaves. Despite all his years in the mines, this night and this darkness seemed different - as if eyes watched from the shadows. He carefully climbed down the uneven steps of a ladder. Three times he nearly fell, but managed to catch a rung to keep from plunging to his death.

At the fifth level, the temperature shot up. Within minutes, his shirt was drenched through and his black hair was plastered to his head. He was short, like most Bolivian men, but the tunnel ceiling was no more than three feet high and so, he crawled through the tunnels like a spider.

The hole to Level Six was like a dark eye that his headlamp's light would not penetrate. Darkness lapped at the edges. Only the end of the ladder was visible. Carefully, Vincente climbed down into the hole. He felt like he was leaving this world and entering another.

When he reached the tunnel below, his lamplight shone red off the rock. Moisture glistened on the walls and Vincente couldn't shake the feeling that the mountain was alive and he was deep in its bowels.

Vincente counted the side-tunnels and stopped at the sixth. A dark red splotch marred the wall. He stared down the passage, drew a deep breath and entered. Within a few strides, the walls narrowed so severely that Vincente had to turn sideways to pass.

Then the tunnel opened up into a cave. The ceiling rose high, beyond the reach of his light. Graffiti covered the walls, but Vincente's attention was drawn to one wall. On the ground, yellow flames flickered atop red candles. Above them loomed a great statue with a man's body and a goat's head. The skin had dried and pulled back, revealing its eye sockets and blackened gums. Its hands and feet were hooves. A gigantic penis thrust out from between its legs.

Its eyes shone like fiery stones. Vincente gazed up at it, knees quaking. It was his first glimpse of *El Tio*.

The candle flames lashed, and the idol seemed to ripple and move. The air was heavy, as if the eight million men who'd died in the mines were there in spirit. Vincente wasn't sure what to do or say. All he knew of *El Tio* was rumour. He cleared his throat.

"Greetings, great Tio. I am Vincente Garcia. I work in the Level Three mines on *Jefe* Hoyo's crew. I'm a miner." Vincente suddenly felt stupid. "But you know all of this. You also, likely, know I've had bad luck, lately. I haven't found any silver. It's been weeks now and I'm at the end of my strength."

Vincente took a step forward.

"I've come to you, great *Tio*, for your help. I don't have much. I have these."

He laid the half-full pack of cigarettes at its feet.

"And this."

He pulled a dried frog from his pocket and set it down.

"And these."

He set down a small bag of *coca* leaves.

"But that is all. Will you help me, great and powerful *Tio*? Will you aid me - a poor miner who works in your mountain?"

He waited. The silence was thick, as if he floated underwater. Vincente knew he had to do more. He had to do more than pay tribute. Men had paid *El Tio* tribute their whole lives with nothing to show for it but a meager living. Vincente wanted more.

"I've nothing else...unless...well, great *Tio*, I don't know what it's worth, but there's my soul...."

The flames licked the air greedily.

"I suppose I'm not really using it, so if that will suffice, as a down payment of sorts, until I hit a big lode, I offer it to you."

The flames stood straight, burning high, unmoving. Had a deal been struck? Vincente clasped and unclasped his hands. Several minutes passed before he backed away from the devil figure into the tunnel.

Vincente's pick-axe clanged against stone, sending tremors up the shaft and his arm. He dropped the tool in disgust.

"I should have sold my soul to a *carneceria*. At least then I could get a free steak now and then."

He glared at the belligerent pile of rocks as if his eyes alone could bore holes in them. He rubbed his hands together, picked up the axe and heaved it into the wall. A chunk of rock fell, but was nothing but worthless stone.

He pulled a small paper bag from his pocket and plucked out a dozen *coca* leaves, wedging them deep in his gums. Next, he pulled out a stick of dynamite. It was dusty and frayed at either end. Crystalline particles dotted the brown wrapper. He had borrowed just enough money from Fidel to buy an old stick of dynamite from the munitions depot in town. Old dynamite was incredibly unstable and not authorized for use in the mines, but it was cheap.

Vincente's hands shook as he struggled to light the dynamite. His sweat-slick fingers held the wick gingerly, while his other hand struck the match against the rock wall. After the fourth match didn't catch, he wiped his hands on his pants and tried again. A flame burst from the matchhead. He held it to the wick, which caught fire instantly.

Vincente leapt to his feet and dashed toward the gap in the rock wall. Stones shifted under his feet and he stumbled, but he made it to the tunnel. He rounded two turns in the tunnel before the explosion knocked him from his feet.

Rocks fell all around him, bouncing off his shoulders and clanging off his hardhat. One rock knocked him so hard that stars soared in his vision. He pushed himself up and worked his way through the rubble until he reached the blast site. His headlamp barely cut through the dust which hung in the air like a lowland mist.

Vincente pressed his handkerchief against his mouth and waded through the haze. He pulled at the rocks, turning them over in his hands, inches from his red, watering eyes.

A flash caught his eye. His heart leapt and he scrambled at the stones, pulling them out of the way, and there among the rubble was a vein of silver as wide as his forearm. He opened and closed his mouth several times before regaining his senses. He picked up his axe and went to work, prying hunk after hunk of silver from the wall. Hours passed and the pile in his wheelbarrow grew. He knew no time, only the feel of the axe in his hands and the rock beneath.

When he was certain the last of the silver was in his barrow, he stopped. His barrow was full. He marked his dig spot, and then wheeled his prize to the surface.

It wasn't long before he found Fidel. His friend's eyes bulged. Soon after, Vincente found the *Jefe* and, for the first time since Vincente had walked into the mine, the *Jefe* was speechless.

Vincente could only smile.

When the silver was weighed and accounted for, Vincente returned to the dig site only to find more silver even deeper in the stone. The *Jefe* shook his head and watched the pile of silver rise.

For a week Vincente worked the dig, cutting and blasting his way through the rock until, at last, the silver ran dry. Vincente took the next day to go over the figures with the *Jefe* and, when all was said and done, walked away with enough pesos in Banco Central de Bolivia to buy a small home.

Vincente never returned to the mines after that day and had Fidel over for barbeques every Sunday.

One day in the month of August, Fidel and Vincente sat on his porch enjoying a couple of Sureña *cervesas*. Their bellies were full of *chili con carne* and each had let out a notch on his belt. The sun was just setting over the red peak of Cerro Rico. As it slid out of sight, the cold rushed in like a storm. The men pulled their ponchos close and their *cervesas* closer. Fidel drank some and then spoke.

"I guess your luck finally came through."

Vincente smiled. "I'd say. None too soon, either."

"Now all I need is some of your luck and we can both retire."

"You can do as I did."

"What's that? Whack at the right stone?"

"Well, sure. But first you must go to *El Tio*."

Fidel's face fell. "I give *El Tio* tribute."

"You have to give more."

"More? Like what?"

Vincente flushed. "I gave everything I had. You must give everything you have, also."

"I can't. If I did, my Silvia would never forgive me. She makes us go to Mass twice a week just for being in the mine in the first place. If I gave more to *El Tio*, I'd be in church seven days a week!"

Vincente laughed.

"I'm serious," said Fidel.

"Silvia would never know."

"I would know and I'm a terrible liar. Silvia can sniff a lie from a hundred feet away. She could make the Pope himself confess."

Vincente laughed and shrugged. "Well - it's your choice."

Fidel drank more. "Aren't you worried?"

Vincente raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't you worried about *El Tio*?"

"Of course not. I think you've been going to church too much." Vincente chuckled.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't laugh about it."

Vincente tried not to smile. "Fidel, when you strike a vein of silver like I did, you'll be laughing the rest of your life."

"I hope so." Fidel smiled and tried to laugh.

Fidel and Vincente finished their drinks and Fidel left. Vincente cleaned up the plates and bottles and then watched television before falling asleep. That night, his sleep was fitful and full of nightmares. When he woke, he felt drained, but shook away the feeling, instead focusing on his new life.

He spent the week exploring new restaurants and trying Chileno wines, buying new suits and picking out jewelry. When Sunday came, Fidel stopped by for a barbeque.

He looked Vincente over. "Are you feeling all right? You don't look well."

"Of course! Life is perfect."

Fidel set a paper bag and a pair of cervesas on the table.

Vincente waved away the beer. "We don't need those. Look here."

He motioned to a crate of Oro Azul tequila. "Imported tequila, Fidel."

Fidel looked over the bottles. "But we drink beer on Sundays."

"Now we can drink tequila."

Fidel popped off the beer cap. "Maybe after my beer." He glanced at the smoking grill. "*Chorizo*, like we planned?"

Vincente shook his head and uncovered the grill. "Steak."

"But I brought bread for *chorizo*."

"Steak is better than *chorizo*."

Fidel sat on the porch and drank beer as Vincente prepared the meal. As they ate, Vincente drank tequila out of a crystal snifter glass. After, he produced two fine cigars, but Fidel refused when Vincente offered him one.

"I provide food and drink and then you insult my hospitality by refusing a cigar?" Vincente asked.

"I quit smoking," said Fidel. "I told you two weeks ago."

"Well, no one says you can't have just one cigar."

"I promised Silvia."

"It's only one cigar."

Fidel looked hard at Vincente. "You've changed, Vincente. You're not like yourself. You only care about expensive things and before you've had time to enjoy them, you're onto another thing."

"That's not true."

"It is true. Every week you've gotten worse and worse. I barely recognize you anymore. You've lost weight. Your skin is ashy. Your eyes are red."

Vincente scowled. "I haven't changed."

"You have." Fidel stood. "Thanks for the meal. Let me know when the real Vincente gets back."

Fidel left the porch and strode up the road. Vincente was surprised and irritated by his friend. After all he did to let Fidel enjoy some of the good life. Vincente drank a shot of tequila before going inside and looking at himself in the bathroom mirror. His arms, which had always been thin, were like sticks. His hair, ever black, had gone gray. The skin across his face was sunken. It was as if he'd been sucked dry and a living skeleton remained.

He grabbed a coffee mug on the sink edge and flung it across the room. It shattered in a hundred pieces. How dare *El Tio* give him all these riches and then take away his health? That hadn't been part of the deal.

Vincente spent the next few minutes cursing *El Tio* before he calmed himself and went outside. He needed to walk. He wound through the streets to the park. Dark pine trees stretched skyward like gigantic black claws. He walked among them, toward a fountain, when a chorus of barking startled him. Behind him ran a pack of feral dogs, teeth bared and hackles raised.

Vincente cried out and ran. His feet pounded the pavement, barely keeping ahead of the pack. Their howls grew nearer. Vincente bolted across the street and into a bar. He waited for the dogs to come in after him, but they stopped just outside. Vincente sat down to steady himself. Where the hell had the dogs come from?

He took a deep breath and turned to the bartender. "A *cervesa*, please."

The bartender shook his head. "We're all out."

"What? Why?"

"It's Sunday. Delivery comes tomorrow."

Vincente swore. He strode to the door, peeked outside to make sure the dogs were gone, and stepped outside. He walked quickly to the next bar. Inside, he found that they, too, were out of *cervesa*. He stopped at two more bars, finding the same result, before he gave up and returned home.

Two days later, he went to the expensive restaurant, El Sol, and ordered well-done *befé chorizo*. The meat came rare. He sent it back and it returned, but this time overcooked.

The next day, he bought an expensive ticket to the Wednesday night soccer match, but the match was canceled when the opposing team's bus broke down.

His luck grew worse with every passing day. He watched movies, and projectors broke. He bought high-end beer, and it was flat. Milk was spoiled. Bread was moldy. Zippers broke. Bulbs burned out.

As the days turned into weeks and months, his anxiety grew. Shadows scared him. Strange sounds kept him in a constant state of panic. Flickering lights drove him to paranoia.

Fidel wouldn't come around anymore. He said Vincente was too difficult to be around. Vincente didn't leave his home, didn't eat more than a morsel of bread, and didn't sleep more than an hour at a time.

And, as a sallow-skinned, sunken-eyed creature, he realized his error, his misunderstanding. He had made a deal with the Devil and the Devil had already collected his prize. How could he enjoy life's pleasures with no soul?

For the first time in months, he stood, went to the front door and ventured outside. The bitter wind keened. The stars gleamed like a thousand malicious eyes. The moon shone a spotlight down on his pitiful shell of a body.

He knew what he had to do. Drawing his strength, he stepped out onto the street and began to climb the steep hill. Two streets later, he stopped. Cerro Rico loomed above him like a temple. One foot slowly in front of the other, he climbed. Over the rocks and the boulders and the gullies and crevices, he climbed. He didn't stop until he reached the mouth of the mines.

The dark maw leered at him hungrily and Vincente had to fight not to flee. He drew out a lighter and entered the mountain.

Though he had navigated the tunnels a thousand times, everything seemed different. But somehow, he was drawn in, as if pulled by the mountain itself. Before he realized what he was doing, he was on the sixth level, crawling on all fours, strength drained and nearly sapped of courage.

He rounded the final bend and almost collapsed. *El Tio* glowed in the candlelight. His sunken eyes stared out, unblinking, frozen forever in malice.

Vincente's muscles fought against him as he reached into his pocket and withdrew a piece of paper. He stretched out and laid it at *El Tio*'s cloven hooves. Next to it, he placed a set of keys, his wallet, and a thin gold ring.

"There," Vincente rasped. "It's done. That's everything I have. My home. My car. My money. Everything. I don't want it anymore. It's nothing but trickery and lies. All of it. You can have your silver and riches. You can keep them. But tonight, I'm reclaiming my soul. You can peddle your wares to someone else."

Vincente pushed himself up and stood unsteadily.

"I only want what's rightfully mine."

Vincente stared at *El Tio* and his courage grew. Somehow, from somewhere, he found the strength to straighten his back and lift his chin. Then, with a final glare at the Devil, Vincente left the cave.

With every level he ascended, his legs pushed harder up the ladders. His arms pulled with more strength. His confidence grew and he allowed a smile to form. At the Second Level tunnel, the floor and walls began to shake. Vincente climbed faster, but the mountain seemed to roar in fury and the ceiling began to crumble. Vincente ran, dodging the stones as best he could. He raced up the ladder to the First Level tunnel and rushed toward the exit when a section of the ceiling fell on him.

For a long time, Vincente heard and saw nothing. Pain wracked him and, when he tried to move, his body didn't respond. At last, feeling came back to his left hand. He wriggled his fingers and some of the rubble was knocked aside. Little by little, he pushed and squirmed until he slid out of the rock pile. He crawled slowly, aching, up the last length of the tunnel and then out of the maw of the mountain.

Cold Andean air came at him in a rush. Vincente drank it in. He rolled on his back and gazed up at the sky. The canopy of stars and the silver-white moon baptized him with their light. He cradled his right arm and knew it would never work the same again. But he had survived.

Vincente struggled to his feet and looked down at Potosi. The city's lights seemed to welcome him like a long-lost friend. Vincente climbed down Cerro Rico for the last time.

The End

Caleb Jordan Schulz has nomadic blood. He's lived on the East Coast, in the Midwest and overseas. He's hitchhiked in Colombia, camped out in the Amazon and played soccer at 15,000 feet in the Bolivian Andes. When he's not handling jaguars or swimming with piranhas, he writes. His work has appeared in *Atomjack Magazine*, *Crossed Genres Magazine* and will appear in *Ray Gun Revival*. His web musings and travel adventures can be found at: www.theright2write.blogspot.com.

Have you ever heard of Bottomless Lake, in the heart of Buda, on a patch of green surrounded by buildings? Every time I left the city to visit my relatives in the country, the bus stopped there before leaving Budapest.

Bottomless Lake Bus Stop

By Bogi Takács

At that time, Budapest was full of monsters. I was a kid, with family who recently moved to the capital from the country, and every nook and cranny was crammed full of terrifying mysteries. I ate up the urban legends, the tales, the stories children tell to each other, all to provide a solid foundation for my fear of the unknown. After all, it's much more comfortable to be afraid of the dragon than to be at the mercy of baseless, free-floating anxiety.

The dragon, as one story went, lived in the Gellért Hill Tunnel. I read this in an actual book, with corresponding illustrations and therefore, an air of mythical believability, even though by that point, I was well aware that the contents of children's books were not necessarily real. I passed through the Tunnel several times a week, sitting on a chugging bus, staring out of the window. The dragon was nowhere in sight, but I knew that if I were to step through one of the service doors to the side, I would find myself in its lair.

How the dragon got there, being too large to fit through human-sized doors, I had no idea. Maybe when it was just an egg, abandoned by its mother and scooped up by a Transport Company worker, taken to the service area to hatch there among the warm tubes and the air pumps. I could only guess, as at that point, I had already returned the book to my newfound friend, Juli, who had originally lent it to me, and tried hard to forget about it.

As I grew up, the monsters faded into memory, less and less real with every step taken on the path to adolescence and then adulthood. Yet, there was one being whose existence I could never completely discount.

Have you ever heard of Bottomless Lake, in the heart of Buda, on a patch of green surrounded by buildings? Every time I left the city to visit my relatives in the country, the bus stopped there before leaving Budapest. I became obsessed.

How deep was the lake? Adults vehemently denied its bottomlessness each time I asked, but yet provided me with contradictory answers. Twenty meters. Thirty. Forty. Just five. Even twenty was astonishing for me, given that the largest lake in Hungary, Lake Balaton, was less than fifteen meters at its deepest. And for every adult who came up with a mundane answer was another one who had a mystery for me.

Nowadays, you can look up these pseudo-facts on the Internet, on more daring tourism websites and in urban myths collections, and indeed, when I do so now, I find many of the tales I was told at that time. One stated that the lake was originally a mine and miners were flooded when they hit upon a spring, to die there. The site was indeed part of a mine more than a hundred years ago, but more official histories of Budapest claim that the empty hole was simply filled up with water after recultivation. However, there are many hot springs underneath the city, so there could be some truth to this old wives' tale, if not for the fact that the water of Bottomless Lake is cold.

Various urban legends state that dead bodies - sometimes whole bodies, sometimes just skeletons - surface from time to time, and one event even bears the official seal of approval: divers found a suitcase with several million *forints* in it, never claimed by its rightful owner. What were divers up to in the lake - who knows? Looking for cadavers? Maybe even the original owner of the suitcase?

With Juli, we decided to investigate. Our plan was to come home from summer camp a day early - "of course our parents know" - and get off the bus before it reached Central Station at Népliget. We had no idea how, or where, we would spend the night before we turned up in Népliget the next day. It wouldn't have worked if not for Juli's eccentric uncle who posed as her dad on the telephone, and he was also the one who picked us up at the lake. "What, did you seriously expect I would let you spend the night alone?" This was the eighties and Budapest was relatively safe, but not *that* safe, at least so he thought.

In person, I quickly realized he was one given to paranoia, even if, at that age, I would have opted for a lengthier description, not being familiar with the concept. While we lay in wait, he told us stories about eldritch horrors, abominations from the deep, in convoluted sentences the half of which completely went over our heads. He had a thin, long face and skin so pale I wondered if he ever ventured out during the day - from then on, he would be a semi-regular character in my nightmares, despite his good-boy impression and conservative haircut.

He brought a turtle with him, a small pond slider you could buy in any pet shop. For some reason, these aquatic animals were *en vogue* in the eighties - much later, I read a tongue-in-cheek short story by a Russian writer who claimed this was because of a surplus in one of the republics of the USSR and, with the vagaries of the planned economy, soon every child in the Eastern Bloc had a turtle. *Ma, can you buy me one? They are soo cheeap!* I could believe the theory, especially since, after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, these oddball pets rapidly went out of fashion.

"When kids like you get bored of their turtles, they often bring them down here," Juli's uncle whispered. "All those intruders could ravage the ecology of the lake and yet, nothing happens. I think I have an idea why...."

The small animal tottered toward the edge of a plank. We watched, enraptured.

It happened too fast and the stalks of reeds obscured the view and it was dark, the streetlights were far away...

But still, to this day, I am perfectly sure that a tentacle rose up from the water and, without a sound, scooped up the little lump of flesh and vanished below the surface.

I glanced at Juli, her round face like the moon - she did not resemble her uncle, not in the least - and saw her bite her lower lip, squeeze her fingers to a fist, fight her urge to cry. The uncle looked vindicated and, for a moment there, I wanted to kick him.

Then the silent spell passed and we headed back toward the bus stop. It was very late - I was surprised; where did all that time vanish? - but still, I insisted on going home, not to Juli's or worse, still, her uncle's place. They had to accompany me all the way, under yellow streetlights, along empty avenues. My mom yelled at me. My dad stared in utter disapproval, not saying a word. I climbed under the sheets as fast as I could, but sleep was a long time coming.

From then on, every conversation with Juli would be strained and we slowly drifted apart. When her family moved to Debrecen, we exchanged addresses, promising each other to be the best penpals ever, but the novelty of letter-writing soon wore off. We never got back in touch.

Maybe we were mistaken. Maybe it was the excitement, combined with the late hour and the wait. Maybe it was something about Juli's spooky uncle and my overactive imagination.

But every time a tourist asks me about the hot springs, I wonder what lurks beneath the city - I even have a little conspiracy theory that the monster drove the Ottoman Turks away. Yet, the Turkish baths still remain, probably with better plumbing measures to keep unwelcome intruders away. And where does the heat come from? You can talk about geothermal gradients as much as you wish, but the fact remains that Hungary has several anomalous hot spots underground, which neighbouring countries seem to lack - and the largest such spot is in Budapest...or maybe I am cherry-picking from half-truths, keeping only the ones that suit me?

I don't know, and maybe it signals a certain weakness of character, but I am not sure I have to answer that question for myself and possibly for you. The monster remains.

THE END

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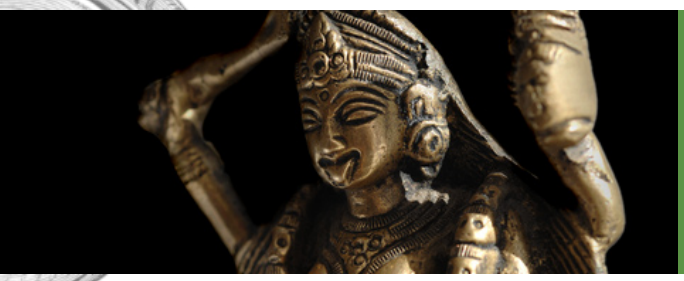

Her teeth were bared and her tongue dangled snake-like. Staring out of the terrifying black mask, though, were eyes that exuded motherly concern.

Kali Yuga

By Sanford Allen

Sunil began complaining about the statue of Kali Ma the instant he saw it on the shelf behind the reception desk.

Aarti knew he would.

"Do you really need to put this in view of customers?" Sunil said, picking up the black, four-armed statue and turning it over in his hands.

Aarti watched as her husband pretended to shudder at the sight of Ma's fanged mouth, her dangling red tongue.

"When someone checks into a hotel," he said, "they want to see a sign offering them a free continental breakfast. Or cable TV. Or Wi-Fi. They don't want to see the Black Mother dancing over Shiva's body with a garland of skulls around her neck."

Aarti turned her attention back to the computer as she keyed in invoices. Stay calm and let Sunil fume, she thought. This was an argument she would win.

"Are you really telling me not to display a statue of a goddess my family has been devoted to for generations?" she said, not looking up from the screen. She pushed a strand of wavy black hair behind her ear. "I can't believe you're so embarrassed of our culture. You live here 15 years and you start to forget you're Indian."

Sunil put the statue back on the shelf, shaking his head.

"Correction: This is part of *your* culture, not mine," he said. "Maybe it's acceptable to Bengalis, but we Punjabis don't devote ourselves to gods that scare away customers. What's wrong with a nice statue of Ganesh sitting cross-legged and content? Or Lakshmi, peacefully holding a lotus flower?"

"Kali is a compassionate goddess. Some of our most famous Bengali poets were devoted to her. Besides, this is the *Kali Yuga*, the Age of Kali, on the Hindu calendar."

"I don't dispute a word of what you're saying. But don't you think a black-skinned woman with fangs and a sword sends the wrong signal to customers?"

"Ma, she doesn't kill people; she kills demons. Surely, you remember the story from childhood. How Kali saved the world from the demon Raktabija. The gods couldn't kill the demon because every drop of his blood that fell to the ground would turn into another demon. Ma spread her tongue across the battlefield so that, when their swords cut him, not a single drop hit the ground."

Aarti peered up from the screen and saw Sunil slip the statue back on the shelf. Looking at it with something close to a smirk, he ran a hand through his thick hair. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as if the discussion had already exhausted him.

After three years of marriage, Aarti had learned that the key to winning any argument with Sunil was to remain calm while he became more and more flustered. He was well on his way.

"We Bengalis have a long history of honouring Kali," she said. "So, you will just have to deal with it, *pati*. I'm a Bengali and a devoted Hindu, and I'm not embarrassed to be either thing."

Sunil exhaled and pursed his lips.

"You're devoted enough to have your daily *puja* to Kali Ma," he said. "But you seem to forget that it's also part of the Hindu religion that a wife should treat her husband as God in his house."

Aarti looked up again to see Sunil push the statue close to a potted fern, apparently hoping the plant's wide green fronds would obscure it from customers. He shook his head disdainfully.

She turned her attention back to the computer screen, pretending none of this bothered her. *That's it*, she thought, l*et him get rattled. Let him shake his head and throw a tantrum*.

"Devoted husband, do you forget that, after I finished my master's degree, I agreed to follow you here to North Dakota - far from my family and far from job opportunities - so that you could take over this motel? Do you forget that I am also putting off a career so we can start a family?"

She didn't look up, but rubbed her hand over the front of her orange-and-yellow *salwar kamee*z, feeling the roundness that her belly had taken on during the past four months.

"There's always Bismarck State. Once you've had the baby, you can - "

"Can what? Pursue a doctorate in plant sciences or veterinary microbiology? My Masters is in mass communications. Those programs don't do me a bit of good."

Silence. Sunil let out an exasperated sigh.

"I've got too much to do to spend time arguing over a stupid statue," he said. "The Wi-Fi's out again. I'll be in the office fixing it."

He slammed the door.

Aarti smiled to herself, keyed in a few more invoices and walked to the shelf behind the counter. She slid the statue away from the obscuring fronds of the palm.

Mickey tapped a cigarette from his crumpled pack, stuck it between his lips. He returned the nearly-empty pack to the pocket of his oil-smeared jeans jacket.

Through the cracked windshield of his pickup, he could see the squat-brick Roadside Inn that Dan wanted them to hold up. The place looked like it had been built in the '70s and the owners were too cheap to update it. The paint on the brown trim was flaking off; the shutters were missing slats and the white sign out front was streaked with rust.

Seemed like he and Dan should be aiming a little higher if they were getting money together for a big score.

He punched the truck's lighter into the dashboard.

"So, what's the story? Why this place? Don't look like much to me."

Dan scratched at his goatee, then ran his hand over his shaved head. He frowned.

"It don't look like much is the exact reason we're gonna knock it over, dumbass. I been in there a month ago when I was working for that carpet-cleaning place. There ain't no alarm system, no security guard. There's just a dune coon couple running it."

"I thought motels had maids and handymen and shit."

"Nope. There's just the two of 'em. Mr. and Mrs. Dune Coon. They got a couple a Mexican women that come clean the place in the mornings, but they're long gone by sundown."

The lighter popped out of the dash with a declarative "thunk". Mickey pushed his long hair back from his face and lit his cigarette. He held the lighter out so Dan could torch his.

"You really think they got cash in there? Don't people use credit cards at motels?"

"This is one of them motels businessmen go to on their lunch hour," Dan said, exhaling smoke. "They don't put those things on their credit cards, Einstein, because they don't want their wives finding out."

"So, how much you figure they got in there?"

"It's Sunday night. That means banks are closed, so they'll have two days' worth of money waiting to deposit. I seen where the safe is in the office. Top of that, the bitch has got gold jewelry in the bedroom of their apartment."

Dan tapped the dashboard and licked his lips. "There's something else of hers I wouldn't mind getting, too - and I ain't talking about jewelry. She's kinda skinny, but not bad at all. Seems like she bathes, unlike most of them."

Mickey nodded. He hoped Dan was kidding about the wife, but figured he probably wasn't. He didn't exactly want to pull his partner off the woman while sirens blared in the distance. He'd done real time twice, and he didn't plan on going away again just because Dan couldn't keep it in his pants.

"Figure they got enough to get us over to Spokane?" Mickey asked. "I mean, if your buddy's saying he can cut us in on that deal, we're gonna need some decent bread."

Dan raised an eyebrow as he dragged on his cigarette.

"I guarantee you they'll have more'n that truckstop in Edgely had in the register. We coulda made out pretty good there if you'd waited to pull the trigger *after* the kid got the goddamn safe open."

"He was going for a gun down there, Dan. Swear to God, he was."

"He didn't have no gun down there. You just panicked like a bitch."

"Well, if you - "

Dan nudged him hard in the ribs. "Look," he said. "There she is. What'd I tell ya?"

Mickey looked up and saw a dark-skinned woman in a baggy orange-and-yellow outfit leave the motel's lobby with a small trashcan. Her long scarf flapped in the wind as she walked to the dumpster across the parking lot. She didn't seem to notice their truck parked across the street.

He'd pictured her skinnier, but Dan was right, she wasn't bad. Gaudy outfit left too much to the imagination, but at least she wasn't covered head-to-toe in one of those black tent things.

"I'd hit it," Mickey said. He took a drag.

"Let's get outta here." Dan cranked the engine. "We'll come back once it's dark. Do the job."

A chill October breeze blew into the office as Aarti closed the glass door behind her. She put the trashcan under the reception desk and slipped into the sweater she kept draped over the chair. As cold as it was getting, she guessed it wouldn't be long before the first freeze and the months of snow that followed.

She cupped her hands over her mouth and blew into them. Tonight might even be a good time to move the chili and coriander plants from the patio into the office. The plants could still get light through the big windows but be safe from the wind that cut like an icy razor.

It had gotten cold in Missouri, where she and Sunil met going to school. But nothing like this. She had survived one Bismarck winter, but just barely. To stay warm, she cooked as much as she could in the apartment, wore a wool hat and bulky North Face jacket when she sat behind the counter. Even with the heater on high, the breeze that blew into the lobby chilled to the bone.

The weather wasn't the only thing she didn't like about Bismarck, though. At least in Missouri, there was a temple, a place to rent Hindi films, to buy groceries. Here, she had to mail-order cooking ingredients or grow her own. She

remembered going to the Cash Wise when they first moved to Bismarck and asking the stock boy for black mustard seeds, only to have him direct her to jars of Grey Poupon.

She heard Sunil in the hall near the lobby talking to the cleaning crew in his bad Spanish. Hers wasn't particularly good, but she always felt embarrassed for him when she heard him stumbling clumsily through the language.

"Chupa la alfombra?" Sunil, she thought, *you're telling her to **suck** the carpet. **Aspirar** la alfombra. Aspirar.* She tried in vain to will the instruction into his head.

No use, she thought, *Sunil is a numbers-oriented person, and you are a language-oriented person. That's all there is to it.*

Eventually, Sunil stopped butchering the Spanish language and the cleaning cart's squeaking wheels receded down the hall.

He walked into the lobby, his eyes immediately fixing on Kali Ma, no longer obscured by the palm. Exhaling loudly, he edged the plant closer to it again.

"Can't you find some other place to put that, Aarti? In the apartment, maybe?"

"No, and that's final. It's part of my heritage and my family's traditions. My father and his business partners have a statue of Kali Ma in the lobby of their office in Kolkata. Don't you want a blessing on our place of business?"

"Aarti, I don't want you to stop giving puja to Kali. I just wish you'd realize this isn't Kolkata. People here are suspicious of foreigners. Look, I've lived in the U.S. since I was 13, but when I walk through the aisles at the Cash Wise, some of these people still look at me like I'm planning the next 9-11 attack. Who knows what they think when they see a statue of a woman with skulls around her neck?"

"Their religion's symbol is a bleeding man nailed to a cross. I don't think they have room to judge."

Aarti opened her spice tin and measured mustard seeds into the mortar and pestle. As she ground them, they gave off their familiar smell - bitter yet inviting.

It reminded her of the *muri* she would buy from the street vendors on Chowringhee Avenue in Kolkata. How she'd craved it since she'd begun carrying the baby - puffed rice, onions and chilies, drizzled with mustard oil and tamarind. She and her sister, Ajanta, would eat it off of a folded banana leaf and lick the sticky, sour tamarind from their fingers.

Aarti ran a finger through the mustard seeds, making sure they were ground finely enough. She emptied the crushed seeds onto a small plate next to sliced chilies and nigella seeds so they would all be close when she started cooking.

She didn't miss Kolkata's smog, the trash-strewn gutters, the frenzied traffic. But she did crave its vibrancy. Everything here felt so still, so isolated.

Here, people liked bland food. They were afraid of eating with their hands. Somehow, they could exist in unbearable cold.

Looking up from the kitchenette counter, she saw Sunil splayed out on the living room couch, a football game on the television. Thankfully, he was too absorbed in the game to notice how late she was with dinner.

She wondered how Sunil could sit glued to a three-hour game that was nothing but big men running into each other, yet complain that her movies were too long, too full of songs.

The buzzer from the front desk sputtered angrily. She looked up. Sunil was already standing to answer it.

"I'll get that. Let's just hope your Kali Ma hasn't frightened away the guest before I get to the front desk." He wagged his tongue at Aarti as he walked past. She scowled back.

She knew the statue still bothered him, but at least he could joke about it now. Perhaps this was a positive sign.

The door to the lobby closed behind Sunil, and Aarti walked to the freezer. She pulled out a bag of okra. Fresh was so much better, but it was near-impossible to find here, especially once the weather cooled.

She dropped the bag in the sink, and heard the familiar "ka-ching" of the cash register from the lobby. This time, though, a loud thump followed. She heard raised voices, and then a second, louder thump.

She froze, unsure whether to go to the door and see what had happened. Had Sunil knocked over that stupid gumball machine again? Or was something wrong?

More raised voices and a crash.

Aarti looked first at the door, then to her cell phone on the kitchen table. She reached for the handset.

The door exploded open, and a gaunt man with long hair and a dirty jeans jacket strode into the apartment, a black pistol at arm's length.

"Get down on the floor unless you want a bullet in the face," he shouted, a drop of spit shooting from his mouth.

"Where's my husband?" Aarti raised her hands, leaving the phone on the table. "What did you do to my husband?"

"He's kissing the floor right now. Same thing you need to do. Get down. *Now*."

Aarti squatted and began to lower herself to the floor. She could have dropped faster, but didn't want to risk hurting the baby. The man cursed, grabbed the back of her neck and shoved her to the floor, smacking her head against the cold linoleum.

"I told you to get *down*."

He brought back his boot, and Aarti curled into a ball, tucking her legs up to protect her stomach. The kick connected with her shin. She yelped as currents of pain shot through her leg.

"Now, tell me where you got your jewelry."

"The bedroom," she gasped, holding her shin. "It's in the bedroom. Where's my husband?"

Sunil staggered into the room and tumbled to the floor. His shirt was hanging open and blood dripped from his hairline.

A second intruder - a man with a shaved head, goatee and a worn leather jacket - followed. He kneeled and poked a pistol into Sunil's face, just below his eye.

"Ain't no other safe in the building? There wasn't jack shit in the one you opened up out there."

Sunil shook his head. He seemed dazed. What had they done to him? How badly had they hurt him?

"No other safe," he said. "No other safe."

"We probably got all the cash," the long-haired man said. "She said there's jewelry in the bedroom."

"Bullshit," the one with the goatee said. "There wasn't even a hundred bucks in there. I say they got another safe hid somewhere."

He smacked Sunil across the forehead with his gun. Aarti screamed. Her husband twitched once and lay still.

"Leave him alone! He told you the truth!" Her vision blurred and she realized tears were clouding her eyes.

"You shut up," the bearded man said, aiming the gun at her. "Unless you want me to kill the both of you."

He turned to his partner.

"Go back into the bedroom, get the jewelry and anything else worth taking. I'm gonna have a little talk with our girlfriend here, see where they got the rest of the money hid."

The long-haired man nodded and left the living room. The one with the beard grabbed Aarti by the collar of her *salwar kameez* and dragged her across the floor. She tried to tear his fingers from the hem of her shirt, but he held tight.

He yanked her through the bathroom door and slammed her against the side of the tub. With one tug, he ripped down the blue-and-purple-flowered shower curtain, its plastic rings raining onto the discoloured linoleum.

The man jerked Aarti to her feet. She thrust out her hands, tried to push him away. But he kept his fist tight around the material of her shirt and thrust the pistol into her face.

"You wanna get shot? Is that it? Hands up."

Shutting her eyes, Aarti raised her hands. She realized they were shaking now, barely in her control. She breathed in, tried to calm herself.

Something cold snapped around one of her raised wrists, digging tightly into the flesh. There was a clank of metal, and she felt the man's calloused hand around her other wrist, jerking her upward. Cold metal snapped around that one too, and she felt herself dangling, standing on tip toes.

She opened her eyes and looked up. Her hands were cuffed on either side of the curtain rod, the cuffs' short connecting chain stretched over the top.

"How about that?" the man said. "Just like on *COPS*."

He stepped close enough to Aarti that his stomach touched hers. She twisted herself, trying to recoil.

The cigarettes on his breath, the medicine smell of his aftershave, made her sick. She thought of Sunil bleeding on the floor in the other room. She gagged. If she had anything in her stomach, she would have vomited it onto the bathroom floor.

"We're gonna stop playing games now, understand? You gotta have more money somewhere around here, so tell me where it's hid."

"There's - There's no other safe. We don't have any more money." Please, she thought, *just let them realize there's nothing else to take. Let them go away.*

The man curled his fingers around the waistband of Aarti's pants. His knuckles were rough against her hip. She gagged again and bit her lip.

"You sure there ain't no more money? Don't keep none hid under the mattress or anything?"

She shook her head, closing her eyes again, gulping in breath. She was sobbing now. Her shoulders and wrists hurt as she dangled from the curtain rod.

She flashed on the statue of Ma in the lobby. Ma was here to protect Sunil and her. She breathed deep, trying to steady herself, to stop crying. She opened her eyes.

The long-haired man was standing in the bathroom doorway now. He held up a pillowcase and shook it. Metal clinked inside.

"Got the jewelry. I'm going back to the office, keep an eye out to make sure no one drives up." He paused, looking Aarti up and down. "If you're gonna do something with her, make it fast."

"Hey, don't you worry about me. Romeo can make 'em scream in no time." The goateed intruder nodded his head toward the living room. "If dumbshit over there wakes up and starts anything, put a bullet in him."

The other man left the doorway.

"Just you and me now, sister." The man with the beard ran the cold barrel of his pistol down Aarti's cheek and smirked. He jerked her pants down to her ankles. She felt chill air on her skin and winced, curling one leg over the other.

"Don't do this. You have all the money."

The man stepped behind her and pulled up the long tail of her kameez, holding it at the small of her back. Something cold touched the back of her thigh and she cringed. It was the gun barrel.

She closed her eyes again. Kali Ma's face flashed across the back of her eyelids, mouth open in a bloodthirsty grin. Her teeth were bared and her tongue dangled snake-like. Staring out of the terrifying black mask, though, were eyes that exuded motherly concern.

Please, Ma, help me. Help us.

Aarti twisted her body, trying to wriggle away from the man, but he put an arm around her waist and pulled her back, pressing his cheek against hers. His beard prickled against her neck.

"Don't do this," she said, surprised at how flatly the words came this time. "I'm pregnant."

"In that case, you understand how this works. Might as well enjoy it."

Aarti kept her eyes shut. She concentrated on the grinning blue-black face of Kali Ma. She who cast aside negativity. The slayer of demons.

"Om Kring Kalikaye Namaha, Om," she said under her breath. *I bow to you, Kali*. She repeated the mantra, louder, and again.

"Shut up with that." The man grabbed a fistful hair, jerking her head back. "You're gonna make me lose my hard-on before I even get my pants down."

"Om Kring Kalikaye Namaha, Om." She ignored the pain at the back of her scalp and repeated the mantra. Again and again.

As she spoke the syllables, the world around her faded.

All she could see was Kali Ma in her triumphant dance, Shiva at her feet, the severed arms and legs of her enemies strewn across a broken battlefield. As Kali's ankle bells jingled in time with the mad dance, all other sounds around her faded. The bells shimmered in her ears like cymbal crashes.

Aarti was vaguely aware of someone tugging her hair again. This time, there was no pain. She heard a faint voice submerged beneath the jangling of Kali's bells, but she couldn't make out a word of it. She had joined the dance, become one with the Black Mother.

"Om Kring Kalikaye Namaha, Om." She laughed as she uttered it this time. Kali continued her dance, mouth open in a blood-drunk smile, tongue weaving like a cobra prepared to strike. Her eyes were glowing yellow points. A third opened in the middle of her forehead.

Under the thunderous bells, a distant scream. Was it in the next room? In the next universe? Another scream. Gunshots. They too could have been a world away.

Kali's frenzied dance continued, her sword slashing the air. Its blade moved too fast to see, a blue-grey smear. Severed heads plummeted from the sky, terror-filled eyes bursting from their sockets. Arms, legs, chunks of meat rained down. The Black Mother's tendril-like tongue darted at impossible speed, consuming every drop of gore before it touched the ground.

Aarti smiled, let her head loll as Kali's dance reached its climax. The Black Mother's hands chopped at the air; her feet propelled her impossibly far from the ground with each stride. The sound of ankle bells, of her feet cracking the earth drowned out every other sound.

Eventually, the goddess' movements became more languid, and the cacophony of the bells subsided. She whirled her final pirouettes. The scene of carnage faded away.

Aarti breathed deeply. There was a coppery taste in the back of her mouth. She realized no one held her hair any longer.

She opened her eyes and saw her hands upraised toward the bathroom's flickering fluorescent light, palms touching. The handcuffs were gone. She was alone there, the apartment silent.

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Mickey looked down at the speedometer. The orange needle twittered crazily between 105 and 110. His knee was locked, his foot jamming the accelerator down as far as it would go.

Dan shook in the passenger seat, his knuckles white around the grip of his pistol. "What the fuck was that back there? It couldn't have been real. Just stepped out of the bathroom mirror. Out of the goddamn *mirror*."

Mickey grunted, eyes locked on the road. None of this would have happened if they'd have just taken the money in the safe and gotten out. He shuddered as he thought of the four-armed black thing that had followed Dan out of the bathroom. The thing with teeth like a pit bull and goddamn severed arms hanging around its waist like a skirt.

"I shot right at it, man." Dan looked at him, eyes wide and crazy. "It just disappeared, then it was there behind me. That shit can't be real."

"We both saw it. It was real."

He looked into the rear-view mirror and saw two glowing yellow points behind them. Headlights. Who the fuck was it? Fast as he was going, they were still keeping pace. Goddamn cops. No, if it was the cops, the red-and-blues

would be flashing. He squinted, looked into the mirror again. The yellow lights weren't exactly round, more the shape of eyes. A third winked into view, just above the other two.

Dan twisted himself around on the seat, looking out the back window. He was screaming now. The gun jerked in his hands as he fired out the window, the shots deafening inside the cab. The glass fell like a glittering green curtain.

Mickey put every bit of his strength into jamming the accelerator. He saw Dan screaming, but no sound came from his mouth. The engine vibrated through his leg, but he couldn't hear it, either.

He turned his eyes back to the road. In the glow of the headlights, the highway surface had changed from dull grey to the colour of cherry candy.

The whole strip of road seemed to heave, like something had grabbed it on one end and given it a shake. The truck bounced, wheels coming off the ground for a split second. The yellow center line was gone, replaced by a deep cleft.

Mickey looked into the mirror again. This time, the three glowing eyes were connected to a face, a blue-black face that covered the entire horizon. The glistening crimson road in front spilled from its grinning mouth, teeth like a pit bull's.

He joined Dan in the soundless scream and jerked the wheel to the side.

"Thanks for the tea, ma'am," Officer Cloonan said, his hand on the lobby door. "Never had it with the spices in there like that."

Aarti nodded. "You're welcome." She rubbed her wrist. It still hurt where the handcuffs had been.

The officer seemed nice enough - they all had - but she wanted him to go. She was tired of questions. It seemed like all she'd done these past hours was answer questions.

"You sure you two are going to be OK?"

"Fine," she said. "I'm sorry Sunil wasn't feeling well enough to talk. With his concussion, the doctor said he needs bed rest."

Cloonan put on his flat-brimmed hat and pushed open the door a couple of inches. Wind whistled into the lobby.

"Well, at least that pair won't be bothering anyone else. They're still picking pieces of them up from the Interstate." Cloonan shook his head. "Weirdest thing, though. Usually, when there's a high-speed rollover like that, there's blood everywhere. And I mean *everywhere*. Seen it happen. This time, they didn't find one drop of blood. Not on the road, not even inside the truck."

Aarti opened her mouth but said nothing. The coppery taste on the back of her tongue returned. She covered her mouth and coughed nervously.

Cloonan looked down. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Got carried away there. Sometimes, I forget people don't want to hear the gory details."

Aarti smiled and nodded quickly.

"Well, you take care, ma'am."

After Cloonan left, Sunil walked into the lobby, a thick pad of gauze taped to his forehead. His right eye was swollen nearly shut.

"Was that the police again?"

"Yes, *pati*. The officer was just checking up. You really should be in bed."

Sunil put his arm around Aarti's waist and touched her stomach. "I just wanted to make sure you and the baby were fine."

"Yes. We're fine."

Before Sunil walked back into the apartment, he slid the potted palm away from the statue of Kali Ma.

The End

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There were candles all over the room. He had never seen so many candles before. To have lighted that many candles in his shanty would have invited the walls to go up in flames.

The Hunger Houses

By Raymond G. Falgui

The food appeared every night, but the squatters knew enough not to eat it.

Their homes were nothing but flattened cardboard boxes leaning against the vine-covered walls of the great houses, but those shacks had housed generation after generation of squatters, and they had learned the ways of the neighbourhood much as their peasant forebears had learned the ways of the forest, field, and mountain. Their ancestors had learned to placate the aswang, the manananggal, the kapre; the descendants had learned to fear the may-ari, the owners of the houses.

Before the Second World War, the neighbourhood had been the playground of Manila's elite. The great houses were like palaces and like palaces, they all seemed the same - each with its wide balconies, hanging gardens and circular driveways. Now they were also similar in their ruin - the driveways overgrown with weeds, the gardens dead, the balconies empty. The families who lived in the great houses had died off or moved away; there was no one left to live in the great houses. But even decayed and abandoned, they were still not for the squatters.

The squatters first came to the city in great numbers after the war, when the breakdown of the old social order had allowed them to exchange the poverty of the country for the poverty of the city. None remained of the generation which first settled in the neighbourhood, but they had passed on their hard-won lessons to their numerous descendants. And to those who doubted the lessons, who did not believe in the stories, there would always be a new arrival from the provinces or an ambitious squatter to provide an object lesson for the rest. A squatter would climb over the walls of one of the great houses, then open their gates to his kin. He would set his family up in one of the rooms of the great houses.

Nothing would happen for days, weeks, even a month, and the other squatters sweating or shivering in their shanties would look at the darkened house, noting the one room lighted by a kerosene lamp or warmed by a cooking fire.

"The foolish ones are still there," they would tell their children and each other.

"It is only a matter of time."

For the *may-ari*, the owners of the houses, were an impatient lot and would not tolerate such insolence for long.

One night, there would be screams and on that night, the squatters would shut themselves inside their claustrophobic shanties, refusing to look out.

The next night, the great houses would be darkened again, with not even a tiny candle to brighten a single room.

Thus, the squatters learned to build their tenements alongside the walls of the great houses. The tenements grew so numerous that they seemed to be organic, a mold or fungus spreading along the walls.

But the squatters learned to leave the great houses themselves alone.

One night, there would be screams and on that night, the squatters would shut themselves inside their claustrophobic shanties, refusing to look out.

But the *may-ari*, the owners, were not content to merely protect their property. In life, they had been waited upon hand and foot, and they expected the same treatment to continue in the unlife.

So, they left food outside the gates of the great houses.

No one saw who brought the food; it just appeared.

But the squatters knew if they ate the food, the *may-ari*, the owners, would own them as well.

"The owners of the houses are too selfish," the mothers told their children.

"Look at the houses. The owners are long gone, but still they will not let us use them. The owners prefer the houses stay empty than to let us live in them.

"Look at the food, for it is given by the same, by those who give a little and take everything in return.

"If you eat even a little of the food, the owner will take you away and we will never see you again."

So, every night, the squatters sent their children to beg in the streets - to tap on car windows for change or to chase foreigners stepping out of their hotels. They sent them to beg, for they knew of nothing else to do with their children, but also to save them from the food of the great houses.

But there came a time when a new President of the Republic was elected, a man whose greatest achievement was to be born the son of an old President. Too late, Filipinos learned that rulership is not passed on like the shape of one's nose or the colour of one's skin. For the son of the old President brought hard times down upon the country. Then

the foreigners no longer came to visit and the car windows did not roll down, for the pockets of the drivers were empty.

And so, the beggar children of the squatters returned to their shanties tired and hungry, dreaming of the food of the great houses.

For one such child, dreaming was no longer enough.

One night, he did not return to his shanty, but stopped outside the gates of one of the great houses, and ate all the food he found there.

Then he laid himself down beside the gate and fell asleep looking at the stars, waiting for the *may-ari* to get him.

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When he woke up, he thought he was still looking at the stars.

Then he realized the stars were actually candles, hundreds of them. He was in a room, lying on a bed. There were candles all over the room. He had never seen so many candles before. To have lighted that many candles in his shanty would have invited the walls to go up in flames.

A door opened.

He looked up, and saw Mang Domeng enter the room.

Mang Domeng had lived with his mother, but was not his father. Mang Domeng was the father of his two youngest brothers.

He expected to see Mang Domeng here. A week before, he had seen Mang Domeng take and eat a bit of cake from the same great house that he had chosen. Mang Domeng had eaten the cake, then had lain beside his mother to sleep. In the morning, Mang Domeng was gone.

"It is time to see the *may-ari*," Mang Domeng said.

He stood up from the bed, the only soft bed he had ever known, with reluctance.

He followed Mang Domeng down the lighted corridors into the heart of the house. But as he walked, he leaned his head to one side, listening. There was a whispering in the corridors, a whispering that came from the very walls of the great house.

Mang Domeng seemed to hear nothing.

He followed Mang Domeng into a large room, a room big enough to fit all the squatters of the neighborhood and more.

The room was filled with pale men and women, whispering to each other, dancing, laughing, drinking, but not eating.

One of the pale men noticed Mang Domeng's arrival and left the others.

"I am the *may-ari* of this house," the pale man said, looking him over. "You can work on the upper floors, I think, cleaning and dusting.

"Take him away," the pale man told Mang Domeng, but he broke away from Mang Domeng's grasp and cheekily walked up to the pale man, who took a step back.

"*Kakausapin ko ang may-ari ng bahay*," he said. *I want to talk to the owner of the house*.

The speaking of the vernacular drew mixed reactions from the pale crowd.

"*Que barbaridad*," said one pale young woman, hiding her mouth with her fan.

"It's just the squatties," said a pale fat man. "We can't expect anything better of them, can we?"

The *may-ari* turned away, ignoring his request.

But he did not feel as he always did when, tapping at car windows, the drivers looked straight ahead, pretending he was not there. After a while, he started to think he was not there, either.

This time was different. Perhaps it was because he had eaten his fill. Since he knew of the fate of Mang Domeng, who had been taken after eating the smallest bit of food, he had been determined to make the most of his meal. He had finished all the food before the gate - not a scrap or crumb remained. For the first time in his life, his stomach had growled in satisfaction, not in hunger.

And, perhaps, because he was not distracted by the hunger, he could hear the whispers.

And the whispers told him what to say.

"*Kakausapin ko ang totoong may-ari ng bahay*," he said. *I want to talk to the true owner of the house*.

The party fell silent.

"You dare?" the *may-ari* asked, turning back to look at him. The pale men and women looked on with interest. The owner of the house would make the dirty-brown little boy pay for his insolence.

"You think to speak to the masters? Do you know Latin, or Sumerian, or Old Celtic? I studied Ancient Languages at the University of Barcelona, then at the University of Heidelberg.

"It was because of my knowledge of languages that I could read the old books Tito Morel brought with him after fleeing the Civil War in Spain. I read the old books and I saw what had to be done.

"The coward McArthur had abandoned us. The buck-toothed Japanese wanted us to bow to them."

The pale men and women nodded their heads.

"But that was not the worst of it. The worst of it was the people we ruled over no longer obeyed. Your people no longer knew their place. Their place was to stay bound to the land, working the fields. If they came to the city, it would be at our behest: the men to work as drivers or gardeners, the women to serve as maids for our houses or as whores for the American soldiers.

"But your people came to the city and stayed and bred like rats."

The pale men and women nodded their heads.

"That was when I called to the Old Ones. I spoke to them using the dead languages. For language has always been our power; we have always spoken the language of those with power, whether Spaniards or Americans or Old Ones. For those with power share their power with us."

The pale men and women nodded their heads.

"And the Old Ones understood! They heard my pleas! For they were here before the stars. They knew what it was to be usurped, to lose your place in the world.

"We offered them our hate and the offering was accepted."

The pale men and women nodded their heads.

"We have always fed them well on our hatred," the pale man said. "What offering can you make?"

But he was not listening to the pale man; he was listening to the whispers, he was taking instruction from the true owners of the great house. He understood that the pale man was wrong, that the languages did not matter, that all that mattered was the need, that both *may-ari* and squatter possessed such a need and that the squatter's need was stronger.

"*Gutom*," he said, answering the whispers, not the pale man. He told them of his need: *Hunger*.

"Take him away!" the pale man commanded, pointing at him with a long, smooth finger.

He ignored the shaking finger, still listening to the whispers. The Old Ones wanted blood; they wanted blood to seal the pact and he knew where to get it.

Opening his mouth, he bit off the pale man's long finger.

The pale man screamed and soon, the pale men and women were screaming as well.

But he ignored them, savoring the taste as his teeth cracked finger bones. He had been full, but now he was getting hungry again.

"This is only one dirty-brown little beggar boy!" the pale man shouted, trying to rally the others. One hand gripped the ruined one, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

"Our hate is still greater than his hunger!" the pale man shouted.

But he turned to Mang Domeng, who no longer looked at the pale man to tell him what to do.

"*Buksan mo ang pintuan*," he said. *Open the doors.*

"Nagugutom ang mga tao."

The people are hungry.

"Papasukin mo sila."

Let them in.

THE END

Raymond G. Falgui teaches English Literature at the University of the Philippines. His short stories have appeared in the *Philippines Free Press* and *Philippine Graphic* magazines, as well as the *Philippine Speculative Fiction* and *Digest of Philippine Genre Stories* anthologies. He is also a self-proclaimed Luddite who last owned a cell phone some time in 2004.

The din of the drumming and the cacophony of the chant seemed an assault on Henley's sanity, inexorably dragging him back to things he did not want to remember and never wanted to know.

Jeroboam Henley's Debt

By Charles R. Saunders

Note: This story first appeared in 1982, in the Canadian magazine Potboiler. The current version has been slightly modified by the author.

The October moon limned the old house and its surrounding copse of trees in a wan white glare. A lowslung black sedan slowly approached the driveway, then turned in. The sound the car's motor made before its driver switched off the ignition was reminiscent of the growl of an impatient beast.

The door on the driver's side opened; when he emerged, it was as though a segment of the shadowy machine had detached itself and assumed the shape of a tall, muscular man. As the driver, whose name was Theotis Nedeau, started up the porch steps, an outside light flared on, illuminating his face. Even in the light, his complexion was of a singularly dusky hue.

With a sharp squeal of hinges, the screen door flew open and a short, rotund man bounded onto the porch to greet his visitor.

"Theotis!" he cried. "It's been so long since you wired from Toronto. My God, I thought something had happened to you...."

About to catch his friend in an impulsive embrace, the smaller man, whose name was Jeremiah Henley, suddenly stepped back. For he recognized the grim set of the dark man's mouth and the glint in his narrowed eyes.

Anticipating Henley's next thought, Nedeau broke his silence.

"I was...delayed...at a gas station outside of Chatham."

Suppressed fury crackled like static electricity in his voice.

"You'd better come in and have a drink, Theotis," Henley suggested.

"Maybe I'd better."

Together, the two men hauled Nedeau's two suitcases out of the trunk of the new-model 1933 Auburn and carried them into the house. Though the suitcases were of similar weight, Henley had to labour with the one he'd chosen, while Nedeau bore his own burden easily. Once again, Henley recalled his friend's phenomenal athletic prowess,

how Nedeau had set football records that still stood and had once held his own sparring three rounds with Harry Wills, the black heavyweight even the great Jack Dempsey never dared to meet.

And he remembered a night more than a dozen years ago in Virginia, when he and Nedeau had been stopped by a policeman wanting to know exactly how a couple of "Nigras" had come by such a fine motorcar as the one they were in without having stolen it. Nedeau had flattened the policeman with one blow and they'd fled the state with a posse of cracker cops on their tail all the way up to the gates of the black college they'd been attending.

It had taken virtually all of the Dean of Men's powers of diplomacy to forestall a major racial incident. And an abrupt increase in Howard University's endowment, courtesy of Nedeau's mysteriously moneyed father, had saved Theotis from summary expulsion.

Now, Theotis Nedeau had been "delayed."

Henley shivered a little as he ensconced his friend in an overstuffed chair in the living room. Then he poured two tumblers of bourbon.

"Are Emma and the boys here?" Nedeau asked.

"No," Henley replied. "They're staying with my in-laws in Dresden, north of here. They'll be safe there."

Nedeau nodded somberly. Silence fell between the two seated figures as they sipped their bourbon. They were a study in contrast. Nedeau was black as polished ebony. The immaculate dark suit he wore barely hid the mesomorphic lines of his physique. Henley was of a *café-au-lait* complexion, with a neatly trimmed mustache and carefully pomaded hair. There were lines of worry in his face and deep shadows smudged the skin beneath his eyes. His lounging suit, though expensively tailored, was unpressed.

More than a decade had passed since the former college roommates had seen each other. Even so, they had maintained a regular correspondence. It was Henley's most recent letter, followed by an urgent telegram, that had brought Nedeau more than a thousand miles northward to Ontario....

Nedeau finished his drink, then began to talk in a flat, uninflected tone.

"I had some problems with directions," he said. "Up to a point, the guards at the Niagara Falls border crossing were helpful - after I signed a statement swearing that I won't remain in Canada longer than two weeks."

Henley shook his head. He knew the intensity of Nedeau's race pride, but it was no secret that the Canadian government officially discouraged "coloured immigration". It wasn't Nedeau's pride that was at stake now, though.

"It wasn't difficult to find my way to Toronto, where I wired you to let you know I was coming, and from there to Chatham," Nedeau continued. "But I became confused a few miles west of Chatham. I saw a gas station on the side of the road, and pulled in to ask for directions. Before I could say anything, the attendant said, 'We don't serve your kind here.' When I mentioned that I only wanted directions to Henleyville, he pulled a gun, flashed a deputy's

badge and forced me out of my car. He said he was going to arrest me for car theft."

Nedeau's fists clenched.

"He was disappointed to find that all my identification was in order - including my auto registration. But he wasn't done. He asked what I wanted in Henleyville. I told him I intended to visit an old friend. When he asked who the friend was, I was tempted to tell him it was none of his concern. But I wanted to arrive here as quickly as I could. So, I mentioned your name. For a moment, I thought he was going to shoot me. Then, strangely enough, he gave me the directions and walked back into the station without another word."

"That would be Lorne Cooder," Henley murmured half to himself. "I wouldn't be surprised if he paid us a visit tonight. Listen, Theotis, I'm sorry about...."

"Forget it," Nedeau said.

His eyes wandered to the wall above an ornate mantelpiece. There was a large square of wallpaper several shades lighter than the surrounding area, as though a picture that had hung there for a long time had suddenly been removed.

"What happened to the portrait?" Nedeau asked.

Henley started violently. His eyes widened with something akin to terror as he looked at Nedeau. Then Henley remembered their many late-night conversations about his illustrious grandfather - Jeroboam Henley.

Jeroboam Henley was a slave who had escaped to the North of the United States, then assisted fellow runaways in fleeing to sanctuary in Canada via the network of abolitionists known as the "Underground Railroad". Henley himself had finally emigrated from Ohio to Canada in protest against the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law by the U.S. Congress shortly before the start of the Civil War.

Settling in Ontario, Henley built a house and founded a self-contained community of ex-slaves. He had disdained the mass migration of blacks back to the U.S. when slavery was abolished there, and the diminished community he had founded eventually bore his name.

As Jeroboam Henley's grandson, Jeremiah had been something of a celebrity even at Howard, a college replete with the scions of illustrious men of colour. He had told Nedeau of the large portrait of old Jeroboam - who had died before Jeremiah was born - that hung over the mantelpiece of the ancestral home. Thus, it was not surprising that Nedeau remembered it now.

"I burned it," Jeremiah Henley said.

Now, it was Nedeau's turn to express shock, though for him that expression was limited to a raising of his brows followed by an intense, thoughtful gaze.

"Jeremiah," he said, "I think you'd better swallow that drink of yours, pour yourself another, then start from the beginning. I won't be able to help you until I know the whole story."

Nodding jerkily, Henley complied. There was a tremor in his hands as he finished his first drink. When he finished the second, the trembling was gone.

"It began a few weeks ago," he said. "No - even before that. I had trouble sleeping. And when I did sleep, I tossed and yelled so much that Emma took to going downstairs and sleeping on the couch. If it was nightmares, I couldn't remember them. At least, not until *that night*….

"As usual, I couldn't get to sleep. But I must have dozed off somehow, because the next thing I remember, I was sitting up in bed and Emma wasn't there. I decided to go down to the living room to talk to her. I got out of bed, went down the hall…*but my feet wouldn't let me go down the stairs!* I found myself walking past the children's room, toward the walled-over end of the hall where the stairs to the attic are supposed to be. I tried to stop myself - I had always dreaded that part of the house since my father whipped me within an inch of my life just for asking about it - but my legs wouldn't obey me.

"The closer I got to the end of the hall, the more fear I felt. My eyes were getting used to the dark, but I still wanted to put on the hall lights. I couldn't stop myself from walking in a straight line toward the hidden attic stairs. I decided I must be dreaming - but never before had I known I was dreaming while the dream was still going on.

"When I got to the end of the hall, my hands - of their own accord - pressed against certain sections of the wall. Then the whole wall slid back, not making any sound at all! I'll tell you, Theotis, I've never been more scared in my life than I was then - not even when those crackers chased us out of Virginia. I hadn't even thought of that part of the house since the beating my father gave me. And now I was at the stairs, and my feet were carrying me up into that dark attic….

"Once I got up there, though, it wasn't all that dark. There's a big dormer window in the attic and there weren't any shades to block the moonlight. The place was piled high with boxes, crates and trunks. There were black shadows between the piles. My feet carried me straight toward one of those shadows. I knelt down. My hands reached out. My fingers worked at the fastenings of a small chest I couldn't see. I opened the lid of the chest, reached in and pulled out a thick, leather-bound book of some sort. I went to the light of the window and opened the book. By then, I was in control of my actions - and I knew I wasn't dreaming.

"The moon was full. By its light, I could clearly see the writing in the book. It was a diary - my grandfather's diary."

Henley drew the back of one hand across his brow. The hand came away wet. Silently, Nedeau waited for him to continue.

"It was actually more of a record than a diary. My grandfather kept detailed listings of all the runaway slaves who passed through his 'station' on the Underground Railroad. There were scores of names. Everyone knows Jeroboam Henley helped many of his people to freedom.

"But some of the names were - *crossed out*. I didn't know what that meant until I paged further through the book, and found a special section in the back. The names that had been crossed out earlier were repeated - with monetary values entered next to them. It was like a ledger.

"Suspicion dawned...a sickening suspicion that was confirmed as I read further and understood more fully. With each word I read, a part of me died.

"Not all of the runaways who came to my grandfather's house in Ohio went on to Canada, Theotis. You know what that man was doing? *He was selling his own people to a plantation owner in Louisiana!* Not all of them, mind you. Just the ones who met the plantation owner's specifications. They had to be native African, and by the 1850s, you couldn't find many of those - so my grandfather said.

"He drugged their food, then tied them up and turned them over to the plantation owner's Northern agent, who lived in the town under the guise of a freight operator. The whites paid my grandfather well and they kept his secret. They needed him. He was the only one, other than Harriet Tubman, that the runaways trusted implicitly - *damn him!*

"There were hints in the diary that the plantation owner had some sort of hold over my grandfather. There were also suggestions that the slaves were used as sacrifices to some sort of god or devil named 'Shub-Niggurath.'"

There were hints in the diary that the plantation owner had some sort of hold over my grandfather. There were also suggestions that the slaves were used as sacrifices to some sort of god or devil named 'Shub-Niggurath.'

"I don't like the sound of that name," Nedeau interrupted.

"Neither do I!" Henley flared. "But it sure as hell didn't bother my grandfather! All he could think about was the money the plantation owner paid him! Hell, he loved it! The greedy son of a bitch!"

Overcome with emotion, Henley held his face in his hands.

"Damn," Nedeau said softly. "Jeremiah, I'm really sorry to hear that. You must have - "

"That's not all of it!" Henley cried. "There was a final name on the list of the ones my grandfather betrayed. It was an African name...'Gbomi'. He was a witch doctor of some kind, so my grandfather said. When this Gbomi realized he had been drugged, he called down a curse on my grandfather. My grandfather laughed as the African mumbled and slurred in his native tongue while being bound. He took his blood money from the plantation owner's agent and thought no more about Gbomi - not until things began to happen at night in that Ohio town.

"Strange things...a black face appearing in people's windows...cattle, sheep and dogs slaughtered mysteriously, horribly, drained of blood...splayed foot prints leading to my grandfather's house....

"The town turned against my grandfather. The people were stirred up by an element which had always been opposed to his antislavery activities. The plantation owner and his agent soon let my grandfather know that he was of no further use to them. He panicked. He fled to Canada, using his opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law as a smokescreen. But he was really running from Gbomi."

"When I finished with that damnable diary, my eyes were sore from the strain of reading by moonlight. I felt as betrayed as those slaves my grandfather sold. Then the anger came, driving everything else before it. I walked out of that attic. This time, *I* was the one controlling my actions. Enraged as I was, I still managed to step quietly, so as not to awaken my sons.

"I kept walking until I got to the living room. Emma was there, sleeping on the couch. There was a low fire in the fireplace. It got higher when I set my grandfather's diary in the flames. Then I looked over to the mantel and saw his portrait. I took it down and put it in the fireplace, frame and all.

"By the time Emma woke up, both the diary and the portrait were nothing but ashes. Emma looked at the empty wall, then at the fireplace, then at me. And she ran sobbing from the room. She gathered up the boys and left. She thought I was crazy. Maybe I was that night. Maybe I still am....

"It was not long after that night that things began to happen here - things similar to the events that forced Jeroboam Henley out of Ohio. That's why I need you, Theotis. You're the only one who can help me. Don't you see? He's come back. By all that's holy and unholy, Theotis, *he's come back*!"

"Who?" Nedeau asked quietly.

Nonplussed, Henley cried, "What do you mean, 'Who?'"

"Who do you think has come back?" Nedeau pressed. "Gbomi - or your grandfather?"

Before Henley could reply, a sudden crashing sound splintered the short silence. Both men sprang to their feet. The roar of a car motor faded in the distance as Henley and Nedeau rushed to the shattered front window. Henley bent to pick something up from the shards of glass, while Nedeau wrenched the front door open and raced outside. Only a few moments passed before he returned, his face set in a scowl of frustration.

"Couldn't get the bastard's licence number," he muttered.

"I know who it is," Henley said. "Remember, I said we'd get a visit from Lorne Cooder tonight."

Nedeau looked at him. Never before had he heard such bitterness in his friend's tone. Wordlessly, Henley handed Nedeau the red house brick that had been thrown through the window. There was a note attached:

NIGGER -

If your black friend has come to take you out of here, tell him it had better be sooner than later!

The note bore no signature.

"It's come to this," Henley said. "My neighbours show their true colours at last - lily white. It was fine for us back in the old days, when the escaped slaves came up here and the Canadians took them in so that they could fling their 'true adherence to the principles of freedom' in the faces of the Americans. But when slavery was over, we became 'niggers' again. And when something goes wrong...."

"Whoever wrote that note was right in one sense," Nedeau cut in.

"What do you mean?"

"We have no time to lose," Nedeau said as he reached for the handle of one of his suitcases. "Let's go."

"Go where?" Henley asked numbly.

"Upstairs. To the attic."

"After what you just heard about my grandfather, you're still going to help me?"

"Do you think you're to blame for what your grandfather did?"

Henley left the question unanswered.

For only the second time in his life, Jeremiah Henley stood in the cobwebbed attic of his ancestral home. Despite Nedeau's presence, Henley was experiencing even more anxiety than he had the night something outside himself had guided him to a secret better left buried with its bearer....

Except for the flicker of a row of three tapers, the attic was shrouded in darkness. Nedeau had covered the single window with a heavy quilt. Henley watched uncertainly while Nedeau carefully arranged the apparatus he had extracted from his suitcase.

Nedeau poured a sackful of sand into a shallow metal tray and spread it evenly across the bottom. From another, smaller sack he poured a fine black powder into a wooden bowl carved with geometric African designs. He took special care not to allow any of the powder to touch his skin.

Henley felt a queer sense of detachment as he observed his friend's preparations. He remembered Nedeau's almost obsessive absorption with African culture back in college, as well as how spitefully Nedeau had been ridiculed for it. All things African had been shunned by Howard students then; even the smattering of Africans attending the college were derided as "Home Boys". More than once, Henley had privately defended Nedeau's affinity for the "Home Boys". Publicly, Nedeau had always been more than capable of defending himself.

Now, Nedeau was a professor in the Howard history department and taught courses in African lore. He had even spent a year in the Gold Coast, a British West African colony. Henley thought of the letters he had received with Gold Coast postage - long, enthusiastic missives full of near-incomprehensible reports of Nedeau's studies of the magic of West African *ju-ju* men....

"I hope this voodoo of yours works," Henley said, for no reason other to break a silence that was becoming intolerable.

Nedeau looked at him. He had removed his coat and shirt, and his bare torso was even more impressive than Henley recalled. It was Nedeau's eyes, however, that caused Henley to recoil in dismay.

"Voodoo!" He spat the word as if it were a curse. "It would take more time than I have to explain to you the difference between that half-baked Haitian superstition and the true magic of Africa."

Scowling, he returned to his preparations. Henley, who remained seated on a dusty trunk, could not suppress a gasp of shock when Nedeau drew a pair of long, white bones from the suitcase.

"Leopard, not human," Nedeau said. "They were given to me by a powerful *malam* - what the ignorant would call a 'witch doctor' or '*ju-ju* man' - because I spoke on his behalf in a case brought against him by a District Commissioner. We will need them tonight.

"From the hints I gathered in your letter - confirmed by our conversation downstairs - I would say you are being stalked by a *semando* - a dead-sending."

"You mean a...zombie?"

"Worse than that. Your grandfather's enemy must have been a powerful *malam* indeed to have launched a curse that has spanned two generations."

"What is a *semando*, if it isn't a zombie?"

"A *semando* is a dead thing shaped and motivated by the will of the *malam*. The animal killings are typical of a *semando's* work, for it needs blood to build its potency to the point where it can fulfill its ultimate purpose - vengeance."

Henley shuddered. "How can such a - *thing* - be stopped?"

"With the powder in that bowl. It is *kaliloze*, meaning that it's deadly to any supernatural thing it touches. It will be the only thing that will save us when I summon the *semando* here."

"What?" Henley cried. "Have you gone insane?"

"It's the only way, man. We can't go out to seek the creature; it's a thing of the night and it would be suicidal to attempt to face it in its own element. I must lure it here, where I'll at least have a chance to get to it with the *kaliloze*.

And it *will* come. I have only to call it, using this oracle of sand and the bones of power. The *semando* will come, for what it wants is here - you."

"God!" Henley exclaimed. "This is so senseless - unreal! Savage ceremonies *here*, in 1933...."

Nedeau stood up, towering over Henley.

"You asked for my help," he grated. "If you don't want it, say so now. If you do, then you'll keep your mouth shut until this thing is over with."

Henley, well aware of the meaning of his friend's tone, fell silent. He was beginning to fear Theotis Nedeau....

Holding the leopard bones like a pair of drumsticks, Nedeau squatted before the sand-filled tray. Then he began to strike the sand with the bones, beating out a rhythmic pattern that slid and twisted like a serpent of sound through Henley's mind. While he drummed, he chanted, singing a litany in a language Henley hadn't heard before.

Nervously, Henley kept his eyes on Nedeau. Though the attic was unheated, beads of perspiration were forming on Nedeau's bare chest. Reflected candlelight transformed the droplets into shimmering liquid gems. Henley moved his gaze to the sand in the tray. The yellow grains bounced and shifted to the rhythm of the pounding bones. He could almost see *shapes* appearing in the leaping sand - the shapes of graves opening at midnight....

The din of the drumming and the cacophony of the chant seemed an assault on Henley's sanity, inexorably dragging him back to things he did not want to remember and never wanted to know. Just as he was about to shout at Nedeau to stop, a rending crash surmounted the sound of the rite.

Immediately, the drumming ceased. Nedeau's voice fell silent. He sat stock-still, like an ebony carving, his eyes fixed in a set stare at something Henley could not see.

Then the footsteps came. Footsteps that ascended the stairs at a steady, measured pace. Footsteps that grew louder as the thing that made them slowly approached the door of the attic. Footsteps that rose and fell with a squamous, sucking sound....

The footsteps stopped.

"For God's sake, Theotis," Henley shouted. "*It's here*!"

Nedeau did not move.

The attic door banged inward. Dimly, the light from the floor below illuminated the hulking, indistinct silhouette filling the doorway. The figure moved closer, catching the wavering glimmer of the candles.

Henley screamed.

The *semando* was a grotesque, misshapen thing formed of mephitic grave-mud that oozed with each sickening step it took. But it was not the lurching travesty of a body that bulged Henley's eyes and clove his tongue to the roof of his mouth. It was the face.

Crudely molded and distorted as its features were, Henley had seen them before - in the portrait that had hung over the mantelpiece downstairs. It was the face of his grandfather, Jeroboam Henley....

Crudely molded and distorted as its features were, Henley had seen them before - in the portrait that had hung over the mantelpiece downstairs. It was the face of his grandfather.

Blunt, malformed fingers reached clawlike for Henley's throat as the *semando* drew nearer. Henley could not move; sheer horror rooted him to his seat.

"*Theotis!*" he shrieked, as if the sheer sound of his terror could halt the advance of the thing with his grandfather's face.

Then a lithe, shadowy form leaped between Henley and the approaching hell-creature. It was Nedeau, cradling the wooden bowl of *kaliloze* powder in his hands. With a swift, smooth motion, Nedeau flung the bowl's contents full into the face of the *semando*.

For a single, timeless moment, the dust hung like a black miasma, enveloping the head of the *semando*. Then it spread across the death-sending's carcass like a swarm of tiny, voracious insects.

The *semando* halted its advance. Its mouth opened, but no sound issued forth. Then the mud began to slough from its form, pooling viscously on the floorboards. Mixed with the malodorous mire was the animal blood that had lent the *semando* its macabre semblance of life. Only a skeleton remained. Then that, too, collapsed, leaving only a tangle of smeared bits of calcium behind.

"You did it, Theotis!" Henley cried, his voice weak with relief. "You destroyed the thing Gbomi sent to kill me."

"It served its purpose," Nedeau said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Henley asked.

Before Henley could move, Nedeau's hands shot out and enclosed the smaller man's throat in a clasp of steel. Henley struggled with a strength born of desperation, but Nedeau held him easily. He tightened his grip, choking off Henley's outcries. But Henley's betrayed, innocent eyes mirrored the man's final question: *Why*?

Nedeau told him.

"I never mentioned much about my family back in Louisiana, Jeremiah. I never told you how we came by our name. 'Nedeau' means 'born of the water' in Creole French. In the Yoruba language of West Africa, the word

for 'born of the water' is...'Gbomi.' Gbomi - *my grandfather*. It is Gbomi who has returned, not Jeroboam Henley. Gbomi is *in me*."

Nedeau's voice was calm and steady, betraying no indication of the effort it took to keep Henley helpless in his grasp. His face was as impassive as a mask.

In a strangled voice, Henley managed to croak, "For...God's sake...Theotis...I'm...your...*friend*!"

Something softened in Nedeau's face then. His eyes blinked; his fingers began to relax.... Then, abruptly, his features contorted. An unholy flame kindled in his eyes. His lips drew back from his teeth in a rictus of sheer hatred. And the voice that issued from Nedeau's throat was not his own. The accent was thick, alien, but the words were as plain as the dates chiseled on a tombstone.

"Hen-lee...now, you die!"

Nedeau's fingers constricted. Henley's eyes popped. His tongue protruded. His cries of pain were crushed in his throat. With an abrupt wrench, Nedeau snapped Jeremiah Henley's neck. When his hands opened, a new corpse dropped to the floor beside another, far older one.

Calmly, Nedeau put on his shirt and coat. Before departing the attic, he overturned the still-burning tapers. For a moment, he watched the flames spread among the musty crates and boxes. Then he hurried down the stairs.

The Henley house blazed like a giant pyre against the night sky. Seated in his black sedan, Theotis Nedeau watched the conflagration. He knew the fire would soon be spotted even in this isolated countryside, and the man who had thrown the brick through Henley's window would return before long. By then, Nedeau would be gone, safely and anonymously back across the border while Canadian authorities sorted vainly through the maze of fictitious identification he had provided them.

His face remained expressionless as he remembered an earlier killing...the death in the Gold Coast of a man whose grandfather had sold a *malam* named Gbomi to the captain of a Yankee slave ship so many years ago. The Gold Coast man was innocent...innocent like Jeremiah Henley. Nedeau regretted those deaths.

But there was another man behind the mask of Theotis Nedeau's face...the other who had been there since the day Nedeau participated in a calling-of-the-ancestors rite in the Gold Coast. Though his bones rotted in a secret graveyard in a Louisiana bayou, the spirit of Gbomi had spanned an ocean to join with, and ultimately overwhelm, that of his grandson.

It was Gbomi who taught Nedeau the *malam*'s way: all generations were part of a single continuum, ancestors and descendants all as one. Until the debts of the forebears were paid, they must be borne by the progeny....

One more death remained to be dealt...that of the grandson of the Louisiana slave-owner who had attempted to steal the spirit of an African *malam*, then slain the *malam* as a sacrifice to a god with an unspeakable name. One more death and perhaps then, the relentless shade of Gbomi would be placated. Perhaps then, only Theotis Nedeau would dwell behind the eyes that now turned from the burning house and began to study a road map of Louisiana.

Gbomi would not allow Theotis Nedeau to weep for his friend....

The End

Charles R. Saunders has been writing fiction since the early 1970s, including four novels about a heroic character named Imaro, who swings his sword in an alternate version of Africa, and a collection of stories about an African Amazon named Dossouye. He has also had stories published in various small-press magazines, as well as paperback anthologies. He lives in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada. He invites visitors to his website: www.charlessaunderswriter.com.

Our cover artist

Cyril Van Der Haegen was born last century but still feels relatively young in spirit. He was educated in Europe and moved to the US in the early nineties. He studied art a little bit more and started working in a game company for almost a decade, then decided that he liked freedom more than cubicles and the man™ and became an independent illustrator about five years ago. He loves it so far. See his website online at http://www.tegehel.org/

R'lyeh or Bust!

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