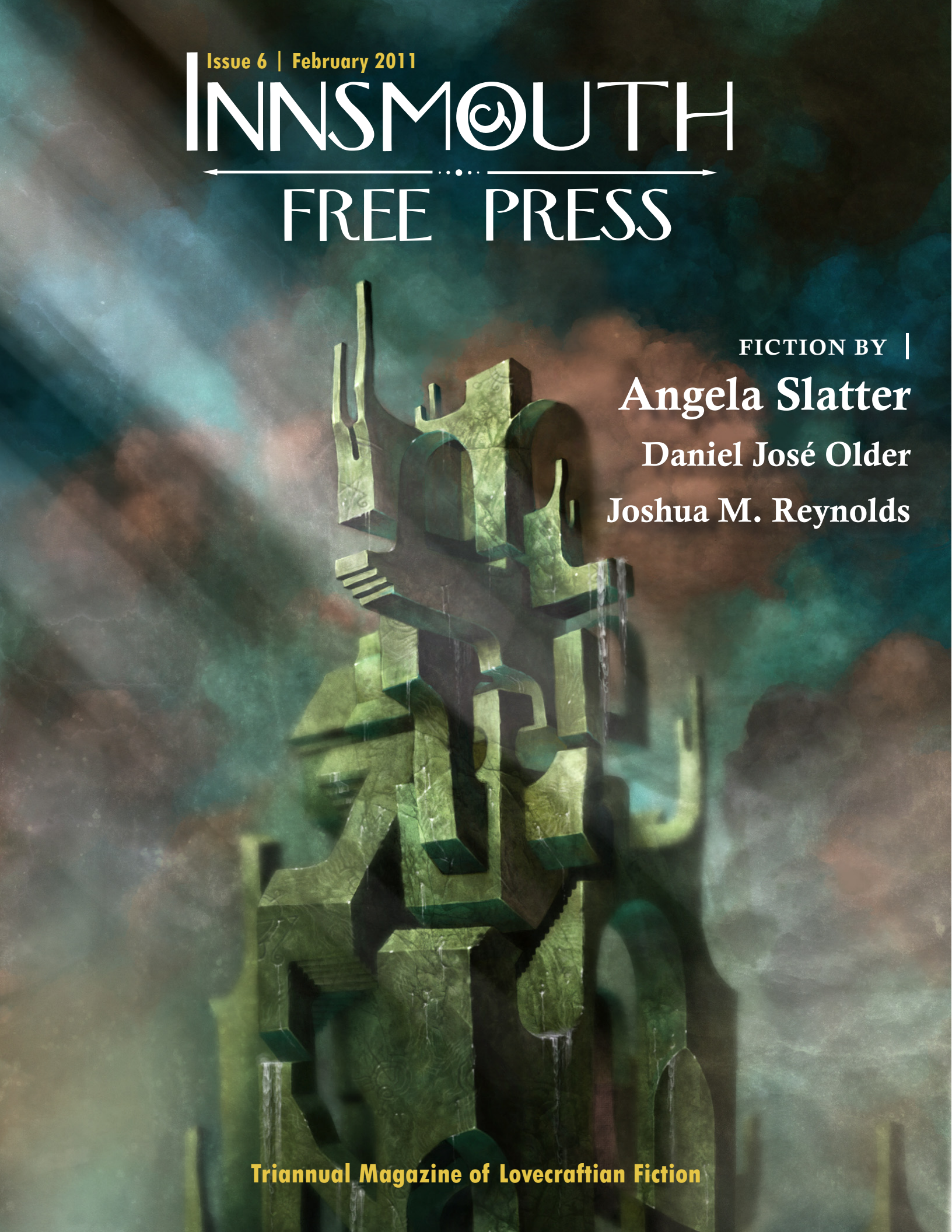
Issue 6 | February 2011

# Innsmouth Free Press



FICTION BY |

**Angela Slatter**

**Daniel José Older**

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Triannual Magazine of Lovecraftian Fiction

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**Cover art:** Jason Juta
**Publisher:** Silvia Moreno-Garcia
**Editor-in-Chief:** Paula R. Stiles

Contact and submission information available at www.innsmouthfreepress.com

# Editorial

Welcome to our sixth fiction issue. When we launched in March of 2009, full of enthusiasm, little did we know how much work and how much fun this would be. We also didn't know how much people would come to love our little corner of the Internet. We have watched Innsmouth grow, from its first tremulous baby steps, to its current incarnation. We've gone from a few hundred readers to more than 10,000 visitors in a month. So, this February, we thank the readers and writers who make this possible and also, ask for your support with our February Fundraiser.

Now, onto the fiction. This issue, with cover art by Jason Juta, is headlined by Aurealis Award-nominated writer Angela Slatter, who brings us an Orpheus-like tale of music, magic and tragedy in "Rising, Not Dreaming". An eerie town underwater waits for the unwary in "The Ghosts of Old Milford". A native of Innsmouth finds her heritage can be problematic in "Drowning on Air". A ghostly mammoth haunts a modern city in "Tenderfoot". A man faces off against a terrible foe in "The Savage Dreamer". You can find a very different octopus "Hidden Beneath Calm Waters". Finally, an obsessed man who is losing his grasp on reality must "Get It Down".

Many tentacles,

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

Too long had the dreams of men been troubled with the ructions of the star lords. Too often did they rise at whim from their undersea city, their R'lyeh, to walk the earth and bring darkness with them.

# Rising, Not Dreaming

## By Angela Slatter

"Play," they said and I did, plucking at a harp made of bone and sinew.

"Sing," they said and I did, weaving words with water and making my listeners weep. I drew from their depths, from souls no one suspected, the dreams that might make them slumber. I surrounded them with lullabies to send gods to sleep, to keep them *below* and render them harmless to all that breathed *above*.

Too many had been the ages of pain and death, too long had the great old ones reigned. *Enough*, said my masters, *enough*. Too long had the dreams of men been troubled with the ructions of the star lords. Too often did they rise at whim from their undersea city, their R'lyeh, to walk the earth and bring darkness with them.

They wondered, my masters, how to keep the beasts beneath the waves. They thought music perhaps would lull them, that in the magic of sound, there might somehow be salvation. But who to play – who *could* play – such a tune? A competition was held to judge the best musician, the most enthralling player, the finest singer/seducer. They promised immortality, my masters, that no one would forget the winner's playing – for that *one*, there would *always* be an audience. They gambled, quite correctly, upon an artist's pride and arrogance.

And I won. Gods help me, I won. I was tasked to sit upon a high mountain by the sea, to play there and let the waves of my music swell and flow, to crash against the walking monstrosities, to enchant them, to lead them like stupid children into the deep, back to their sunken city.

The spells my masters had set around me meant I would not – could not – drown, that the water would be to me as the air had been. That my life would not wear out, that I would forever keep them under my thrall, my hideous listeners, eternally asleep. I did not pay attention, though, not carefully enough. Only once I'd been trapped did I replay the words in my head and realise what I'd agreed to do.

*Eternally asleep*, as long as I continued to play.

I think of the wife I had, sweet and tender.

I think of her belly swelling, rich and round.

I think of how I told her it would be all right. That I would return, my masters would reward me, and we would never want for anything ever again.

I thought, my pride blinding me, I need only sing them to sleep. But when the last notes of my song died away, I watched the great things stir and begin to wake. And I could not bear the thought that they would walk

once more, that my wife might be endangered, that our child might be cast upon an altar for the satiation of beings that had come from dark stars.

And so I played again.

And again.

And again.

Forever again.

But lately, I am tired. I have been too long beneath the storm-tossed waves. Centuries, aeons passing, while I go on in an extended state of decay, neither living nor dying. I know not if I am a thing that remembers itself a man, or a man who thinks himself a thing.

My wife long ago was bones and dust, carried along the river of time.

My masters, likewise, have turned to ash.

What care I for a world I no longer know?

What care I for anyone else, when all I wish for is the balm of sleep? The balm I have given to these *things* for so very many years?

My fingers slow upon the strings and my song stops.

"Awake!" I say, and they do.

I watch them turn and roll, sloughing off their slumber like giants, like continents rising out of the sea, with the steam and stink of earth-birth hazing their grey-green skin. The water around us boils as if a volcano had grown.

Limbs like monumental trees shift, torsos like cliff faces heave, visages bereft of benign intent turn themselves upward so they might find the underside of the sea's surface and know which way to go. They uncoil their bodies, stretch towards the sky and the air, think and seek to break the hold the waves have upon them, and to reach once more into the dreams of men.

"Rise," I say, and they do. Released from sleep, they believe it a time when they might reclaim all that had been theirs.

Their largest, their lord, their priestly god ascends first, speeds upwards fastest to break free. The strokes of his great arms cause tidal waves; the bubbles from his newly-filled lungs, his once-forgotten breath, move big as buildings. Dead Cthulhu rises from his house in R'lyeh, his dreaming done and his waking mind focused upon

an end, a finish, a catastrophe. Around me, his kin, his followers hum a tune of destruction, one that sounds so like my song that I feel, a-sudden, the keen dagger of my betrayal.

I think of what I have done. Of the promise I have broken, the covenant I have dishonoured. I think of the disappointment on my wife's face should her shade discover my treachery. And I weep, though my tears mix with the sea, and no one but I would know of my remorse. I feel my own sleep creep upon me: a death and a forgetting, so close, so sweet.

And I fight it.

I put my hands once more to the sinuous strings of my harp and strum a tune to draw them back, these monstrous mountains, these great old ones who could bring only ruin to whatever roams above, whatever takes wing in the skies. All would fall beneath the merciless behemoth feet.

My voice catches all of them. Most of them. All but one. The others, still close enough to be caught upon the sweet hook of my song, the enchanting notes of my harp, settle once more. They go back to their dead, drowned houses, open the doors of heavy stone and retire.

But the greatest, the first amongst them, him I did not snare.

Cthulhu in rising, not dreaming, escapes the bonds of slumber.

Cthulhu rose and I know not where he resides or what destruction he causes. But I remember his terrible eyes as he swam upwards, as he gave me a single, contemptuous glance and knew what I had done, both to him and his, and to my own kind. He judged me a hollow, water-logged thing, a thing that remembers itself a man, barely worthy of a glance.

And it is that look, that longest, shortest of looks that keeps me playing, praying that my notes will linger forever.

**THE END**

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**Angela Slatter** is a Brisbane-based writer of speculative fiction. Her short stories have appeared in anthologies such as *Dreaming Again* (Jack Dann ed), Tartarus Press' *Strange Tales II*, the Twelfth Planet Press anthology *2012*, and in journals such as *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Shimmer*, *ONSPEC*, and *Doorways Magazine*. Her work has had several Honourable Mentions in the Datlow, Link, Grant *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* anthologies #20 and #21; and three of her stories have been shortlisted for the Aurealis Awards in the Best Fantasy Short Story category. She had two short story collections out in 2010: *Sourdough and Other Stories* (Tartarus Press) and *The Girl with No Hands and Other Tales* (Ticonderoga Publications). She is a graduate of Clarion South 2009 and the Tin House Summer Writers Workshop 2006. She blogs over at **http://angelaslatter.com/** about writing and random things that catch her attention from time to time.

Nathan said nothing for a moment. They stood in the dark, silence surrounding them, a swallowing, all-encompassing silence. "Just looking for something I lost a long time ago."

# The Ghosts of Old Milford

## By Aaron Polson

Nathan knew what they'd find under the house.

Even before the bulldozer blade crushed the grey wood into a pile and pushed it aside on a June day in 1968, Nathan Porter *knew*. He knew what they'd find under the house which used to sit at the end of a lonely street in a town called Milford, a house which used to crowd secrets under its corniced roof and tall, multi-paned windows. A house which *knew* how to hide its secrets. A house of collections, of shadows and dust.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

He knew and the knowing paralyzed him.

"What the fuck are you waiting for, Porter?"

Nathan brushed sweat from his forehead. "Nothing. Nothing at all." His hand was damp as he pushed the lever forward, engaging the tracks of the bulldozer. The diesel gave a cough and the machine sputtered. The house cried a little as it died, cried with the tinkle of glass and crack of splintered wood. The ghosts cried, too. Nathan heard them.

Sergeant Willits, the pudgy foreman on Nathan's squad, waved his arms. His mouth moved, but the sound of the bulldozer's engine growled over everything, even over the thump of blood in Nathan's ears. Willits flapped like a madman until Nathan cut the engine.

"What?"

A ring of sweat darkened under the arms and around the neck of the sergeant's olive-drab shirt. "Some kind of hole."

*Yes, a hole*, Nathan thought. *A doorway*.

"Don't want you to put the 'dozer in. Back her up and get down here."

The house wouldn't give up its secrets that easily, not even to the Army Corps of Engineers. Sure, they would build the dam, drown old Milford under thousands of cubic feet from the Republican River, but the hole

would still be there. Nathan rode the bulldozer backwards, idled the engine, and hopped down. The loader driver, Hank McHenry, stood with Willits. McHenry was a skinny kid from Idaho, "pale as a peeled potato" as the joke went. The sweat chilled against Nathan's forehead, despite the heat of a Kansas Summer. He carried the ice of 13 years in his stomach, a deep freeze of memory.

"Porter, you from around here, right?" McHenry's words were slow, deliberate, each vowel carrying the drawn quality of Northern dialect. "You know anything about this?"

They stood at the lip of a square hole. A pit deep enough to frighten away the sun. No bottom was visible, only black. Pure shadow. The square, much wider than a cellar door, covered enough ground to threaten the metal tracks of the heavy equipment.

"I – I don't know anything," Nathan lied.

Willits spat a stream of brown tobacco juice onto the sun-bleached grass. "Fuck a-doodle-doo, Porter. We knew that already." His fat hand waved at the hole. "I 'spose you can just come at the rest of this wreck from the other direction. We've got other houses to smash today, fellas."

The others backed away. McHenry moved back to his loader to carry away the debris, but Nathan shifted closer to the hole, remembering. His boots cracked fragments of glass and shards of wood as he stepped on the old floorboards. He counted back in his memory. Thirteen years. He was seven then, when they found the hole for the first time. Seven. He wanted to look away, but the memory held him: the last time he saw Bobby Talbot's face, white like a plastic mask at the craft shop, slipping into the black square as Nathan dropped the rope.

Nathan shivered.

"Porter, these houses aren't going to fall down on their own. Get on it, mister."

In the valley which would soon be the bottom of Milford Lake, the Corps of Engineers' trailers made a neat cluster, a temporary town to replace the one they were destroying. The best homes of Milford were moved at government expense, the houses of railroad millionaires and politicians, the grocery store owner and the postmaster. Fine homes. The rest of the town was to be razed and as much debris carted away as possible. Razed like the grey house at the end of a lonesome street. Other squads worked on trees and leveling the landscape; Nathan's job was to knock down houses.

Knock down houses and reveal secrets.

Secrets like the doorway which haunted Nathan as he tried to sleep that night. His eyes wouldn't shut – not for long. Not with the black specter and the memory of Bobby Talbot lingering out there, in the night, under the shadow of Nathan's bulldozer, less than a half-mile from the trailers.

He held his hands in front of his face, searching for the weakness of a seven-year-old boy. The others snored

while he stared. He searched until his mind was set and quietly slipped from his bunk, out the trailer door, and toward the looming shape of his 'dozer in the dark. His eyes adjusted enough not to stumble under the half-moon. The valley was lost to blue sleep. The new town looked down from the ridge. A few lights burned there, but Milford was asleep.

He had to check. Had to do at 20 what a seven-year-old couldn't.

Inside the bulldozer's tool chest, Nathan found an electric lantern and pair of leather work gloves. The rope, knotted for climbing, came from the trailer. Testing the lantern, he shined its yellow eye toward the stripped ruin. The beam swung back to the bulldozer and Nathan studied the rope. *Long enough*, he thought. He tied one end on the articulating arm of the 'dozer blade and began walking toward the hole as if measuring the years. More than enough. He dropped a length of at least forty feet on the ground next to the black mouth and began feeding it inside.

Once the hole swallowed the balance, Nathan gave it a solid tug. He turned his lantern toward the hole, letting the warm light probe inside and search for the bottom.

"Porter?" McHenry's voice lanced through Nathan's skin like a knife. "What the hell are you doing?"

Nathan straightened his back. "Just...just...."

"I heard you leave the trailer. What're you doing with that rope?" McHenry waved his own flashlight across the opening. "Are you – "

"Does anybody else know you're out here?"

"What?"

"Did you wake anybody else?"

Nathan's yellow lamplight caught McHenry's long, pale face. Shadows sung around the eyes and mouth, making it look like a strange, stretched skull. A ghost. A phantom. A mask.

"No," McHenry said. "Don't think so."

Nathan glanced back to the hole. "I think I dropped something earlier. My scr – "

"Bullshit."

An owl called in the distance. Both men shifted their weight.

"Right. That's bullshit. I just have to go down there. Tonight. Before we smash the other houses and collect our gear and head out." Nathan's fingers scratched his close-shaven scalp. "I have to do it."

"You're from around here, right? Like I asked earlier, 'cept you didn't answer."

"Yes." Nathan nodded. "I'm from *here*. This town." His throat tightened, squeezed by the memory.

"I'm not gonna stop you, then, am I?"

Nathan's head swiveled back and forth.

"Then I'm not gonna try." McHenry shrugged and walked to the bulldozer. He knelt near the knotted end of rope with his back turned. His shoulders moved.

"What are you doing?" Nathan let the lantern beam sink to the dirt.

"Checking the rope. If I'm going in, I want to know it's safe."

Nathan closed his eyes for a moment. He listened to McHenry's footfalls on the dirt and debris.

And they descended.

They stood at the bottom of a cylindrical well, at least fifteen feet across by Nathan's estimation, but with missing sections.

Both men wore gloves, stiff, leather work gloves to protect their palms should they slip and burn their flesh against the rope. Knots at regular intervals aided their descent; this was a climbing rope and the Army had taught both well. Nathan counted as he dropped. The knots were two feet apart…eleven in all. "Over twenty feet," he muttered, once his boots touched the packed floor below. McHenry came next and dropped the last few feet with a thud.

"What the hell is this place?" he asked.

Nathan's lantern was already skirting the shorn rock walls – at least, those close enough to illuminate. He turned in a circle and the yellow beam would occasionally slip into blackness and then back to a rough-hewn plane. They stood at the bottom of a cylindrical well, at least fifteen feet across by Nathan's estimation, but with missing sections.

"Tunnels," he said.

"What?" McHenry looked up from his flashlight; the bulb had fizzled on the descent and he tapped it against his leg. "What about 'tunnels'?"

"Just that there's tunnels. Looks like tunnels, anyway." Nathan waved the light at one of the dark sections. "Doorways."

"These walls look carved."

"Choices...."

"Porter? Are you listening?"

"What?"

McHenry cleared his throat. "You know who did it?"

Nathan shook his head, unaware that McHenry could scarcely see him in the dark since his flashlight malfunctioned.

"Look, my light's out."

"Tunnels," Nathan uttered again, almost in awe. A cold, *knowing* sensation crawled into his toes and began to nibble away at the edges of things.

"Why the hell did you ever want to come down here? Gives me the God-damn creeps."

Nathan said nothing for a moment. They stood in the dark, silence surrounding them, a swallowing, all-encompassing silence. "Just looking for something I lost a long time ago."

"What something?"

"Bobby Talbot."

"What the hell?"

Nathan turned the lantern on McHenry. "Bobby Talbot."

"Bobby? You...you've been here before, haven't you?"
"Almost."

McHenry stepped closer to the rope and let his hand wrap around the rough cords. "Almost...what's that mean?"

"Bobby fell in. We snuck out one night, seven years old, and Bobby fell in. He tied a shitty knot, so I 'spose it was his fault. I tried to catch him." Nathan held out one hand, illuminating it under the yellow light. "I tried to hold the rope, but my hands gave out."

"Jesus...."

"Bobby fell. I ran home."

"Oh gawd...." Metal rattled, the squeak of plastic. McHenry's flashlight came to life. "I guess the top was loose. What – "

"Happened? I ran home. I didn't tell anybody. The old house, the one that used to stand above us, was off limits. But boys make up stories, especially in shitty little towns like this. "Haunted," we said. Gate to Hell in the basement. You walk by so many times at night, trying to imagine something in the house. A ghost. Ghouls. Werewolves. The Devil himself. Sometimes, you think you hear something – "

Nathan paused. His voice had fallen into a rhythm, almost mechanical. A sound echoed off the stone walls, a scraping. Maybe the scuttling of some invisible creature, lost to the shadows. McHenry's feet shuffled against the gravel on the chamber floor.

"Like footsteps," Nathan continued. "Voices. Anything." He pushed his lantern around the area at their feet. "Bobby never came out."

"Jesus...Porter...are you telling the truth?"

A bit of metal flickered in Nathan's light. He knelt, pulled an object from the dirt, and brushed it against his pant leg. "Here," he said, holding out a dented cylinder. "Bobby's flashlight. He dropped it."

"Fuck this, Porter. You're nuts."

"I didn't expect the other tunnels, though." Nathan brought his lantern back around in a wide arc, taking in the empty spaces in the walls. "Four of them, like the cardinal directions, maybe. Choices. Other paths. Somebody carved this. Somebody made these tunnels."

"But there's no body. Let's go, all right? I'm done."

Nathan breathed deeply, sucking the stale, cold air through his nose. The noise, the distant scraping, came closer, sounded from the open maws in the rock. "Maybe we should go." His voice shook a little – not fear, really, more like sadness, a young man's voice on the edge of tears. "I fucking left him down here. You know that?"

"We didn't need to climb – "

"I did. I needed to see it. See where he died. I spent so many nights awake, hiding under my covers." Nathan's voice rose, almost sobbing. "I didn't tell anybody until a week later...I guess I thought Bobby'd be out. Find a way out somehow. I was seven God-damn years old. Scared."

"Didn't they search?" McHenry held the rope with one hand, his flashlight in the other. He was ready to climb.

"Yeah. They came to the house." Nathan turned, stared into McHenry's flashlight with watery eyes. "There was no hole, just floorboards. They couldn't find the fucking hole." He threw up a hand. "This hole."

"There's no body. C'mon, man, let's go. This place is creepy as hell."

"They thought I made this shit up. I never thought...never said anything about Bobby."

Something like laughter came to them, soft and distant. The rock made an exact direction impossible.

"Sorry, Bobby...Jesus, I'm sorry."

The sound stopped.

They climbed hand over hand, straining against gravity. McHenry went up first. Nathan Porter's muscles ached; they ached with the years of knowing Bobby Talbot died at the bottom of the pit in the haunted house at the end of a quiet street. He'd killed him. He'd killed him because his hands weren't strong enough. Halfway up the rope, Nathan paused and removed his gloves, one at a time while holding his weight with the other, and finished climbing bare-handed, feeling the bite of the cords against his skin. He slipped three times on purpose and swallowed the pain.

His palms bled by the time he surfaced.

McHenry gawked at the wounds, open-mouthed. "Fucking-A, Porter. You're nuts. I'm heading back to the bunk before anybody finds us, right?"

Nathan nodded.

"Look, I'll buy you a drink tomorrow night, all right?"

Nathan watched as McHenry hesitated, shook his head, and vanished in the darkness on the other side of the bulldozer. Nathan moved to the machine, examined his knot again. He touched the twists of rope, looked over his shoulder at the square opening, and walked back to the trailers while his wounds were still raw and wet.

Nathan Porter lay in bed watching shadows twist and cavort on the ceiling of the Army trailer. A scrawny kid from Oregon with a nose the size of Portland snored – the only sound in the trailer. The air was too still. Too warm.

A pebble struck the window near Nathan's bunk. A tiny tick – *must have been a pebble*.

Nathan sat up and quietly slipped his feet from the bunk. He moved to the window and pressed his face against the glass. Bobby had hit his bedroom window with pebbles when they planned on sneaking out.

Moonlight glinted on the yellow paint of his bulldozer.

Shadows moved – not trees-in-the-wind shadows. Shadows cast by living things.

Nathan hurried with his boots and closed the trailer door, nearly tripping down the stairs to the ground. Fresh breeze caught him across the face, cooling the sweat that had pooled in tiny beads on his forehead and nose. He paused. A noise clicked behind him.

The trailer door snapped open. "Porter?" McHenry called into the night.

"Shhhh." Nathan brought a finger across his lips. "I'm here."

"Jesus, Porter. You going for another climb?"

"No."

"It's late."

"I'm taking a walk. Just a walk. I couldn't sleep."

McHenry hesitated before clicking the trailer door shut.

*Good.*

Nathan walked toward the bulldozer, almost chilled now by the night breeze and suggestion of something wavering in the gloom. Black lines like tiny hands moved up and down the side of the machine. Something was wrong. Pieces of the bulldozer were missing – the exhaust stack for one, he could see clearly now. Nathan trotted toward the equipment.

"Wait there, Nate."

Nathan shoved his hands in his pockets. His stomach boiled. "Bobby? Oh…shit. Bobby."

"Right-o." The voice belonged to Bobby Talbot thirteen years ago, but was tainted now with a deep resonance which didn't belong to a seven-year old. The thing which used to be Bobby – still wearing the bones of a seven-year-old – moved toward Nathan. His black eyes winked. "A piece of him, anyway."

"Bobby…."

The near-Bobby turned and looked toward the bulldozer and ruins of the old house. "I heard you earlier, down below. In Old Milford. You weren't alone."

"Old Milford?"

The near-Bobby smiled, showing a mouth of black, shiny teeth. "Older than people, anyhow."

The shadow-things chattered as they dismantled the bulldozer. Nathan pulled his collar around his neck.

"Still gets cold some nights, huh?"

Nathan shivered. "God, Bobby. I thought you were dead."

"I am, mostly. My friends gave me some new parts." He stretched his arms and a ripple crossed from his neck to the tips of both hands. "Gonna live a long time now."

"Below…Old Milford…."

"You left the rope this time. Didn't drop it."

Nathan shook his head. "We're flooding the place. Drowning everything."

"My friends and I will be fine, Nate." The near-Bobby nodded. "Just fine. Taking your tools to speed up our work, though. We can do something handy with all this metal. Hope you don't mind. We're building a better city."

In the distance, one of the shadow-things lifted off a panel from the side of the bulldozer. Its fingers stretched in a line of black oil, encircling the metal casing like a length of rope. Nathan dropped to the ground and crossed his legs in front of him. He looked at his hands, at the dark wounds across his palms.

"Didn't need to punish yourself, Nate. I figure we're even now. We all will be fine." The near-Bobby turned and walked back toward the ruins.

"We? Who…who are they?"

The near-Bobby paused, glancing over a shoulder. "The citizens of Old Milford, Nate-o. Older than people."

Nathan sat and watched, wordless, as the shadow-things carried the rest of the bulldozer into the hole, piece by piece. In the morning, McHenry and the others found him there, sitting cross-legged like a child. The opening below the ruined house was gone, not just covered, but *gone* without a trace – solid dirt beneath. Nathan's bulldozer was gone, too.

"What the hell happened out here, Porter?" Sergeant Willits barked.

Nathan could only close his eyes. Three weeks later, the unit left with the dust of old Milford under their nails and the mystery of a missing bulldozer on their tongues.

The lake eventually drowned the valley, covered it under leagues of river turned into a rippled sheet of brown water, murky and deep. Nathan Porter came back to town in the spring of '71. He rented a little boat and rowed out onto the lake one night, pushing off from the asphalt remnants of Morgan Street. He listened, the air still and quiet without a breeze. His nostrils touched the cold scent of the water, water not yet warmed from the winter's cold. It smelled of fish and mud and memory. His flesh dappled with the chill. He rowed alone with only the oar and a sealed bottle of Johnny Walker at his feet. The moon's reflection rode on the water like a discarded sheet.

In the middle of the lake, he slowed. He laid down the oar and started with the bottle, dumping the amber liquor over the side in short bursts. A few times, he tipped the neck to his lips and the little boat seemed to rock on ocean swells.

When the bottle was gone, Nathan closed his eyes, leaned his head against the port gunnels and thought about a child he once knew. He thought about the rope he dropped as a child and the one he left tied to the bulldozer as a young man. With his palms turned up to the moonlight, Nathan examined the scars.

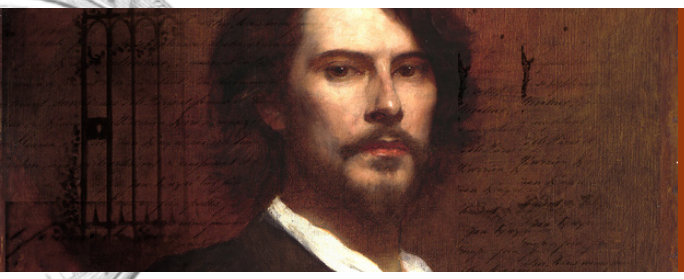
He'd never told anyone the whole story, but just might. He thought about going to Idaho to see what an old buddy from the Army was up to. *When I do*, he thought, *I'll tell him about how Bobby was still alive and how his friends took the old 'dozer that night. I'll tell him about the lake, why it took six months longer to fill than we planned. And we never did drown all of it, anyway. Not Old Milford.*

*That might make a good story.*

**The End**

---

**Aaron Polson** was born on the Ides of March: a good day for him, unlucky for Julius Caesar. He currently lives in Lawrence, Kansas with his wife, two sons and a tattooed rabbit. To pay the bills, Aaron attempts to teach high school students the difference between irony and coincidence. His stories have featured magic goldfish, monstrous beetles, a book of lullabies for baby vampires, and other oddities. You can visit Aaron on the web at **www.aaronpolson.net**.



It hunched like a tombstone among flowers, a gaunt, gray house that made the others around it seem blindingly bright in contrast. The shutters were closed, where they were not broken, and the railing of the front porch hung sideways like a snapped length of spine.

# The Savage Dreamer

## By Joshua Reynolds

It was 1920 and Charleston withered beneath the glare of an angry Apollo. Or so it seemed to Randolph Carter, late of Boston, late of Arkham. Dressed in his grandfather's stiff, starched black, the long-jawed Yankee looked archaic even by the standards of coastal South Carolina.

He slipped and stumbled slightly on the cobbles of the High Battery as he hurried towards his destination. Palmetto trees rustled in the wet, salty breeze coming off of the river and Carter shuddered slightly as the tang of fish insinuated itself into his nostrils.

Running a finger around his sweat-drenched collar, he hurried on. On the horizon, he could see a tangled haze of gray and black rushing over the water. The low, coiling wind promised a scalding rain.

The houses that lined the Battery sat in defiance of progress, white-pillared echoes of what had been. Despite the peeling paint and moldy trim, there was still a despairing nobility to them.

All except for one.

It hunched like a tombstone among flowers, a gaunt, gray house that made the others around it seem blindingly bright in contrast. The shutters were closed, where they were not broken, and the railing of the front porch hung sideways like a snapped length of spine. The porch itself sagged in a way that Carter found faintly obscene. The whole house expelled the faintest whiff of sweet rot.

On the whole, not a scene to engender confidence. Especially in a man of Carter's nerves. He ran a trembling hand over his slicked-down hair and looked around. In the distance, he could hear a rumble of what might have been thunder.

He stepped onto the porch. The knocker was iron and ugly. Rust flaked off, sticking to his sweaty palm. He let the knocker thud into the wood once, then twice. He fancied he could hear the echoes of the sound somewhere within the flabby house.

He turned, loosening his tie. He could see the water from where he stood. Sullivan's Island hovered in the distance, a shapeless mass. Beyond it, lightning struck the water and Carter flinched. Thunder crashed and he felt the wood beneath his feet tremble. He turned.

The door was open and the smell of incense wafted out. It was a heavy, oriental odor and made him think of swirling vistas of sun-baked streets and men in strange clothes. He coughed and dug in his coat pocket for a handkerchief.

"Can I help you?"

The voice was the hiss of a snake shedding its skin on a rock, a gentle rasp. Carter felt his nape prickle. It took him a few seconds to pierce the tendrils of accent wrapped around the words.

"I...ah...I'm...ah...," he said. Or tried to say. Words tripped off his tongue in a babble. Eyes like pools of melted brass pierced him to the quick. He turned, intending to run.

"Wait."

A hand fell on his shoulder. Lightly, lightly. Iron rings coiled tightly around long, graceful fingers. He was pulled back, enveloped in the scent of foreign places. The eyes – those strange, terrible eyes – caught him again and this time, held him.

"My name is...is Randolph Carter. And I have come to be your apprentice, sir," Carter said. Then, "I...that is...if you'll...ah...have me, I mean?"

"Apprentice?" The horrible eyes blinked. Confusion flooded them.

"You are...ah...Mr. Harley Warren of Charleston?" Carter said, a bit of Yankee iron creeping into his voice. He had to be sure. Had to –

"Warren?" A smile. "I am Warren."

"We have corresponded many times over the past few months, Mr. Warren. I..." Carter hesitated. "Randolph Carter."

"I heard you the first time, Mr. Carter." Warren cocked his head. A generous mane of loose, curly hair hung around his oval face and, combined with the shock of his eyes, made for an altogether too-leonine aspect. "The man with the dreams. I was merely wondering why you were here. Now. At this time."

"I...my letter..." Carter made a helpless gesture with his hands. "I wrote – "

"Many people write me. Some of them write to you, possibly." Warren stepped back, the edges of his silk robe brushing the door frame. It was untied, displaying his bare torso, and a length of strange, circular, reddish scars that crossed his chest from kidney to shoulder. "Do come in, Mr. Carter." Warren pronounced it 'Cahr-tah'.

Carter hesitated then stepped past the other man. Wood creaked beneath his feet and the cloying tang of incense he had noticed earlier struck him full in the sinuses as Warren closed the door behind him.

"So." Warren leaned back against the door, his bare feet scuffing at the floor. Carter glanced at the other

man's feet then up, at the strange serpentine scars, and finally, at his face.

Warren was younger than he had thought. His face was unlined, his mouth full-lipped and feminine. But there was nothing feminine about his shape. Broad shoulders strained at the seams of the robe he wore and his carriage was atavistic. Carter swallowed thickly, trying to dredge words out. Warren smiled.

"Cat got your tongue, Mr. Carter?"

"I...no. You aren't what I expected, I hope you don't mind me saying." Carter looked around. Curtains of thin, rustling silk hung from the ceiling all over, seemingly taking the place of walls within the house. Warren stepped past him and pushed aside a curtain.

"You must be parched. Would you like a glass of tea?"

"Y-yes." Carter followed Warren.

Warren led him through the labyrinth of curtains and into a larger room. The kitchen was small and surprisingly neat. It opened up onto a screened-in porch heavy with bookshelves. Carter moved through the kitchen and out onto the porch without realizing, his eyes drawn to the books. He let his fingers trail across the spines, mouthing the titles to himself.

There were books clinging to the sagging shelves that he had only read of in other, equally-rare tomes. Books in Latin, Akkadian and other tongues that defeated Carter's limited experience.

"Here. Drink up," Warren said, appearing behind him. Carter whirled, pressing himself up against the bookshelf.

"I...ah...."

Warren proffered the glass of chilled tea again, and took a sip from his own. Carter took it and held its refreshing coolness in both hands. Warren sat down in a wide-backed wicker chair.

"So, boy. Why are you here?"

"To learn," Carter said, after a moment. He cast a glance at the books. "Everything."

"Everything? Tall order. Don't think I can deliver, as such," Warren said. He pressed the bottom of his glass against his temple. "I am not, in the parlance, a follower of the Socratic method." His odd eyes rolled down, bobbing beneath heavy lids, pinning Carter in place. "Nor would I hope you'd expect such, from our briefest of correspondences."

"I don't know what I expected," Carter said. He looked around and collapsed into a similar seat to Warren's. "I am utterly at a loss, Mr. Warren. That is why I'm here, I think."

"You think?"

"I cannot say for sure, you see. What are my desires and what are the desires of another, altogether different me." Carter smiled, or tried to. Warren frowned.

"A different you?"

"Me, myself, I. Old granddad and young fool, wrapped up in one, I feel at times," Carter said. "My mind is split, quartered and scattered across the boundless plains of Hypnos – "

"You seem fairly well-composed to me," Warren said. "But then, I have my own difficulties in that regard."

"Which is why I came," Carter said. He made a helpless gesture. "Who better to help than one who has had similar experiences?"

Warren was silent. He gazed at Carter, unblinking. Then he said, "No."

"What?"

"No." Warren took a sip from his glass. He did not elaborate. Carter stared at him for a moment, stupefied. Then his mind and mouth abruptly reconnected.

"May I inquire as to why?" he said stiffly.

Warren cocked his head. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, I believe it does." Carter shifted, jaw working. "I was given to understand from our correspondence that you had some understanding of my plight. And while said correspondence was hardly voluminous, I thought – "

"That I would happily extricate you from whatever mess you've gotten yourself in?" Warren said. "No. No, I think not."

Carter seemed to sink in upon himself, long neck disappearing into his stiff collar, lower jaw enveloping the upper, eyes squeezing shut. An overgrown child resisting the urge to tantrum, or a Victorian gentleman striving against apoplexy.

"Why?" he said again.

"Because it is not my place to rescue a fool from his fate," Warren said. "You sought out the outer reaches and they followed you home. So be it. More than you have paid the price for less than that." Warren idly traced

the scars on his chest as he spoke. "Go home. Enjoy what time you have left to you, in the bosom of your family."

"I must insist that you help me, sir," Carter said. He didn't look at Warren. "I must...." His fingers slid beneath his coat and an old Army revolver appeared. Warren froze as Carter used both hands to point the pistol at him. His hands shook, but not so much that the barrel didn't point straight at Warren's heart. "I must," he said again. His eyes were wide, his face fish-pale.

Warren uncoiled slightly, a small smile playing across his lips. "So I see."

"No. You don't. You can't. You can't imagine the things I've seen. The things I've experienced," Carter said softly. "It's all too much...."

"I think I can." Warren sat back in his chair, fingertips pressed together beneath his chin. Carter once again found his eyes drawn to the strange marks on Warren's torso and he shuddered. "But unburden yourself, if you must."

"I...." Carter's jaw clenched. "You read my letters."

"Your dreams. You're a remarkably lucid dreamer, I must say. Too lucid, perhaps."

"You're saying that I-I made it up?" Carter's voice had a shrill edge to it. Warren's eyes were solemn.

"No. Only that you remember too much." Warren tapped the side of his head. "Why is that, I wonder?"

"I don't know. I don't know!" Carter yelped. "I only know that the memories invade me, my life, with increasing frequency. I cannot tell fact from fancy some days. I-I am trapped in a web of dreams and the more I struggle, the more I...." He shuddered. "The more I am ensnared."

Warren watched him without speaking. Outside, a gentle rain had begun to fall and a warm wind gusted through the porch, ruffling the pages of several books. Carter shuddered again, reminded of something that he could not quite recall.

"I'm sorry," Warren said finally. He gestured towards the pistol. "You were in the War, then?"

"I...yes. I thought...." Carter shook his head. "I don't know what I thought." He looked at his host. "And yourself?"

Warren said nothing. Carter frowned. "Your scars...."

"Before the War, by several years." Warren leaned forward abruptly. His eyes gleamed. "Beauty and horror often go together, don't they?"

"Yes," Carter said, without hesitation.

"Yes. Sometimes more the one than the other." Warren rubbed his chin. "In your dreams, of which you wrote, you named places which do not exist. Things which cannot be. Horrible, beautiful things," Warren said. "Things you forgot, but are now remembering."

It was Carter's turn to fall silent. Warren nodded. Then, "Kadath, in the Cold Wastes."

Carter shivered. He looked at the pistol in his hand, as if not quite recognizing how it had gotten there. "You've been there?" he whispered.

"No."

Carter looked up. "But – "

"I dream within my own mind, Mr. Carter. I do not allow myself the luxury of doing otherwise. Not these days." Warren made a complicated gesture. "But there are those who have. Yourself, for instance."

Carter put a hand to his face. He was sweating. The heat cloaked him. Smothered him. "Perhaps. I only see snatches. Brief glimpses of memories that I do not remember making."

"The human mind has a blessed inability to consider all of that which it records. If you have forgotten it, perhaps it is best left that way?" Warren said softly. His hand reached out, fingertips pressing against the barrel of the pistol.

Carter looked up. It was not Warren sitting in front of him but something else. A mocking, androgynous face with eyes like twin hell-suns. Then, a voice like a panther's rumbling purr echoing within his mind.

*Pray to all space that you may never meet me in my thousand other forms....*

Carter screamed. He pulled the trigger and the pistol belched.

Luckily, Warren had already shoved it aside. As Carter thrashed, the other man held him flat against the back of his chair.

"Carter! Calm down, damn you!"

"*IA*! *IA*! *HEI*! *Aa shanta 'nygh*! The Crawling Chaos!" Carter screamed, flopping like a fish in the bottom of a boat. Warren yanked the pistol out of his hand and tossed it aside. Then, face set, he backhanded the thrashing man. Carter rocked backwards and slumped.

Warren pulled him back up and took his chin, shaking him. Carter's eyes fluttered.

"Bag of nerves, aren't you?" Warren murmured. Carter mumbled, but his eyes, despite their movement, didn't open. Warren grunted and sat back in his seat.

He examined the man before him. Carter was one of those men driven to age before his time. The Great War had contributed some to that, obviously, but the rest...ah.

Warren stood and belted his robe. The air had turned cool and in his backyard, the palmetto trees rattled. He went to his books and let his fingers drift until he found a particular title. *Sundry Masks* by Anonymous. It was a re-binding of the original 1778 edition, rumoured to contain clues as to the author's identity. The book itself was little more than a series of lists and descriptions, but that was all he needed. He flipped through the pages, looking for specific phrases.

"Ah." His finger pinned a word to the page. He closed the book and tossed it on a pile on the floor, then looked back at Carter. He considered the other man for a few minutes, wondering how best to proceed.

By rights, he should send him packing. No sense getting involved in something like this. No sense in attracting attention.

No, he'd learned his lesson, hadn't he? The scars on his body were one thing, but the ones on his soul....

Outside, the rain was coming down harder. It hammered like bullets on the tin roof of the porch and Warren closed his eyes, listening.

Like Carter, he had been in the War. He had sought to lose himself in the fury and fear, to forget certain things he had learned. Not everything, but just enough to be safe. Like an ant seeking to avoid the tread of heedless giants.

He looked at Carter again. Sometimes, though, the giants followed you no matter what you did. Particularly, if they were the type to brush aside anthills.

"Nyarlathotep," Warren said, rolling the alien syllables around in his mouth. They left a greasy feeling on his tongue, but he resisted the urge to spit. Not quite Egyptian, but they tried.

"Nyarlathotep," Warren said, rolling the alien syllables around in his mouth. They left a greasy feeling on his tongue, but he resisted the urge to spit. Not quite Egyptian, but they tried. Like something someone only passing familiar with how names worked might come up with. Still, it was closer than some of the others. At least it could pretend to be a proper name rather than a fart of glottal mumbling.

He sat back down and watched the rain, thinking of the months before the War, when he had been visiting friends – back when he had had friends – in New York. Of a strange and terrible show in a back alley theater, where lightning danced overhead, flitting between coloured spheres suspended from the sagging ceiling, and a phantasmagoria played out on a silk screen. And the dark, thin man who stood on the stage in his fine suit, with his thin, intent features and his eyes – so like a panther's eyes.

Nyarlathotep. The Crawling Chaos.

It was a nonsense term for a nonsense thing. Something which the five base senses could not discern. A storm occurring just out of the corner of God's eye.

Warren brushed his fingers across his cheek, catching a drop of sweat before it left his face. Taking a breath, he reached over and shook Carter back to sensibility.

"I...what?" Carter blinked rapidly and looked around, suddenly panicked. Warren pressed him back down in his seat.

"Easy. You're fine. Just had a bit of a shock, I warrant."

"Forgive me." Carter wiped his mouth with the back of one trembling hand. "I'm...ah...of a nervous disposition. Always have been."

"No reason to apologize," Warren said, cutting off Carter with a gesture. "How long have you been a man of dreams, Mr. Carter?"

"What?"

"Your dreams. How long have you had them? Have they always been this strong, or...." He trailed off, waiting. Carter bent forward, running his hands through his hair, visibly trying to compose himself.

"I stopped. When I was younger. Stopped almost entirely. No more jeweled vistas or wondrous, ice-capped peaks. My dreams were mundane, Mr. Warren." Carter spoke softly. Hesitantly. "And then I went to war."

Warren said nothing. Carter swallowed. "I went to war. I was a volunteer. From the first, with the *Legion etrangere*. As were you, I believe, sir," he said. Warren nodded.

"For a while."

"You know what it was like, then. I was less affected by it than my companions, though not due to any personal bravery, I assure you." Carter gave a sad grin. "No, for it was in those muddy, bloody trenches that I began to dream once more. We all did, I think." He hesitated. "Our dreams were at war, even as we were, and we moved through our days and nights half-asleep and half-mad and could not tell fact from fancy. And maybe

there was no difference. Not then. We dreamed the same dream of cyclopean monstrosities rising up over jagged worm tunnels and the dead....” He paused. “The dead squirmed through those tunnels in legions.” He closed his eyes, his voice stuttering to a halt. Warren waited. Eventually, Carter began again. “That was the first time. Verdun. I could almost see it....”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It prowls the edges of things.” Carter shook himself. “When I returned home, to Arkham, my dreams continued. But not as strongly as before, yet more sinister. It was as if I were of two minds,” he said, looking at Warren. “As if there were the dreams of some other man – some other Randolph Carter – pressing into my own. Inundating them.” His hands became fists. “And the sensation of being hunted, circled by some great predator, grew stronger. The less mundane my dreams became, the more the sensation increased. I could feel it. Feel it waiting. Watching. Inhumanly patient.” He took a breath.

“I started my correspondence then. With you. Others. Men and women who might be able to shed some light on what ailed me. But....”

“But?” Warren said. Carter gave a weak laugh.

“Frauds. Or worse.” He looked at Warren in reproach. “How can this be my fault if I remember doing nothing? Why am I expected to pay for mistakes I don’t recall making? What is the mocking laughter I hear in the darkness on the edge of sleep? Why – “

Warren held up a hand. Carter fell silent, trembling in obvious agitation.

“Have you ever seen a reef, Mr. Carter?”

“A reef?”

“Yes. A reef. Branches of curved coral, coiling back in on themselves in a cramped space. Home to a variety of colourful fish and insects. They are quiet places. Safe. Calm. But outside, the other, larger fish wait hungrily.” Warren stood and went to the bookshelf. Carter twisted in his seat.

“I know what a reef is. What does it have to do with anything is what I’m asking.”

“Sometimes, an inhabitant of the reef darts out, by mistake, into the vast ocean beyond. And, inevitably, it is noticed. Sometimes, it is devoured then and there. Other times, it makes it safely back into the reef.” Warren pulled a book of matches off of a shelf and lit one. He held up the flame for a moment then blew it out. “And sometimes, very rarely, it is followed.”

“Followed,” Carter said. He was pale now. Trembling.

"Yes. Those of us who make it our business to study life outside the reef have learned the importance of avoiding notice. To do otherwise, well...." Warren sat back down.

"I didn't – " Carter began.

"You did," Warren said, gently. His voice was low and soothing. A steady rumble of sound, like ocean waves. "The dreams of humanity are simply part of the ocean. You left the reef, purely by chance, through misadventure, or maybe you subconsciously intended to. Regardless, there was something waiting. But...." He lit another match. Carter stared at the dancing flame. "But. But, but, but. Perhaps it can be thrown off your trail."

"My trail?" Carter said. Warren snuffed the match and lit another. Carter's eyes locked onto the orange glow and shifted as Warren moved the match slowly back and forth.

"The scent of your mind and soul, trailing back through your dreams and out across the arc of space and time, drifting like blood on the water. Attracting things. But what kinds of things? A fish? A shark? Or something worse?"

"Oh," Carter said, his voice muffled. His eyes were wide but dull. Warren snuffed the match. Carter didn't blink.

"Time to jerk the line, then," Warren said. "Sleep, Carter. Don't fight it. Let your mind relax. Relax. Relax." Carter slumped, his eyes fully closed. Warren bent and scooped up the pistol, laying it close to hand, before settling in to wait.

Minutes passed. Then an hour. Warren watched, listening to Carter's silent breathing. His own eyes grew heavy. He blinked, fighting the urge to sleep.

Something chuckled.

Carter's eyes opened and idiot chaos looked out through them. Warren froze, his heart almost stuttering to a stop.

"Ahhhhhh," Carter – the thing in Carter – breathed. "I can smell yellow jasmine and honeysuckle. And you, of course, lovely Warren." It had none of Carter's physical mannerisms, none of his hesitancy. And its voice – God, its voice – thrummed down through him, impossibly deep. It splayed itself out in the chair, as if luxuriating in the feel of Carter's thin muscles. "Where are we, Warren?"

Warren said nothing. He remained still. It looked at him, eyes swiveling in Carter's sockets. "Ha. Afraid, Warren?"

"No," Warren said, finally. "Curious."

The thing was silent. Then, "Oh? Do tell."

"You know my name."

"I know everyone's name." It winked, somehow making the gesture altogether more obscene than it should have been.

"Do you? Or does Carter simply think you do?"

"Ha," it said again. There was a smell on the air. Rank. Animal-like, but familiar. Warren had smelled the odor before and his hand pressed against his chest briefly before falling to the pistol. He hefted it, feeling the weight.

"Are you going to shoot me, Warren?" it asked.

"No. Does Carter think I would?"

"Stop asking me about Carter. I'm not Carter," it said.

Warren nodded. He was testing fate. But, if he were correct.... "No. You're not. In fact, you're nothing."

"And everything. Both and neither," it said, stretching Carter's arms out. "Idiot chaos. Crawling madness. Where I walk, unborn infants drown in the womb so as not to face me."

"I wonder who told him that," Warren mused.

"Pay attention to me," the thing said, standing. It was a command, not petulance. Carter's face twisted, becoming leaner, darker.

"Another mask," Warren said. He stayed seated, but raised the pistol, aiming it in a general fashion. "How many are there, I wonder?"

"A thousand," it answered then shook its head. "But you knew that, didn't you?"

"A thousand is just a number. Just like the masks are just faces. Definitions for something which, by its nature, is indefinable."

"Somehow, I do believe that you are still ignoring me," Nyarlathotep said, stroking the golden sheath which bound his tightly-wrapped beard. Even in Carter's clothes, he looked every inch the Pharaoh. His eyes were like twin suns, boiling red and yellow and orange in their sockets, a hideous light which made everything so much darker.

"I'm not ignoring you. Just your mask," Warren said. He made a show of looking around, fighting the urge to flinch as he felt Nyarlathotep's eyes crawl across him. "You aren't really here. Just the idea of you. The real you, if there can be said to be such a thing – something I very much doubt – is obscure and unutterable."

"Oh?" Nyarlathotep sounded curious. Warren kept going. Indeed, couldn't stop himself. The old hunger was coming back. The need to know, the lust for knowledge, no matter the cost. His side and chest – the scars – burned.

"Yes. You're far too big to do otherwise. Even Great Cthulhu cannot perceive you, so massive is your presence." Warren's thumb caressed the hammer of the pistol, pulling it back with an audible 'clunk'. "You're the lure of an anglerfish. A shiny thing that attracts minds and souls and dreams, like poor Carter there. An idea that they can grasp."

"I am the Black Pharaoh. The Messenger of Infinity – " Nyarlathotep began, smiling widely, showing off impossibly-white teeth.

"No. No, that is what they think you are." Warren said.

Nyarlathotep straightened, seeming to loom, his shaven pate scraping the ceiling of the porch as his hands descended on Warren.

"Even figments can be dangerous, Warren." Claws sank into Warren's flesh and he screamed as he was lifted and hurled into his bookshelves. The gun slid away as he tried to pick himself up. Books flopped open beneath his flailing limbs. He stared at one for a moment. The words were blurred and jumbled.

"Ha," he said. He knew then, where he was.

Something wet and long wrapped around his ankle, yanking him backwards. Nyarlathotep's face had split open from crown to chin and a tendril of raw, red meat exuded, the end of which had caught Warren.

"Figments have memories. Personalities," Nyarlathotep said. "Desires. Enemies. Are you my enemy, Warren?"

Warren's hand found the butt of the pistol. He grabbed it and looked over his shoulder. "No. Something that doesn't really exist can't have enemies." He shoved the gun beneath his armpit, its barrel extending towards the thing, and fired. Nyarlathotep staggered then straightened.

"Then whyever did you just shoot me?" Nyarlathotep said, sounding amused.

Warren twisted and took aim again, lying on his back. "I didn't. I shot Carter."

"What?" Nyarlathotep blinked. Blood ran down its chest, a darker stain against the black of the suit. Nyarlathotep raised trembling fingers to its chest. "Oh."

The tendril whipped away from Warren and he fired again. Nyarlathotep screamed, sounding like a thousand whippoorwills crying out at once, and its form began to balloon up, growing and spreading like a puddle on sand. Warren watched it for a moment, watched the edges of everything waver and crumble as Carter was jolted awake. Then, without changing expression, he pressed the pistol to his arm and pulled the trigger one last time.

His eyes opened and he took a shuddery breath. Carter looked even worse, if that was possible. But it was Carter who sat there, and not something else.

"What...." Carter began. "I fell asleep. I – "

"Should have no more problems," Warren said. He rolled up his sleeve and looked at the bruise on his arm that matched the bullet wound. He felt lighter than he had in years, somehow, despite the aches and pains. More fulfilled.

Carter slouched forward, rubbing his chest. "I...ah...what happened? What did you – "

"I baited a trap and caught what decided to poke its nose in." Warren said. He let his sleeve fall. "It might not work a second time." He reached over to the table beside his chair and found a pack of cigarettes. "It wasn't anything, really. Just a little nightmare you made into something much worse. If it had been what you made it out to be, we wouldn't be having this conversation." He stuck a cigarette into his mouth and lit it.

Carter stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Nyarlathotep isn't an Egyptian. Or a magician. Or a demon-god. Those are simply masks we give it to make entropy into order. To make the incalculable understandable. We bring it down to our level and it, in turn, preys on us once we do so. But if you recognize the mask, if you look beyond it, you see that it is nothing but flotsam. Debris from something we cannot even conceive." Warren inhaled, filling his lungs with smoke. "Still dangerous, but only if you get too close. The reef, Mr. Carter."

"Then, what do I do? What if it comes back?"

"It won't. If you learn to control your dreaming." Warren pointed at him with his cigarette. "You need training. Discipline. You need to be able to recognize the signs that – "

"I've left the reef?" Carter said, the trace of a smile on his lips. Warren smirked.

"Exactly."

"And where would I find this training?"

"I went to Tibet," Warren said. Carter's face fell. Warren laughed.

"Or, perhaps, if you wish, you could stay here, Mr. Carter," Warren said. "I find myself thinking that I may need an assistant sometime near in the future."

"You'd let me stay?" Carter said.

"If you wish." Warren stood and went to the front of the porch, a trail of cigarette smoke marking his passage like a twitching cat's tail. "Yes. An assistant." Outside, the rain was still coming down. A storm had rolled in off the ocean and on past. Only the dregs of its fury remained.

He turned, glancing at one of the books on the floor. The title was simply *Incorruptibles*. He frowned. There was a place he had been meaning to visit, before the War. Before...everything. A little spot out near the Gainesville Pike. He turned back to Carter.

"Well, Mr. Carter?"

Randolph Carter sat quietly, for just a moment. Then, hesitantly, he nodded. Harley Warren smiled and turned back to watch the rain.

**The End**

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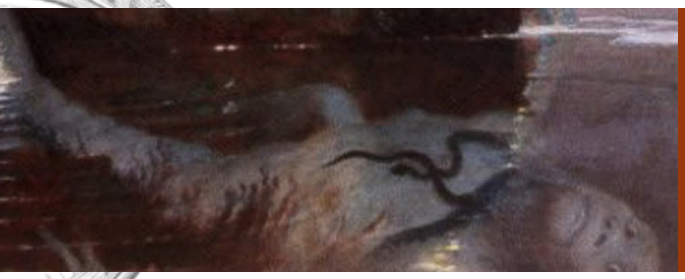
**Joshua M. Reynolds** is a freelance writer of moderate skill and exceptional confidence. He has written quite a bit and some of it was even published. For money. By real people. Feel free to stop by his blog, **Hunting Monsters**, and cast aspersions on his character.



Daddy went to sea before I was born. I'm told he looked even moreso than me and Mama do, which was saying something. Me and Mama were the only ones in the family still around who showed our blood so much.

# Drowning in Air

## By Rebecca Rahne

Mama had been resisting the call for as long as I could remember.

It was the middle of summer, and she lay in the tub, trying to keep her skin damp. Maybe trying to keep herself cool, too, but like I said, it was the middle of summer. Even if you only turn on the cold water faucet, the water's still gonna come out at 'inferno' temperatures.

Daddy went to sea before I was born. I'm told he looked even moreso than me and Mama do, which was saying something. Me and Mama were the only ones in the family still around who showed our blood so much.

'Course, the family's pretty much dying out. Used to be, Mama said, people would marry in. But being part of the family meant being part of the religion and going out to sea without ever coming back. Not a lot of call for that kind of stuff these days, not without something really showy.

The stars being all wrong, we couldn't do 'showy' anymore.

So, Mama was in the tub and I was in the kitchen, because I'd just come in from the garden and I wanted a swig of something cold.

"Moni!" Mama called, her voice low and barely-there. "Moni! I'm hungry!"

"Monique, Mama!" I snapped. "Monique! Pronounce the last damn syllable!"

I opened up the fridge and grabbed a box of grocery-store sashimi. Mama hardly ate anything but fish since I had turned sixteen.

I eyed the contents of the fridge critically. I could maybe manage dinner tonight if Daniel down the road had some fish he'd give me. Otherwise, I needed to run into town.

Great.

Mama looked pretty bad when I brought her the sashimi – bald, with the same weird, narrow, flat, bulgy-eyed face I had. The lights were off, but she had some candles lit. Good enough to manage by, I guess, but they made the bathroom stink.

She fished out the sashimi slices carefully with her strange hands and gobbled them down. I sat on the toilet and waited, 'cause sure as shooting, she wasn't going to throw away the box.

"Mama," I said, "You ought to go to sea. I'm old enough to manage on my own now."

Mama hissed at me. Sometimes, she forgot about using words, herself.

"I am," I protested. "I'm almost nineteen. I graduated from high school. This ol' place doesn't need a lot of upkeep."

Heck, maybe if Mama weren't around needing me to take care of her, I could pack my stuff in the car and go somewhere else for a while. Not sell the property, never sell the property, but it'd be nice to see the world before I left it.

"Not until you get a husband, Moni," she gabbled out. Words sounded weird when Mama said them, like they didn't quite sit right in her mouth.

"'Monique'," I muttered. I slouched on the toilet lid. A husband? Not going to happen. Not with everything else that came with having a husband in this family. Besides, I was eighteen, still! Who got married at eighteen?

Well, besides one of my classmates, but she loved her guy and they'd been planning it since her sophomore year. Me, I hadn't met a guy yet I could stand to touch, much less have kids with. Who went and decided guys should be all hot and dry, anyway?

Mama finished eating without saying another word to me and I threw out the box and wandered back into the kitchen. It was a dim-grey now and the trees were whipping around outside. The afternoon thundershower was blowing in.

I dashed outside to gather up my gardening tools before they got rained on. Got that done just ahead of the rain, so I flopped on the back porch to watch everything come down.

I loved thunderstorms. They were wild and wet, and they were best enjoyed from someplace dry. When I was younger, I used to run out and dance in them, and maybe I'd do that again when I was older and need the water on my skin. Right now, though, I could get away with not, so I just sat under a roof to watch them. It was a good sort of feeling, not needing to be wet.

Daniel down the road hadn't been too successful with his fishing, so I told Mama I was going to make some groceries. The air was cool in the dusk, still a little wet from the thundershower this afternoon.

I cranked up the radio in the peeling-blue car, rolled all the windows down, pulled out on the gravel road, and headed for town. It'd take me about forty-five minutes to get there on the interstate. I had a list of stuff and

a cooler in the back for perishables, because this car had long ago stopped believing in air-conditioning.

It was a cloudy night and the wind was picking up as I drove. I hoped I could beat the storm home. Rain always made people forget how to drive around here and I didn't look forward to an hour on the road in a storm. Most of the drive between home and town was over a swamp. You're stuck on a bridge with barely any shoulders for miles and miles. Yeah, let's drive that in the rain with drivers I couldn't trust.

The drive out went as quick as it could.

Seafood selection at the counter wasn't too bad, so I grabbed what I needed and paid for it. Got the usual amount of not-looking from people. No one liked to look at an ugly girl.

My face was narrow, like real narrow, like I could probably have stuck it through the bars of a jail cell narrow. My nose was so flat, it looked like it was trying to sink into my face. My eyes bulged out, and I didn't need to blink much, so people told me I stared. My skin was so pale, I glowed in the dark and my hair was this wispy dirty-blonde, too thin to really style. If my mother was any example, it would all fall out by the time I was forty.

If I didn't go to sea by then.

There was one guy who stared at me in a way that made my shoulders itch. That happened sometimes, but nothing ever came of it. Sometimes, guys were just creepy.

I had popped the trunk of my car and opened the ice-box when he caught up with me in the parking lot. Great, a mega-creep.

"You're one of them," he said.

From his accent, he definitely wasn't from around here. It sounded nothing like the soft drawls of anyone who'd grown up here. All hard and weird and wrong, and I hadn't the slightest clue where it meant he was from.

I glared at him. "What the heck are you talking about?"

"You're one of them, the abominations – "

"You're being a major creep. I don't know what the hell you think I am," I snapped, "but you had better back the fuck off and leave me alone."

He backed off, but he didn't leave altogether. I could sense him at the edge of my vision, hanging back and watching. My bulging eyes were good for one thing, at least.

The wind was really gusting as I closed my trunk. It kept trying to steal my cart and I let it as soon as the thing was empty. Rain started to come down, in a drizzle at first, but soon slashing down hard enough to almost hurt.

And the guy was still watching me. Creep.

I climbed inside my car and locked it, then tried to start the engine. The guy finally left, then, going back inside the grocery store.

My engine wouldn't catch.

I stared at the steering wheel in perplexity then tried again. Another grinding attempt at catching then it gave up entirely. The third time I twisted my key in the ignition, it wouldn't even try to catch.

Great. Could tonight get any worse?

Evidently, the Great One of the Deeps heard me, because when I pulled out my cellphone to call Daniel for a ride, I was out of minutes. I cursed hell and high water then slumped back against the seat.

I could have gone back into the grocery store and explained to the manager about the problem. I'm sure she would have let me use the phones in there. Except that guy was in there. Something about him scared me.

The grocery store sat on a not-minor road, and I knew there was a gas station at the next major intersection. I could get a phonecard there and give Daniel a call. It'd be miserable to walk, but I was okay with being miserable if it meant I could get the hell home. Town hadn't felt this unsafe since I was a little girl taking swimming lessons.

Town hadn't felt this unsafe since I was a little girl taking swimming lessons.

I was way too good at swimming lessons.

I was way too good at swimming lessons.

I grabbed a jacket from the back seat and pulled it on. Stuffed my keys in my pocket, pulled the hood up to maybe keep me a little bit dry, and got out of the car.

Then I started walking. The jacket helped some with the rain, so it took until I got across the parking lot for me to get well and truly soaked. After that, I was miserably cold as my wet clothes clung to me and the rain kept coming down. I wrapped my arms around myself as I walked, trying to generate a little more body heat.

I kept blinking my eyes and wanting to rub them dry, but it was just too wet. Everything was too wet. I hopped across puddles and some of them were bigger than I thought. My shoes got soaked. My socks got soaked.

It was hard to see in the rain, too. Besides it being dark, the rain caught the light of the streetlights and just kind of blurred everything out. I knew I was going in the right direction because I'd been here before, but if my route hadn't been a straight line, I'd have turned back.

At least I didn't have to worry about getting sick. I'd never gotten sick for as long as I could remember, even when everyone else in my classes was hacking and coughing and dripping disgusting fluids.

I stopped at the corner of the parking lot and waited for the cars on the road to pass on by so I could cross. I huddled sodden and miserable in my clothes, but either no one saw me or they figured I knew what I was doing to be out in this kind of weather.

I held onto the thought that if I just kept walking, I'd get to the gas station and get a phone card. I still wouldn't be home, but I'd be a lot closer to home than I was now. Comparatively speaking.

Cars stopped whizzing by and I trudged across the street. Then I was confronted with the fact that the blocks in front of me, nice neighborhood suburban blocks, weren't made with sidewalks right next to this particular road. The sidewalk under my feet went down the street instead.

I could go that way. There had to be another road through. But it was dark and raining and I didn't know this neighborhood at all.

I looked over my shoulder to see if I saw any headlights heading my way then sloshed down the shoulder of the main road. My feet felt like ice blocks and I wiggled my toes to maybe get a little more warmth down there.

It didn't work. So, I kept walking and checking over my shoulder. Sometimes, I'd jump back on the thin strip of swamped grass between the fence and the road, waiting for a car to pass.

Was this what drowning felt like? Wet and cold and miserable, water hitting so hard against your body that you could hardly think? Or maybe it was just a level of hell. Surely, they couldn't all be fire.

Headlights caught my eyes as I turned to look over my shoulder, blinding bright in the darkness. I squinted and hopped over into the grass again, huddling up against the fence. Grass squished around my feet.

The headlights stayed in my eyes. The car swerved – I barely had time to think, It's going to hit me, before I took off running. Instincts, those of a bullied kid and older ones still, screamed at me to find a place to hide, to run, to get out of this straight line. Cars were faster than me!

I heard the car accelerate behind me and bit my lip to keep from looking. I scrambled and slipped, threw myself to the side as soon as the fence was gone. I tumbled to the grass on someone's lawn, scrambled to my

feet and up against the house as the car drove onto the lawn after me. Prickly bushes tore at my clothes and I nearly fell on a ceramic pot, and there was a car after me, on the lawn after me, why the hell -

I stumbled on the slick driveway, half-threw myself forward between two cars, and tried not to cry out as the car chasing me crashed into the car next to me. I lay on the ground, dazed, my head clipped. I could smell iron. The rain was coming down red in front of me.

"I knew you were one of them," someone snarled over the sound of the rain. "Another fish-blooded abomination, just like those people in -"

The porch lights snapped on in a blaze of yellow, and the front door of the house was thrown open. "What the hell – ?"

I took advantage of the distraction and crawled forward, pressing myself underneath the other car. I heard people yelling behind me, knew the cops would be called. I had to get away. Not because of the cops, but because anyone who knew enough to call me 'fish-blooded' knew enough that getting locked up wouldn't bother him. If he had a gun he wanted to use....

I wasn't bulletproof. Or carproof.

I slid out on the other side of the car then worked my way across the neighbour's lawn. The rain and darkness felt like a blessing now – still miserable, but they'd keep other people from seeing me too well.

I took off into the night, scrambling over grass to the sidewalk. 'Fish-blooded,' he'd called me. I slipped on the sidewalk, came down hard on my knees, and I gulped back a cry of pain. I was crying; I was pretty sure I was crying, or maybe it was just the rain on my face. Or the blood.

I sat there for a long moment then forced myself to my feet. I couldn't go back the way I'd come. I needed to go this way and find a cross-street then head down it until I reached the road with the gas station.

He wouldn't keep chasing me. He wouldn't. He'd already wrecked his car and someone else's. I'd be fine. Just miserable and hurt. I could handle this.

I had to handle this.

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No cars had come down this road since I got on it. Of course, it was a dark and miserably stormy night. Anyone with sense was inside. So, when the darkness around me brightened, I glanced over my shoulder. A pair of car headlights was way at the end of the road.

There was no reason it had to be that guy.

There was no reason it couldn't be, either.

I scrambled into the yard of the house I was walking by and dropped down behind their shrubbery. Don't let them have seen me. Please. I don't care who they are, or what they want, but don't let them see me. I couldn't take it if they did.

I clenched and unclenched my fists. Lying down like this felt…Well, better than being up and walking. Like I could just fall asleep right here if I was an ounce more exhausted. So, I thought about the ocean, about being cold, about fish. I thought about going fishing with Daniel, and the way watching a fish flop around inside the bottom of our boat did something to my head.

I tried not to breathe rainwater.

The rain was coming down in a steady pour, but my clothes and skin were already so soaked, I might as well be a fish. Or a dolphin, because I needed still needed air to breathe. With the air so full of spray and heavy droplets, it felt even more oppressively wet than just being soaked did.

The car rumbled past. In the dark and rain, I couldn't tell if it had run into anything, recently. Still, I lay there behind the shrubs and waited, counting slowly to sixty five times. Then I stood up and stumbled my way back onto the sidewalk.

My eyes felt weird. Like I'd started crying again.

When I get home, I thought, I'm going to strip all these clothes off, make myself a mug of hot chocolate and wrap myself up in as many blankets as I can. Okay, maybe I'd take a quick shower to rinse the feeling of ick off my skin. Mama could have sashimi again for dinner, and I could have some, too, because I so wasn't cooking after all of this.

I paused, listening. Something didn't feel right. Like…I don't know what like. But my heart was pounding, and something just felt wrong.

There was a fence next to me, so I took off running instead of trying to hide. I had no idea what I was running from, if I was even running away from it or toward it in the rainy darkness.

I slipped, fell, cracking my knees again and skinning my hands on the sidewalk. I panted, staring as the puddle turned pinkish in the streetlight. Get up. Get up and go. Go and go and go until I get there, run. Don't stop, never stop, be a shark and die if I stop.

Get up.

I stood, bones aching, and looked around, trying to see something. Nothing. Just rain glowing around streetlights and a whole lot of night.

There was a stoplight a few blocks ahead. I must have been near the main crossroad the gas station was on and I started walking faster, passing a stop sign. Down two blocks and across two streets. That's all it would take.

I found a break in the sidewalk the hard way, tripped and fell. My palms felt skinned and my knees felt like they were on fire. I just groaned and waited for some of the pain to diminish.

Something out in the darkness was moving. I blinked rain out of my eyes and raised a hand to shield them. From the faint light of the streetlights, I could just make out a car rolling down the street without its headlights on.

I sat very, very still. My throat felt tight and my brain was bleating at me to run-run-RUN as fast as I could, but a deeper part of me refused to let my body move.

The car drove slowly forward, the front looking pretty bashed-in. The puddle I was sitting in was soaking my underwear uncomfortably, but I just sat and tried not to cry in frustration. I don't think I succeeded, but in all the wet, who really cared?

I dreaded when the driver would realize I was sitting there, frozen, and climb up on the sidewalk after me. I didn't think I could run this time. Too exhausted, too miserable. It'd be pretty easy to lie down and not get up again, just let him drive right over me. Some part of me didn't want to make it easy, but a whole lot more of me just wanted this to be over one way or another.

Light blazed for a moment as the car tapped its brakes.

My fingers clawed at my legs, and I almost lurched up to run. It didn't matter how useless it was, it'd end things quicker than this waiting.

But I didn't. I was cold, wet, miserable, and exhausted, so I just sat there because running was too much work.

The car rolled slowly past. Very slowly, I turned my head to follow it.

The brakes tapped again, blinding red this close. The car came to a stop.

Run. Run as fast I can. I stared, frozen, rain smashing into me and the night so damn dark it hurt. Run, run, run. My fingers dug into my legs and my spine creaked as I shifted in preparation to lunge forward. My knees complained at the shift in weight, but I was past the point of caring what my body thought about anything.

My body still had veto rights, though, and I couldn't run. I couldn't move at all except to breathe the too-wet air that felt like suffocation.

The car rolled around the corner, turning to the right. If the driver turned his head, surely he'd see me, huddled there on the wet sidewalk. Surely. But the car didn't stop again; it just drove out of sight.

I gulped and slowly, creakingly, rose to my feet. It hurt and I wanted to start walking again, almost as much as I wanted to just lie down and never get up again. Instead, I turned to stare up the street the way I'd come.

A stop sign stared back at me.

I started laughing. It was just…Too funny. Just too funny. My laughter got a little too hysterical somewhere in there and then maybe, it wasn't laughter at all, anymore.

Still not-laughing, I turned away and hobbled towards the stoplight two blocks away. The rain let up some, still pouring down but not so hard anymore. Maybe the storm was finally moving on. I tilted my head up to see if I could see any stars at either horizon, but I just got rain in my eyes.

Every step of those last two blocks felt like my legs would give out. If I'd fallen again, I don't think I would have gotten back up. I stumbled several times, swayed like a drunk, had to push myself off someone's fence so hard I almost toppled over the other way. But I kept walking and that was the most important part.

I didn't stop when I reached the light. I was too tired to risk it, too sore and miserable. If I stopped, I wouldn't move again.

Across the T-intersection was a canal, grass running from the curb all the way down into the water. It looked like there was enough room for me to walk alongside the canal and I knew there'd be a crossover somewhere ahead in whichever direction I went. So, I plodded across the street towards the grass.

A car with no headlights hit me.



I woke up half-sprawled on grass and concrete. Breathing felt like agony and I wormed forward, stupidly thinking I still needed to get away, still could get away. The pain as my hip moved made me black out again. I came to with my hands in the canal water. It felt scummy and vaguely, I noticed it was covered in duckweed. Something from my arm was jabbing into my neck and hot rain oozed across my face and down my arm.

Except the rain on my back had faded to a drizzle.

I didn't worry too hard about it. I just lay there and hurt.

Hurt and hated.

My hands were in the water and dimly, so dim it felt like part of the pain at first, I felt a connection to the sea.

I clenched my hands into fists, and dark blood rolled down my wrists and into the canal. There were words. There were words that blood and seawater could use to call old things, great things.

Words burbled and slobbered from my mouth, words that tasted of saltwater and rot, words that felt like drowning. Maybe I was drowning, because breathing still hurt so damn much. I heard someone crunching down the embankment.

The water grew cold. The scummy feeling faded away. It wasn't a canal anymore and I knew if I tumbled in, I'd sink down a long, long way. If the things in the water let me get that far.

"Still alive? Not surprised. You fish-bloods are nasty tough." He sounded pleased by it.

I couldn't turn my head to look at him. I didn't even want to. "Die."

"It's not going to be me – "

There were things in the sea, old things, great things. Things with teeth and long beaks to pull in animals that came down to the shore. Things that didn't live in this world anymore, but did live in the seas where blood and the words could call them back.

It was over very quickly.

I stared into the water that wasn't canal water, and I wanted to go home.

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Mama came later, when I didn't come back to the house and Daniel found my empty car. Daddy was so happy to see her and I took off before she could get hold of me to scold me for being stupid.

I liked chasing fish up to Daniel's boat.

**The End**

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**Rebecca Rahne** lives in a swamp. Below sea-level. That masquerades as a city with an awesome music scene. (She also thinks she's clever. She LIES.) She writes fantasy and horror, and pokes at science-fiction with a stick. This is her first published short story. You can find her on **Twitter**.

The world is one, long car wreck, in perpetual slow motion. It never ends. There is never any reconciliation. Time passes and we grow ever nearer the awful moment of impact, and with each passing second, our fear and dread grow greater, but it never comes.

# Get It Down

## By Martin Hayes

My mind is going. Of this, at least, I am certain.

The carpet whispers secrets, untold before now, but always hinted at, drowned out now by the wailing of the cracks in the plaster that covers the cold, red bricks before my face. The world is unfixed, unreachable, unmade. I am me, here in this dark and subtle craft of being, but I am also the madness that creeps from unseen places. I am duality squared.

Shadows loom, and years pass by in breaths, as I sit and wait for it. The television spews information at an ever-increasing speed and Jesus...my fingers can barely keep up with it. Got to type faster; come on, now. But other thoughts slope into view and distract my mind from the job at hand. *Why are you such a cunt? Why does every single person on the face of this pox-ridden planet hate you and think they're better than you and –*

Put it out of your mind. Think on only good thoughts. Sunny places.

*Come on, you stupid cunt.* There it goes again. Like a bullet to the base of the brain. Fit me with a jack-socket and download me, and then wipe the drive and bin it. Have done with this long, drawn-out abortion, this futile, synaptic death.

Type.

How would Jesus drive? Badly, I'd say — he'd be fucked on Last-Supper wine.

I can't get Ingrid Bergman out of my head. She will not abate. Her face fills my field of view, bright and letterboxed with the picture sharpness turned up as far as it will go. I can smell her hair and feel the heat from her neck. In the fleeting moments of perfect consciousness, when I am not here at all, I can see her in fully-realised 3D and she is beautiful. But that's just the silly thoughts creeping in again.

Type.

The day flows out of me, but it is false, because I did nothing today but watch the telly. This is how I live my life now: through other people's experiences, through their failures and petty victories. I hate them as surely as I hate myself. They come into my living room: fat people, ugly people, posh pricks and tarts in cheap frocks, gross

old tramps and tidy wives, and I want to destroy and fuck them all beyond recognition.

The world is one, long car wreck, in perpetual slow motion. It never ends. There is never any reconciliation. Time passes and we grow ever nearer the awful moment of impact, and with each passing second, our fear and dread grow greater, but it never comes. The fatal contact will never take place and so, we are consigned to wandering in our lives, each day more scared than the last, always dreading what is just around the corner, but oblivious to the fact that the bad thing never truly happens.

Magnolia is the colour Hell will be. Its pigments and hues are perfectly mixed in order to create the definitive soul-sucking machine.

I take a break from typing, stand up from my desk and turn towards the kitchen, but not before picking up my Dictaphone. The greatest sin that can be committed in a reality that contains cognitive thought is for that thought not to be recorded. Why should one, solitary imagining slip away and be lost? Better, I say, to jot everything down, get it down, on paper or if not, on tape, to be properly transcribed later.

The journey from desk to kitchen passes by without incident.

Magnolia is the colour Hell will be. Its pigments and hues are perfectly mixed in order to create the definitive soul-sucking machine. How many good men and women have been dissected by magnolia walls? Did they even notice as their essence and spirit were slowly drawn out of them? Maybe they welcomed it, as the guilty might welcome the hairy rope. Might it not be a relief there, in the end of your days, to know it will at last be over and done with, to feel the shit flow, and the piss? To feel the death spasm shudder you like never before. Might they find ultimate pleasure there? Ultimate surrender? A powerful muscular spasm on this side, and there, just beyond sight, on the other end, an end. To have an end in sight. That must surely be the goal.

Make tea.

Listen carefully to the squeak of the cutlery drawer. The pitch has increased noticeably since the wet weather came in last week. Wonder what it means? Is it a sign? Am I blind to be missing it? Close the drawer.

Faint sound.

Mental note to check the Dictaphone later, examine the sound. Stir tea. Drink. Avoid eye contact with the garden birds. Back to the computer.

Type.

Don't let it get away. Thoughts have to be channelled; you have to actively seek them out and catch them and get them down. I've said that before, haven't I?

I added another owl to my collection today. The traps have been working splendidly of late. That's five altogether now. The first one I caught has already started to decompose. Its once-bright-and-deep eyes have shrunk away to almost nothing; they look like hollow pea skins in their now-enormous sockets. The feathers, too, have begun to wither, but with these wide fields at the back of the house, I think there will be plenty to serve their purpose.

The streets around me throb with unknown power. Their footpaths and sewers and kerbs spell out meanings unseen by all but the initiated. How many know how much frazzled energy a line of lamp posts can suck up in a day? The paths around my house store my life in living rock; only the dead are free from the lichen chatter. And birds, too, sparrows and crows and the like, they know it and they see it and they never tell; at least, if they do, then no one is listening.

I have planned the deed.

There are no gaps in my logic.

The sigil has been working for over two months now, seeping into the town's fabric, a ticking bomb, a waiting landmine, a hideous booby trap – its tripwires still intact. As above, so below, and all that other bollocks. Only the waiting left.

I am not sure what will happen when the swirls and angles reach a point of critical density, when the triggering numbers are revealed, when the power they contain has grown too unstable to be withheld from the greater cosmos any longer. I only know that it will happen. For it is written now in the dark matter and therefore, it must manifest itself on the material plane.

I drink my tea and go back to my typing.

Chaney was walking into town. He had a car, but since he'd got out of hospital, the doctors had been telling him to walk as much as possible. They said it would help with the mobility in his leg. Even now, over a year since the fall, he still walked with a heavy limp.

The rain had stopped earlier, leaving the newly-laid tarmac of the roads covered in a slick, oily discharge. When he caught it at the right angle, he could see miniature rainbows swirl across the surface.

All along this route, from the footpath's edge to the peak of the embankments, sloped freshly-tilled earth, great swathes of new grass seeds, spreading away across the subtle slopes to the skyline. Here and there were freshly-gouged tire tracks, made by diggers and earth movers, and on the top of the incline to his right, sat a huge, caterpillar-tracked crane. The major construction of ring road and its huge, three-lane, six-junction roundabout had finished two months ago, but still, the machines toiled to bring beauty back from chaos.

Chaney was pushing fifty, but he was thin and wiry as any fit 30-year-old. His face was a crazy maze of wrinkles and his blue eyes were no longer the brilliant jewels they had been in his youth; now they were a milky blue, a little washed out.

Chaney designed roads for a living; at least, he used to. Thirteen months ago, he had taken a bad fall from the top of the stairs in his office building. He'd broken his right femur in two places. For five months, he'd been laid up with cold steel pins sticking out of his thigh.

The ring road project had been his; it was to be the crowning achievement of his career, but just as his plans had been accepted, he took his fall and the job was handed over to Nicholas Lincoln, Chaney's understudy.

Lincoln had been there on the day of the accident; the two men had been descending the stairs and Lincoln's umbrella had somehow tripped Chaney, causing the fall. Chaney had thought it an accident, unplanned, no one's fault. But as the months had passed, his feelings on the subject had changed. You see, Lincoln had always been a bit of an odd bird, a bit out there, although he was hard-working and dedicated to the job. Sometimes, Chaney would ask him to join him for lunch, but he would always refuse, preferring to stay in the office, reading his strange books on the occult and chaos theory and multi-dimensional mathematics. He always seemed to be typing, or scribbling in one of his vast collection of dog-eared notebooks.

The project was handed over to Lincoln after Chaney's accident and the first thing he did was to completely scrap all the work his predecessor had done on the roundabout. Chaney's plans were torn up and replaced with ones that – while they did what was needed of them – were overly complicated. It seemed to Chaney that his young protégé was simply showing off, using strange artistic curves when a straight line would have served just as well.

Chaney made his way up the hill. His cane helped him but not much. His leg ached badly in the cold air.

The road was due to open the next day. Latest estimates predicted that up to fifty thousand vehicles would use the roundabout every day. When he made it to the top of the hill, Chaney looked out across the newly-terraformed earth. He could smell the fresh soil in his nostrils, almost feel it clinging to his damp face. If you had asked him why he had come to that spot, he would not have answered, for he did not know. He only knew that he had been drawn here somehow. The feelings had first surfaced over a month ago and had grown stronger with each passing day. He had to come here, just as surely as dawn follows night, as death follows life.

There was an air of expectancy about this place. It seemed to know more than it was letting on; it was hiding something.

Chaney felt strangely ambivalent toward the landscape, like a man unfixed, an outsider and yet, why should he? This was his town, his home. But there, on the sloping hill, looking out over the curves and angles and arcs, Chaney felt alien to the earth.

Fucking computers. Come on, work. No, I do not want to send a fucking error report. Double click...time passes...come on, you piece of shit...time passes...there. It's working.

The screen flickers into fresh life and numbers scroll in vertical lines. Won't be long now.

I wonder: do they know? Do they have any comprehension of what is about to happen? They, there in their suburban heaven, greedy bastards to a man, look at my fancy, fucking house and yes, I change the car every year and no, I don't give a fuck about the bastards whom I'm bleeding dry by overcharging them on rent on the other two houses that I bought with Daddy's inheritance. If you're not on the property ladder, then you're not worth talking to. Oh, Christ, Miranda, he works with his hands and he drinks pints of lager; watch the fucking silver.

My finger hovers over the return button. In the films, this is where the guy in the bloodstained white vest would come crashing through the window and mule-kick me in the solar plexus, but this is real, real as any made-up story, and so, nothing happens, no heroes, no vigilantes, no ghosts, just me and my computer and the work.

These last 13 months have been solely about the work. There was nothing else for a man like me. It was easy once that idiot Chaney was out of the way. It was all so simple in the end, so utterly free of complexity. It was almost beautiful. The right shapes, the right numbers, at the right time, and the world is your servant. I sit here in my shitty suburban hovel and inside, I know that I can bleed the earth and snuff out the stars.

I breathe the electric air. This will be a moment unlike any other. I press the button; the numbers stop scrolling...there's a pattern there, an escape.

And oh how the feeling grows.

Chaney couldn't get Lincoln out of his head. There was something weird about him, something off. There were rumours going around the town. He lived alone in a rented house; the landlord said he was always grumbling about the rent. Some people said they had seen him in the field behind his house, carrying a stuffed owl; others claimed that it had been alive.

He'd been going out with a girl, but they'd broken up six or seven months ago. She had told the local hairdresser that he talked to himself, that he cried in the shower and sometimes spent hours doodling circles and shapes in a notebook.

Chaney was on the verge of heading for home. That strange, expectant feeling, which had hung over him since he'd gotten out of his car, had slowly dissipated, the way the fury of a hurricane might die away as the eye bears down on you. It was getting cold, so he pulled the zip of his parka right up to his chin. And then... warmth...a well-known warmth, the warmth that newborn babies miss. It took him a few seconds to realise that he'd just pissed himself. He lifted up his parka and looked down at the dark stain growing from its root, there in his groin.

Then a slurping noise. He looked up and out and there, like worms in a can, the six roads that fed into the roundabout began to squirm. The movement was entirely fluid, like oil being squirted into water. The roads slipped and writhed and the air began to hum. Chaney's wet penis grew hard and vital. His radar was picking something up. There was a loud moan, of either pleasure or pain, and the mud about his feet began to throb and heave.

Above him, in the blackening sky, huge thunder clouds swelled and churned. They seemed to be hiding something, some strange, writhing beard of limbs or tendrils that, at times, reached out from the great wall of black cloud and slithered across the earth and grass and roads. A streak of sickly yellow lightning struck the ground about fifty yards from where he stood. The wind was deafening. He fell to his knees, his knuckles turning white as he pulled out great clumps of his own hair.

He could have done murder, kneeling there, watching the hypnotic movement of the ground before him; he could have strangled and garrotted and raped and gouged and burned. The universal laws were corrupted, made obsolete, easily overruled by the shapes and spirals that formed and flowed across the now-kaleidoscopic roundabout.

Chaney could feel the heat of the blood as it ran down his face and into his eyes. It tasted good.

In the town, in the houses and shops and offices, people's anger and self-loathing and spite grew and swelled within them: a woman was punched in the face by a man who had unsuccessfully asked her out two weeks previously; he then lay down on the ground, curled into a ball and shit his jeans. In another part of town, in a tidy house, a woman took a double-edged blade from an old razor that had belonged to her husband's father – an heirloom of sorts, he could never bring himself to throw it away – she eased the blade out, being careful not to cut her fingers, and carved two long and horrendous incisions down the inside of each of her thighs. She watched, transfixed, as the blood soaked into the worn white material of the underwear around her ankles. Two doors down, a man attempted to slit his wrists and throat with a corkscrew, while in a pub called The Seven Bells, on the other side of town, the barman poured a freshly-boiled kettle of water over his head. The sudden realisation that there was a way to escape overwhelmed them. It was as though the knowledge that they could shake off their dull-grey shawl of reality and strike out into the indecipherable spaces had somehow corrupted their minds. The sigil had kicked open the doors, but they did not have the right password to leave. Without the right numbers, there could be no escape.

Chaney was scratching in the wet dirt, shovelling it into his slobbering mouth and wishing, wishing to the universe itself, that there was someone nearby whom he could hurt.



I am gone. The deed is done. The stars look different somehow. I will not think again.

The papers reported the case of the barman and the boiling water. He died before they could get him to hospital. It was, apparently, a sudden and complete nervous breakdown. There were very few other reports of the goings-on of that wet afternoon. It was almost as if the people had willingly forgotten it, although some, if they had been asked, would have said that they felt disappointed somehow, that they felt as though they had missed out on something, some rare opportunity, even though what that opportunity was, they could not have said.

Chaney had woken up at the base of the hill just as night was falling; he cried for a long time after vomiting the soil and gravel out of his stomach.

He went back to work two months later; his leg was as good as it was going to get and the Council were in need of a good man. Nicholas Lincoln had disappeared. His landlord called around for the rent at the end of the month and found him gone. He had not packed his bags; he had not even turned the TV or the lights in the bathroom off. His ancient computer was still switched on, but the screen had been smashed in; a tiny piece of scalp and hair clung to the jagged glass. The room looked like it had played host to a miniature tornado. The police found traces of blood on the keyboard and five dead owls in the kitchen cupboard.

**The End**

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The rain keeps starting and stopping like an anxious lover, who doesn't know if he should spend the night. The sky has been clouded over all day, but the true evening darkness is just beginning to settle in.

# Tenderfoot

## By Daniel José Older

I remember Delton Jennings. Bumped into him pretty regularly on my late-night sojourns and the guy was nice enough, if you could get past the rambling and hygiene issues. But this flattened mass of flesh, blood-crusted hair and organs? There's a name tag where they guessed the foot would've been and without it, I wouldn't know old Delton from a ham sandwich.

The one thing that is impossible not to notice is the smell. It's not the pee-plus-beer-plus-a-quarter-century-of-body-odor combo that Delton usually rocked. It's something more animal-like. As if he'd been wrestling in a zoo and lost.

I concentrate hard, watching the air around him for those little shining satellites that tell me what's going on with folks, but nothing comes. He's already been dead at least six hours and rotting in this morgue for three, so whatever memories his corpse carried could easily have fluttered away. But then, slowly, a few flashes return. It's the sound of leaves rustling, something huge moving through the underbrush. A jolt of utter terror courses through me – I assume it was Delton's, 'cause I don't frighten easily. I hear a high-pitched shrieking – something not human. A few flashes of light burst out of the darkness and the inside of my head turns somersaults. Then everything goes black.

I'm dizzy when I open my eyes. It's not that I'd been expecting Little Bo Peep, but dealing with this giant, screeching monstrosity seems a little out of my pay grade. My creepy, translucent bosses at The Council Of the Dead are gonna need to hear about all this, but there's a few more leads to check up on first.

I like to get a strong Puerto Rican coffee after I visit the morgue. It's the perfect palate-cleanser for all that creepy sterility. I sip the extra-strong, extra-sweet brew out of a little plastic cup as I walk up Nostrand Ave towards Eastern Parkway. The ghostly dickheads upstairs have selected my half-dead-half-alive ass to do this job, for some nefarious reason, I'm sure. I'm the only one like me,  far as anyone knows, and it gets lonely, but the Council always finds a way to use my situation to their advantage.

The rain keeps starting and stopping like an anxious lover, who doesn't know if he should spend the night. The sky has been clouded over all day, but the true evening darkness is just beginning to settle in. I finish my coffee and walk into the sloping park that's nestled between the Botanical Gardens and the library.

Brett Colson crouches like a scruffy gargoyle in his regular perch, on an old bench halfway up the slope. He's talking to himself, but waves at me genially as I approach.

"Bad business with Delton," I say.

It takes Brett some effort to pull away from whatever conversation he was busy with before I showed up. "Bad indeed," he finally manages.

"You see him before it happened, anytime?"

"Carlos, me and Delton been running these streets together for damn near twenty years. I seen Delton every day."

"So, what's the deal?"

"I dunno, man." Brett fists up his face in disgust. "D disappeared one night last week, showed up again, reeking like he was rolling around with some circus animals. Couldn't get the smell off him."

The smell came *before* he got stomped. I have some recalculating to do. "Didn't say where he went?"

"Didn't remember. But that's not so odd for Delton. Thing is, though, he actually got hisself cleaned and everything at the shelter on Fulton, and still couldn't get that prehistoric foulness of him. We woulda teased him 'bout it, but it was all kinda creepy. Now I'm glad we didn't."

"Damn."

"Did you know D had a dentistry degree?"

"I didn't know that."

"Yessir, went to school and everything. Had a wife and kids once upon a time, too. His degree'd-up ass still landed next to mine on this here park bench."

"Look how she swings."

Brett pours a swig of his bottle onto the grass and takes one, himself. I wonder if Delton will turn up in the afterlife, maybe even end up back here, and keep his old drinking buddy company. You never know.

Like drunk teenagers with too much toilet paper, cops have strewn that ridiculous yellow tape haphazardly across the upper park area. I find that if I act like a real dick and scowl a lot, I don't even have to flash the fake FBI badge that the Council Of the Dead gave me – the street grunts just assume I'm some high-up brass they've never met and do whatever I tell them. But I'm not in a mood to take chances, so I exaggerate my grimace, lean hard on my wooden cane and flip out the silver shield. With a few arbitrary curses thrown in for good measure, the two uniforms guarding the crime scene fall right into line.

You can tell the new guys 'cause they have a lot to prove. It's written all over their faces. This one's named "O'Malley" and he's masking how mortified he is with an exaggerated, brotherhood-of-cops chumminess.

"What's going on, Agent?" he chuckles, like we're old college buddies. "Didn't know the feds wanted in on this one."

"We don't," I say curtly. I don't like forced friendliness, especially when I'm in character. "Just swinging through for a looksee. Where's the kill spot?"

O'Malley makes an I'll-take-him-you-stay-here sign to his partner, who just rolls his eyes. I follow the kid up a winding path into the darkening underbrush. "You shoulda seen the body, man," he yammers. "It was like someone ironed him." I'm too busy trying to weed out all the new-guy excitement this guy's projecting so I can focus on the crime scene. So far, though, it's just your basic city-park deal: the slow pulsing of plant life arching towards the sky, a flurry of insects and the scattered frenzy of a few midsized mammals scurrying for trash. Oh, yes: and the unforgettable aura of homelessness – that pungent, lived-in-clothes desolation.

"Here we go, boss." O'Malley waves his light over a dark stain on the path. "This is where the bum got done." I scowl at him and walk up close to where Delton's blood is slowly absorbing into the cement. There's not much left for me that hasn't been swallowed up by forensics or the urban wilderness. A few candy wrappers and beer bottles are scattered around – remnants of Delton's last supper, no doubt – and a little further away, a used condom and an old hat. None of this is particularly helpful. I take a step into the total darkness of the underbrush. It's here I realize that there's something else odd about the park tonight. It'd been bothering me since I stepped in, but I couldn't put my finger on it, like a humming you don't notice until it stops. There are no ghosts here. Usually, any city park hosts a whole cross-section of spirits. This park's particularly alive with the dead; you can see 'em fluttering in their strange circles, like glow bugs, any time after sunset. Well, I can, anyway. But tonight: it's like an empty schoolhouse. A silence so deep it curls up inside my ears.

The leaves convulse more frantically. I hear the snapping of branches. Something huge is moving very quickly towards us.

Then, all at once, I'm inundated by a rush of thick, pungent wind. The trees around me tremble and send up a mournful shushing. Back on the path, O'Malley shifts his weight uneasily from one foot to the other. The leaves convulse more frantically. I hear the snapping of branches. Something huge is moving very quickly towards us.

I smell it before I see it; that same old-feces-circus-tent stench from the body. O'Malley yells something unintelligible and I duck as three gunshots ring out behind me. There's a flurry of motion – the huge fast thing lets out its deafening shriek and thunders even faster towards us. It's only a fuzzy flicker – tall as a two-story

building, long matted hair and all shiny-transparent like a jellyfish. It bursts out of the trees and knocks me on my ass.

For the first year after my death, I got the heebie-jeebies each time I rolled up on some runaway spook, but after a while, you get used to it, and I haven't felt much of anything for quite a while. This situation, on the other hand, has reached some place deep inside of me and crushed all that cool-headed resolve. *Find out what's going on*, the Council message had said. Okay, I found out: there's a huge hairy freak show in the park. Done. I hear that inhuman shriek, mixed with the wet, crunching sound that's probably the end of Officer O'Malley. I don't look back, don't think. I just run. I don't stop running 'till I reach my friend Victor's spot in Crow Hill. I ring the bell until I collapse in a heap on his doorstep and only then, do I realize I'm bleeding.

"Really, babe? Penicillin? You gotta be fucking kidding me."

"You can't crush up some aloe, love muffin, and make this all go away, okay? That gash is deep as shit."

"Oh, is that all I do? Crush up some aloe? Victor, I swear to God, if Carlos wasn't here bleeding all over my couch, I would stab you in the neck."

It's comforting, really, the gentle love-hate routine that Victor and his girl Jenny banter back and forth over me. I wake up smiling, in spite of the dull throbbing in my flank. The brand new thing called "terror" is only a faraway echo.

"He's awake. Put the kettle on, Vic."

"You're the Tea Master General; you put the kettle on."

"Victor…." There's a serious threat in Jenny's voice. It might be the threat of no ass for a month, but whatever it is, it works. When I open my eyes, it's Jenny's calm, slender face that's looking down at me. She's one of these new-age urban herbalist types, straight out of Minnesota or Ohio or somewhere, by way of some fancy liberal arts school. In spite of it all, she's grown on me. Victor's a paramedic with the FDNY. The combination makes for some fiery dinnertime showdowns about the best way to manage a broken bone, but the make-up sex is sensational, from what I can hear one room over.

"You're gonna be all right, Carlos," Jenny says. "I'll keep Victor busy making tea so he can't get to you with any of those synthetic death medications he loves to gank from the station."

"Actually, synthetic death medication sounds like it might really hit the spot right now," I say. When I sit up, it sends splintering pain all up and down my right side.

"Lie down," Jenny scowls. "And shut up. I'll let you know when dinner's ready."

Dinner is fake chicken, mixed with something green called "kale", but I eat it, anyway.

"You gonna tell us what happened?" Victor asks. By the way he gets a little rounder each time I visit, I'm guessing he still sneaks in a few pork sandwiches during those long nights on the ambulance.

"Probably not," I say.

"Really, you should go to a hospital, man. That wound is nasty."

"You know damn well I can't do that." We have this argument almost every time I show up at their door with some otherwordly injury. My heart barely beats at all. My complexion is a dull, brownish-gray. Medically speaking, I'm dead – a partially resurrected, gimp-legged half-wraith. Treatment at a hospital would mean answering far more questions than I care to. Much easier to just come here, where I only say what I need to and get some form of dinner on top of it.

"What's up with the elephants?" Jenny asks. I look at her with raised eyebrows. "Elephants. You wouldn't shut up about them when you were writhing around on our couch." She flails her arms in the air and affects some version of a Spanish accent. "'Oh, the elephants! Estop the elephants! Oh!'"

"Okay," I say. "I got it. I have no idea what you're talking about." But my mind is racing. Is that what I saw flashing out of the underbrush?

"That's what did this to you?" Victor gapes. "I've never had an elephant injury before."

"No," I say. "It was…hairy." The frenzied memories aren't leaving me with much information to go with. "It was huge and hairy and it stank. That's all I got."

"The Hindus believe that elephants used to be able to fly," Victor informs me. "Until one of them fell out of a tree onto a great meditating sage and he cursed away their wings."

"Whoopee," Jenny says. "I know how to google, too."

Victor grunts.

"Elephants," I say, retreating deeper and deeper into my mind. "Elephants." I look up at Jenny and Victor. "Can I use your phone?"

When the regular old fully-dead Council agents want to get in touch with headquarters, they just use that special afterlife telepathy shit and it's done. My halfnhalf ass has to use the phone. I receive all their irritating updates and directives perfectly clearly – comes through like a radio blasting inside my head, but for whatever reason, it doesn't work the other way. They rigged up a phone line and answering machine somewhere in that vast, misty warehouse they've taken over in Sunset Park. I call the number, leave my message and wait for the reply to blare through my skull.

"It's Delacruz," I say (as if anyone else calls them on that line). "Updating on the Delton Jennings park murder. Checking on a possible link to a phantom pachyderm." I feel stupid saying that, but it sounds better than "ghost elephant". "Check and advise on any recent circus or zoo fires. Also: an Officer O'Malley with the NYPD was injured or killed earlier while I was at the scene. Advise on status. That's all." Is that all? Is it ever all? I hate updating. I hang up and sit on the bloodstained couch to wait.

The reply takes a little longer than usual. When it does come, it rustles me from a troubled nap. *Council Of the Dead to Agent Delacruz.* A dull ache begins to spread across my forehead. *Your orders are to detain, but not destroy, the subject. Do not, under any circumstances, damage the ghost elephant.* I hate my job. *Capture it and bring it to headquarters. That is all.*

I don't know if I can all-the-way die or not, but I have a feeling I'm about to find out. Just the thought of going anywhere near the park sends a shudder through me.

"I'm out," I say, poking my head into the kitchen.

"You're not even better, yet!" Victor says.

It's true; my flank still burns every time I move. I shrug and then scowl in pain.

"See?" Jenny says. "Just lie back down on the couch for a few hours."

I shake my head. "Thanks for dinner."

"You're a pain in the ass."

Whenever something sinister seems to be brewing at the Council Of the Dead, Riley is the dude I politic with. They usually partner him up with me on assignments, and he's the closest thing to a friend I've got in the Underworld. Also, he has an uncanny ability to wreak havoc on authority figures and an entire network of likeminded phantoms, scattered throughout the Council, that he goes to for information.

He materializes next to me at the Burgundy Bar. The Burgundy Bar is a rundown saloon in Red Hook, owned by a one-eyed drunk named "Quiñones". It's mostly a bunch of dazed alcoholics in there, so no one pays much mind when I sit at the bar, carrying on a full conversation over drinks with someone that ain't there. Long as Quiñones gets his little package of twenties at the end of each month, care of the COD, he's perfectly happy ignoring whatever hints of supernatural activity sputter up at our after-hours spot.

"What'd you find out?" I mutter at the gently-glowing apparition beside me.

The drunks can't see or hear Riley, and he enjoys taking full of advantage of the situation. "Found out you stepped into another dead people clusterfuck," he says loudly. "Get me a Henney."

I nod at Quinones. "A Hennessy for my friend." He winks at me like I'm some happy retard and busies himself with my order.

"It wasn't an elephant," Riley says. He loves knowing shit I don't.

"What the fuck was it, then?"

"I got a guy coming, Dr. Calloway. He's gonna fill us in on some shit."

"What's the word on O'Malley?"

"The cop that got squashed?" Riley lets out a belly laugh.

"He got squashed squashed?" I say. "Or just kinda squashed?"

"No, he's gonna make it," Riley chuckles. "But the thing got his shooting arm. Looked like God took a spatula to it. Just flat and splayed out. Like Wile E. Fucking Coyote."

"Wow."

"They had to take it off. He's got early retirement, line-of-duty compensation, and now your freakoid park killing is big news. Press all over it. Major Crimes Division investigating. A hot mess."

A sparkly, bearded form fizzles into existence in the barstool next to Riley. "Carlos, meet the good Doctor Calloway." The ghost nods at me and looks around nervously. "Doc, thanks for joining us today. You will note: no afterlifers besides us two are present and everyone else is drunk as fuck and can't see you. You are free to speak freely."

Calloway nods again. His fingers fiddle endlessly on the bar. "What's the what?" I say.

"The what," Doctor Calloway says, "is that the Council Of the Dead is engaged in the systematic categorization of all things phantom."

"This we knew," I say. "Get to it."

"Which includes building a secret zoological theme park for the afterlife."

"A ghost zoo?" I say.

"Essentially," agrees the doctor. "For the purposes of both study and entertainment. And they are particularly interested in tracking down specimens that haven't previously been analyzed."

"Eh?"

"Meaning, things that were around before we had the ability or technology to really find much out."

"Extinct shit," Riley explains.

"It's all very sinister, really," Calloway says. "Like a prehistoric Noah's ark."

"Charming," I say. "So, my friend in the park?"

"*Mammuthus primigenius,"* says the doctor.

"You tangled with a wooly motherfucking mammoth," Riley translates.

I order three shots of rum. "It seems," the doctor continues, "that certain species continue to move in migratory cycles, even centuries after they are extinct. The COD charted a pattern of savage disasters – unexplained building collapses, mysteriously crushed vehicles."

"Flat dudes," Riley adds.

"All bearing that unmistakable stench so common to long-dead pachyderms, left like footprints behind the stampede. The Council calculated a few routes and determined when the herd would be passing through our fine city."

I down all three shots in quick succession. "Go on."

"Their team of forensic zoologists, of which I am occasionally a participant, proposed that the ancient pachyderm may share a common behavioral trait with the modern elephant: an almost-fanatically protective drive in relationship to their young."

Riley's looking ornery about me hogging all the shots, so I order two more and give him one. "Using a method too complicated to get into right now, they secured a sample of baby mammoth dung."

"Then they kidnapped a vagrant that no one would miss," I put in, "and covered him in it."

"Precisely!" exclaims Calloway, looking a little too impressed with the whole thing for my taste. "Turns out, mammoths were very attuned to scent. They could tell what kind of mammoth it was that produced the feces, how old, whether it was an ill mammoth or healthy one, all kinds of fascinating information."

"Fascinating," Riley says.

"Fascinating, indeed," the doctor nods.

"So, a ghost momma mammoth returns to the park after the herd passes through," I say. "She's thinking she'll find a stray ghost baby mammoth there and take him along."

"Instead, she finds Delton Jennings," says Riley, "and makes a bum pancake."

"But why's she still there?" I ask.

"Once she was inside," Calloway explains, "the COD put the area on a kind of spiritual lockdown. She is trapped within the boundaries of the park."

I slam my hand on the bar, perhaps a little harder than is really necessary. "That's why there were no ghosts in the park!" A few drunks look over at me with their shut-the-fuck-up faces and I settle down.

"Only trouble is, they had to put down such heavy barriers to hold her, now nothing dead can get in or out. It's a no-go zone, now. If they take them down to go in, she'll make a break for it before they can subdue her."

"Leave it to the COD to come up with a plan so brilliant that it doesn't work," Riley chuckles.

"That's where I come in," I say. "*Detain, but don't destroy, the subject.* Send the halfie in to catch the momma, cut open the damn boundary from the inside and lure her right into their little Underworld entranceway in Prospect Park. Fuckers got me doing their dirty work again."

"That's your job," Riley reminds me.

I grunt moodily. "Where's the rest of the herd?"

"Oh," Calloway throws his translucent arms up in the air. "They're long gone, stampeded out across the Atlantic Ocean a few days ago."

"Great." I finish my drink, grab my walking stick and head for the door.

"Where you off to?" Riley calls after me.

"Gotta sleep off this rum and figure out what the fuck to do."

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I wake up the next afternoon to the sound of Victor and Jenny's grunting, passionate reconciliation. It's almost as comforting as their bickering – a sweaty, breathless reminder of life amidst all this death. Outside, the sky flirts with the beginnings of night. I'm trying not to think about my date with the giant, prehistoric ghost in the park, but it's not working. I'm not comfortable being on the same planet with that thing, not to mention subduing it. And I like even less the thought of turning it over to the probing curiosity of The Council Of the Dead. But Riley's right: it is my job. I let myself out quietly, without disturbing the festivities and head to the Puerto Rican spot for my coffee.

The park is mostly shadows. A few sad lamps let off eerie glows; pathetic little constellations that reach out into the woods. Now that I'm expecting it, the lack of anything supernatural at all is jarring, a scream of white noise. How do you people do it? I wrap my fingers around the walking stick, which conceals my ghost-killing blade. It is my only comfort right now, and I pray with all my might that I won't have to use it.

The police grunts are gone, but, as if to prove their utter disregard for the rest of the world, they've left behind a little makeshift cop memorial to O'Malley's arm. It features a few corny snap shots of him, a candle and some empty liquor bottles. If I hadn't promised myself that I'd walk as slowly and calmly as possible, I would scatter it into the weeds. I make each move matter; inch forward at an agonizing pace. The momma will come, but she won't come angry. I find my spot, a few feet from Delton's grisly stain, and wait.

I wake up from pleasant dreams of a beautiful, dark-skinned Puerto Rican woman, who only wants to stare in my eyes, but instead, I'm looking directly into a tower of ghostly fur. Momma mammoth has found me. She's standing about five feet away, studying me. I close my eyes again, make a concentrated effort to suppress the urge to run and vomit at the same time. I breathe deeply until my heart rate returns to the melancholic six beats a minute that I'm used to. I open my eyes again and she's still there. She raises her furry trunk towards me. I let it explore my whole body. The trunk lets out little snorts as it probes my cane, then proceeds up to my face. It's wet and smells foul like Delton did. But I am alive. She's not trampling me, yet. Perhaps the rage has subsided some.

Slow like honey, I raise my hand out, palm to the sky. The snout snorffles its way through my fingers and then retreats back to its owner, apparently satisfied. "I'm going to take you out of here," I say, very slowly. "I'm going to break the barrier." She just stares at me, her humongous body rising and falling like a furry tide. "To find your herd." Maybe I'm imagining things, but she appears to perk up a little. Her breath quickens. Of course, she was alive millions of years before anyone thought to say "herd", but a halfie can hope.

I take a step backwards, beckoning her with my hands. "C'mon," I say, in the friendliest voice I can muster. "Come to the edge. I'll take you to freedom." It's hard to say that word, knowing that where I really have to take her is quite the opposite of freedom, but I'm trying to push that out of my head for now. Getting all sappy doesn't make this job any easier. "C'mon, Mama."

I think what really gets me is her first step forward. I keep cooing, "C'mon, Mamma, come to freedom," but by the time we've reached a full stride towards the edge of the park, tears are streaming down my face. I will never, in a million years, be able to explain why. We keep walking along, a strange night procession through the park: me crying and cooing, waving my hands in little circles towards myself and the ghost mammoth, lumbering along cautiously.

When we reach the stone wall around the park, I try to collect myself. I wipe my eyes with my sleeves, like some chick on a talk show, and take a few deep breaths so I can stop making those damn little hiccupy sobs. "I'm sorry," I say to the mammoth. "It's been a rough week." She's glaring furiously at the invisible force field that the COD has rudely erected around the park. Surely, she has already had more than a few unpleasant attempts to escape.

I pull my spirit-killing blade out of its walking stick sheath and the she-mammoth lets out that ear-shattering shriek and rears up above me. Her legs kick the air a few inches from my face. I take two steps back and slash behind me with the blade, trying to feel out the damn force field. I'm cutting air. She lands and I swear New York must be registering a minor earthquake. Her tusks are aimed right at me, two great translucent curved swords reaching out to run me through. She stomps forward.

I slash some more, and finally feel that satisfying pressure against the blade that means I've found my mark. The force field gives way, ripping open around us. The great ancient matron stops mid-charge and regards the air that was once her prison wall. A crowd of relieved phantom park critters trickles back in through the new tear. The mammoth watches them scuttle past and then she looks at me. I make a show of sheathing my blade and step over the wall, so she sees it's alright.

"See?" I say. "It's safe now. C'mon. Come over. You're free. You're going home." Damnit – the word home chokes me up again, but I recover quickly. She's huffing and puffing as she reaches her trunk cautiously towards the wall. When nothing happens, she takes a single step forward. Then another. "C'mon, ma, c'mon," I say. She lumbers out of the park and then we're standing on Eastern Parkway at four o'clock in the morning, me and my new friend, the momma mammoth.

I'm trying to figure out how we're gonna make it to Prospect Park when I feel her warm trunk wrap tightly around my waist. Panic sweeps across me like floodwaters. I can't breath. I can't move. I can't even see straight. The whole world turns upside down and then I'm deposited gently onto her mountainous back, looking down on the street. I catch my breath and right myself, reaching one leg down along either side of her body. If God, or whoever, brought me back to life just so I could live this moment, it was worth it. I take two firm fistfuls of ghostly fur and the momma mammoth jolts into a run. Without regard for which streets are populated or who might see us, she barrels headlong towards the park.

The Council Of the Dead has a very strict rule: do not involve humans. Don't fuck with their lives, don't appear to them if you're a ghost, don't let on that you can see ghosts if you're not one. In short: leave the greatest mystery of the afterlife a damn mystery. But the Council Of the Dead also kidnapped Delton Jennings, covered him in mammoth shit and sent him off to be trampled. So, if tonight, a few nocturnal stragglers are startled to see a dapper and ecstatic gray-skinned Puerto Rican fly past with tears in his eyes, I couldn't really give a damn.

The wind ripples fiercely around me, cleansing me of all doubt and indecision. What is left is pure exhilaration. We gallop down the Parkway, cut a left across Grand Army Plaza and burst like a furry ghost rocket into Prospect Park. There's no more decision to make. We rush along towards the turnoff that would lead to the waiting arms of The Council and their infinite imprisonment. I could urge the mammoth to turn off. She trusts me now. Instead, I smile as we thunder past.

The Park is alive around us. The early-morning birds twitter a high-pitched symphony and the city forest ghosts erupt into a flurry of activity as we pass. We break out of the wilderness and speed down Ocean Parkway

at a steady, ass-breaking canter, through Midwood, Gravesend and over the Belt Parkway. Ahead is the infinite Atlantic darkness. I take a deep breath of ocean air and laugh out loud. Some doufy early-morning joggers pass and try to ignore me, the crazy laughing man floating in the corners of their eyes.

When we hit sand, she's walking. Her body heaves up and down beneath me. I pat her gratefully. Then I grab hold of some fur, dangle down along her wooly flank and drop onto the beach. Side by side, we stroll to the edge of the water. I imagine a whole army of ghost mammoths, thundering out across the waves somewhere, but all I see is darkness and a few stars. I don't have to tell her to go on now; after a brief pause, momma mammoth launches herself out onto the water. I plant my ass in the sand, light a cigar and watch her flickering glow disappear into the night. There will be hell to pay in the morning – eyebrows raised, forms to fill out, suspicious interrogations. But all that is tomorrow. Tonight, for the first time since I died, I feel alive.

**THE END**

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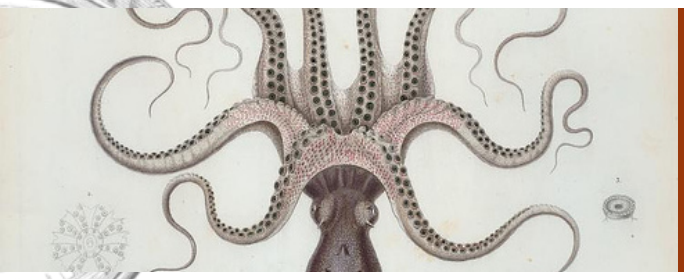
**Daniel José Older's** spiritually-driven, urban storytelling takes root at the crossroads of myth and history. With sardonic, uplifting and often hilarious prose, Older draws from his work as an overnight 911 paramedic, a teaching artist and an antiracist/antisexist organizer to weave fast-moving, emotionally-engaging plots that speak whispers and shouts about power and privilege in modern day New York City. His work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *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.ghoststar.net**). Read some of his ridiculous ambulance adventures at **www.raval911.blogspot.com**.



A yellowish-green glow appears in the distance. Somewhere in the creature's tiny brain, electrical impulses decide that glow signals the location of the food it seeks.

# Hidden Beneath Calm Waters

## By Jerry Hobbs

**Today:**

As with most finned creatures living in salt water, survival of the sablefish, genus *Anoplopoma,* depends on a brain that is controlled by 99% instinct and 1% intelligence. A perfect example is the one which now swims downward several thousand feet below the surface of the Pacific Ocean, miles off the coast of Japan. It blindly follows the instinct portion of its brain, which promises food. The intellectual part neither understands, nor cares, what type of food, but simply trusts that it will soon eat.

What began as a journey, guided by an unusual scent and a slightly elevated temperature of water carried upward by ocean currents, soon becomes one of visual attraction when a yellowish-green glow appears in the distance. Somewhere in the creature's tiny brain, electrical impulses decide that glow signals the location of the food it seeks.

Even though normally dependent on shrimp, crabs, and smaller fish when searching for a meal, the sablefish swims without pause between what appear to be weaving stalks of brown kelp and begins to feed on the glowing algae. Had it used even a fraction of its brain's 1% intelligence, the fact that kelp doesn't exist at this depth might have issued a warning. Instinct and hunger overrule caution, however, and the waving brown stalks are ignored as they slowly move closer. Soon completely surrounded, the fish continues to feed on the odd-tasting algae, unaware it is now in a trap from which there will be no escape.

**1945:**

On Monday, August 6, an American B-29 bomber with the name "Enola Gay" took off from North Field Airbase in the West Pacific for a six-hour flight to Japan. Its primary cargo, including an element known as uranium-235, was no more dangerous than a large mass of metal during most of the flight. It would remain harmless until thirty minutes before reaching the target city of Hiroshima, when the safety devices would be removed. At that time, the atomic bomb, code name "Little Boy", was capable of an explosion that would equal the force of 13 kilotons (26,000 pounds) of TNT.

On Thursday, August 9, a second B-29, named "Bockscar", took off from the same airfield. This aircraft flew first toward Kokura, Japan, its initial target, but a thick cloud cover forced them to choose the secondary location of Nagasaki. "Fat Man", as this bomb was nicknamed, contained a more powerful element called plutonium-239, which would yield an explosion the equivalent of 21 kilotons of TNT.

The following morning, Friday, August 10, a third and final B-29, named “Texas Rose”, left the airfield with the destination of Tokyo - Japan's capital city. This was the final aircraft to be dispatched and its cargo was also an explosive device. Like the one the day before, it contained the more powerful element, plutonium-239. Even larger, it was designed to explode with the equivalent force of 28 kilotons of TNT.

Enola Gay and Bockscar, the first two bombers, entered the country of Japan as planned, flying between thirty-one and thirty-two thousand feet, almost six miles in altitude. The first bomb, Little Boy, fell 43 seconds before reaching its programmed height of 1,900 feet over Hiroshima, where it exploded. An estimated one hundred and sixty thousand people eventually died as a result. Though the second bomb was more powerful, the death toll in Nagasaki when Fat Man exploded was approximately half that.

The successful missions of these first two planes were largely due to the fact that, even though detected by enemy radar, they were ignored as being too few in number to be considered a threat. Therefore, to conserve fuel, no Japanese defense planes were sent to meet either of them. That decision proved to be extremely costly and effectively determined the outcome of the war.

Because Tokyo was the capital city, reconnaissance flights were randomly sent aloft to search for any threat. A Japanese Zero, which was a long-range fighter aircraft, was patrolling that Friday when Texas Rose entered the forbidden airspace. Discovering the B-29 while still well offshore, the Zero flew just above the water to evade detection then rose upward to attack from below with .30 caliber, armor-piercing ammunition that was interspersed with tracer rounds.

As the bomber's tail gunner hastened to return the fusillade of bullets from the lower rear turret, the Zero's aim proved effective as the shells strafed the larger aircraft's port side wing, rupturing the fuel lines that ran to the engines. The B-29's gunner quickly found his range, and .50 caliber shells tore into the Zero's starboard wing, ripping it to shreds before slicing across the cockpit.

Even as bullets pierced the Japanese pilot's body, his finger continued to press the firing trigger. With the drag reduced on his right wing, the small plane spun counter clockwise, causing the last of his ammunition to stitch across the B-29's starboard wing, rupturing the fuel lines there, also. This time, however, a tracer shell ignited the volatile liquid, causing both starboard engines to catch fire and explode.

The Zero spun in a counter-clockwise spiral all the way to the ocean below, while the Texas Rose, with most of its starboard wing now missing, followed closely behind. It took each slightly less than two minutes to fall those six miles. Whereas, the Japanese pilot died almost immediately from the .50 caliber bullets, the crew of the B-29 bomber lived a lifetime in those 120 seconds.

What remained of the Japanese fighter disintegrated when struck by the waves created by the impact of the larger plane, which plunged into the water nearby at more than two-hundred miles per hour. Its crew died instantly from the impact, even before the huge bomber broke apart and sank. Within minutes, there was no trace of either aircraft on the ocean's surface.

Unlike the rest of the B-29's structure, the reinforced compartment holding the bomb with "Remember the Alamo" painted across the side remained relatively intact. Though armed, the electrical safety plugs had not yet been removed and therefore, the device did not explode.

Meanwhile, authorities at the airfield anxiously awaited the return of the Texas Rose. Hearing nothing in the 12 hours following its takeoff, they feared the worst and dispatched search planes to follow the bomber's charted route. After 24 hours, including nighttime flights looking for signal flares, they determined that the aircraft had crashed and sunk to the bottom at some unknown location between the airfield and its targeted city of Tokyo.

When the Japanese Zero's pilot failed to return to base, his squadron commander decided he was dead, presumably due to engine failure that forced him down somewhere in the Pacific Ocean while on the routine reconnaissance flight. Due to a fuel shortage, no effort was made to search such a large area. No one would ever learn of the hundreds of thousands of lives saved due to the man's courageous actions.

Since the Japanese Emperor formally surrendered six days after the second bomb was detonated, it was decided in the interest of public opinion that all records of the failed attempt to bomb Tokyo should be conveniently "lost". In their place, documents were created that reported in great detail how the Texas Rose had been shot down over the South Pacific Ocean during a routine bombing mission. The crew was officially listed as MIA - Missing In Action. Due to tight security surrounding the actual operation, along with the fact that orders for strict radio silence had been observed, only those directly involved knew the truth. It was a secret they all carried to the grave.

**Today:**

The brown stalks, mistakenly ignored by the sablefish as kelp, are in truth, the tentacles of a species of octopus known as the North Pacific Giant, genus *Enteroctopus doflein.* They slowly close around the hapless victim before it suspects danger. By the time it does, the suckers lining each of the tentacles prevent any chance of escape. Just as countless times before, a feeding fish becomes food itself and is crushed to death while being pulled towards the parrot-like beak of the larger creature, which is superior in both strength and intelligence to the sablefish.

Soon, the queen's feast is complete. She sinks back down into the dark throne of twisted metal, content to digest her meal and lie in wait for the next tasty morsel that will be drawn to the slight rise in temperature and the glow of enticing algae. Like dozens of female ancestors before her, she's confident she'll be well-fed for the rest of her life.

Beneath her is a half-hidden chamber containing a large, oblong object with the faint letters, "Re__mber th_ Al_mo", on its side. Created as a weapon intended to be used from the air, the bomb wasn't designed to withstand either the pressure at this depth or the corrosive salt water. The effect of both has, through the years, eaten away most of its housing, including the thin, protective shield of lead that lines the plutonium, allowing heat from the radioactive material to perpetuate the algae, along with its faint glow.

Since the Giant Octopus breeds only once at the end of its life, the eggs hatched by every successive queen gradually build up an unexplained affinity for the radioactive material. As a result, each new tentacled female, "chosen" by her display of superiority to occupy the throne inside what remains of the Texas Rose, therefore lives slightly longer than the previous one. This extended lifespan, aided by a rich diet, not only encourages an increase in physical size, but also provides additional time for her brain to further develop. Genetics ensure these enhancements are then passed on to the eggs. The result is that each generation is even more evolved that the last.

At their depth and isolated location, it's unlikely anyone will disturb this group of North Pacific Giant octopi. Since the half-life of plutonium-239 is thousands of years, these creatures, one of the higher mentally-developed denizens living in the oceans of Earth to begin with, will no doubt continue to grow in size and intelligence. Even today, their cognizant ability approaches that of humans. Soon, it will be much higher.

Hours after the female's meal is digested, a prowfish, genus *Zaprora silenus*, searching for something edible, senses a slight increase in temperature, along with an unusual hint of food carried upward by fickle ocean currents. Instinct guides it down, deeper than it has ever swum before - toward a faint glow, where it will soon eat and be eaten. Down to that special place, hidden beneath calm waters.

**The End**

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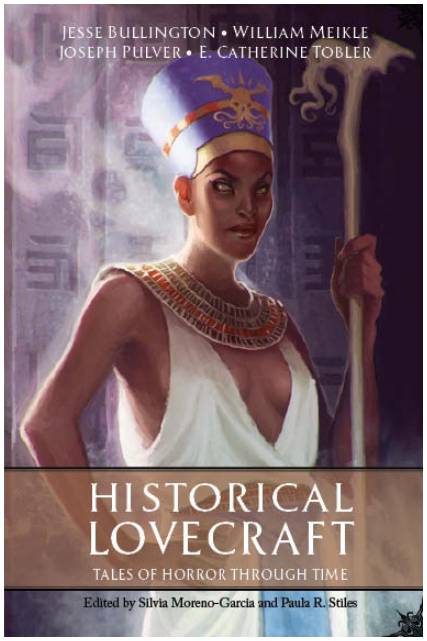
**Jerry discovered** the joy of putting his imagination on paper shortly after retirement. Since that time, he has published two novels and a book of short stories. He uses his own version of "thinking outside the box" to ensure his stories are not only fresh and entertaining, but also sometimes have unpredictable results. Several of his articles have been published in online magazines, but his true love is fiction. He recently completed a novella and plans to include several short stories under the same cover. In his spare time, he sings barbershop harmony in both a men's chorus and quartet. Though not recently active, his blog is: **http://www.jerrywriter.blogspot.com/.**

# Our cover artist

Jason Juta is a freelance digital illustrator living in the UK, specialising in fantasy art for the gaming industry. He intends to fully explore the hyborean and antediluvian realms of dark fantasy and cosmic horror in the future.

# Coming this spring

*Historical Lovecraft*, a unique anthology blending historical fiction with horror, features 26 tales spanning centuries and continents. This eclectic volume takes the readers through places as varied as Laos, Greenland, Peru, and the Congo, and from antiquity until the 20th century, pushing the envelope of Lovecraftian lore. William Meikle's inquisitor tries to unravel the truth during a very hostile questioning. Jesse Bullington narrates the saga of a young Viking woman facing danger and destruction. E. Catherine Tobler stops in Ancient Egypt, where Pharaoh Hatshepsut receives an exquisite and deadly gift. Joe Pulver's Wild West is a bit wilder, and darker, than what cowboy movies have shown you. These are tales that reimagine history and look into the past through a darker glass. Tales that show evil has many faces and reaches through the centuries. Tales that will chill your heart.

Join us in our journey through horror and time, if you dare.