

Issue 7 | June 2011

INNSMOUTH

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FREE PRESS

FICTION BY |

W.H. Pugmire

Don Webb

Stephen Woodworth

Melissa Sorensten

Byron Alexander Campbell

Regina Gleib

Triannual Magazine of Lovecraftian Fiction

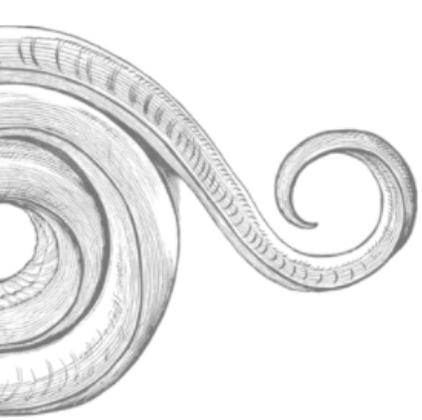


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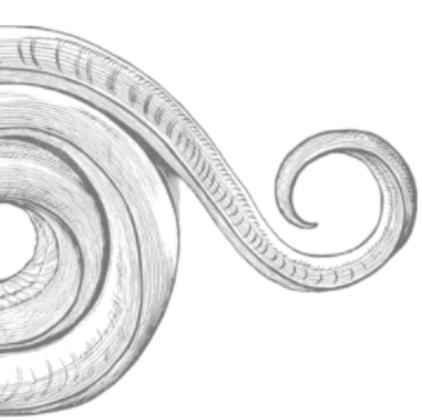
Innsmouth Free Press #7 (June 2011)

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EDITORIAL

With summer come the beach and the sun. But we didn't want you to feel too safe and warm, so Issue 7 is out with some chilling stories and a cover illustration by Scott Purdy. Instead of taking a vacation in some sunny location, won't you journey into our decadent Innsmouth?

Renowned Mythos writer W.H. Pugmire begins our trip and takes us into the "Cool Mist", where a haunting song will bring terror. Next comes "A Tour of the Catacombs", though be warned, this is no ordinary tourist attraction. We journey back in time to the 17th century, where a naturalist learns about the mysteries of the worm in the tale, "On The Generation of Insects". Don Webb has us pause and introduces us to "Nyarlathotep". Our voyage then takes us across vast distances and mountains, and toward an odd landscape of "Black Sand". This little expedition of terror concludes in an orphans' asylum, where sickness festers in "Every Little Sparrow".

Don't forget to send us a postcard and tell us what you thought of our little horror holiday.

Many tentacles,

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





Fearful as I was, I wanted to listen to his tune. The guttural language that he softly uttered was like none I had known; it amazed me that a human mouth could shape such alien words.

COOL MIST

By W. H. Pugmire

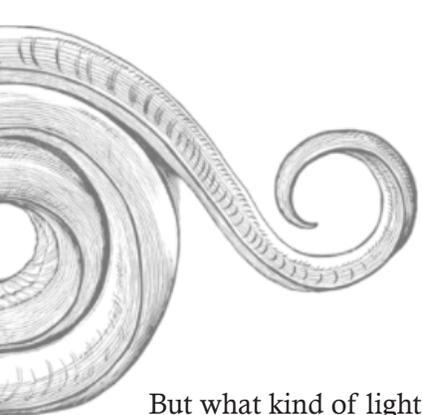
Night seeped into the early evening sky and made it black. I remember wandering that realm of ink in search of perfect solitude, hunting for one uninhabited place where I could sit undisturbed and weep for the soul of my young lover, dead by his own hand. Finding my way to the waterfront, which was near to the punk artist's co-op that was my unruly home, I walked in wind that pushed the stink of Puget Sound into my sensitive nostrils. I heard the plash of waves on rocks and approached that liquid song. The somber expanse of water spread before me, seeming like some living thing, reminding me of the mortal elixir that once flowed within my lover's veins, those vital stems into which he pierced a needle and heralded his junky doom. He had mocked my quaint abhorrence of drugs and booze, and I suppose he would laugh to know that I had procured some outlawed absinthe from my Autumn Sister and drank the brew in bitter memory of our love.

Night's chill shook me from my morbid reverie. Shoving hands into pants pockets, I felt the chunk of cheese that I had wrapped in plastic. It had been Todd's habit to feed cheese to the waterfront rats, and I had decided to continue this tradition in his memory. As I began to unwrap the substance, I heard a human sound above the wind and waves. A voice of song. I hesitated, not wanting to meet anyone, but as I listened, something in the sound beguiled my senses and seemed to beckon. My boots crunched on pebbles as I trod upon the path that led beyond the rocks and water, and my footfalls must have carried to the singer, for suddenly the song went false. I looked and saw a shape kneeling on the ground, a blanket enshrouding its shoulders. It rocked to and fro, and as I cautiously approached, I could detect the soft singing of an esoteric melody.

His small face was that of a child, but his eyes were not young – they gleamed with hostility as they held my own. His dark hair was kept short except for two tufts dyed red and shaped into horns. Spiked dog collars choked his throat. His face contained a kind of ravaged beauty, and it terrified me. There was something in his dark, sparkling eyes, a weird kind of crazy rapture that chilled the heart of he who looked upon those slanted orbs.

I knelt a few feet from him. Fearful as I was, I wanted to listen to his tune. The guttural language that he softly uttered was like none I had known; it amazed me that a human mouth could shape such alien words. He turned away from me as I listened and sang to distant water. Trying to think of something to say, I held to him the chunk of cheese: "Care for some? I like feeding the sewer rats; they get so hungry this time of year." I thought I detected a sort of smile. And then he turned his merciless eyes toward mine and opened his mouth in song – a loud wailing sound. I felt stabs of icy terror creep into my flesh. Those weird words of his cacophony filled me with a kind of panic. I leaned upon my hands so as to push myself erect and stalk away.

His singing stopped and he gazed toward the water with frantic eyes. I followed his gaze and at first saw nothing – and then it was there, a patch of mist that floated toward us in dark aether. I thought at first that it reflected moonlight, but then I realized that its odd illumination came from some other, some unknown, source.



But what kind of light could form such outlandish hints of hue in the body of dull mist? And what were those colours that writhed obscenely, that shaped themselves outlandishly?

Once more the child-like creature sang. The mist wormed nearer. It pulsed inches from my face, and a wisp of it drifted to me and smoothed itself against my brow. Vision blurred and blood thickened. My skull throbbed with pain. The boy's decadent singing sounded as though it emanated from some other place, some other time. Cold oppression seethed inside my skullspace and spilled toward my heart. Like a drunken thing, I tipped and slammed against the ground.

Awareness came as an ache and sense of dull fear. His strong hand helped me find my balance. How unyielding was the hand that held my own. He sidled nearer and pressed his body against my own. I could taste his rancid breath on my lips. And then I noticed, floating above his head, the patch of mist, that monstrous substance that spilled toward and enveloped our conjoined hands. His fingers tightened in their clutching. I could just make out the muted image of our joined hands as the boy opened his mouth in chanting. I watched in horror as the flesh of our locked hands began to ripple and discolour, how it began to shred and dissolve. The mist grew opaque with crimson cloudiness.

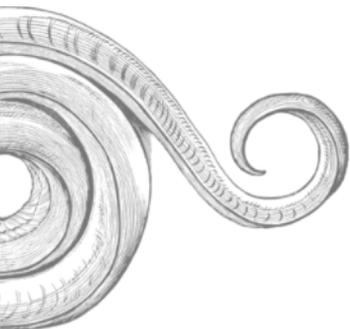
Overwhelmed with searing pain, I shut my weeping eyes and tried not to lose consciousness. Lips kissed my hair and pressed against my ear.

"It does get hungry this time of year," a little voice mocked. That was when my mind snapped, and I lost myself within a hysteria of screaming as my companion sang and sang.

THE END

Wilum Hopfrog Pugmire has been writing Lovecraftian horror fiction since the early 1970s. His work has appeared in such magazines as *Weird Tales*, *Deathrealm*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Fantasy Macabre*. These past two years have seen him writing like a lunatic, and his four books to be published this year are *The Tangled Muse*, *Some Unknown Gulf of Night*, *Depths of Dreams and Madness*, and *The Strange Dark One – Tales of Nyarlathotep*. He is working on his next two books.

Note: "Cool Mist" first appeared in DEATHREALM #2, 1987. This version has been revised by the author.





The early Church often constructed its edifices on top of pagan architecture, both to take advantage of the existing structures and to make a rather presumptuous attempt to usurp the places of older Gods.

A TOUR OF THE CATACOMBS

By Stephen Woodworth

Please watch your step as we descend. As you can see, these stairs were cleft into solid stone and their slant has become treacherous from the tread of so many feet.

And I hope there shall be no stragglers among you. As we say in the Abbey, only two sorts enter the Catacombs: the quick and the dead.

The crypt predates the Abbey, of course, by many centuries. You can see for yourself the difference in construction. Medieval artisans, however clever they might have been, could hardly hope to have burrowed into impenetrable metamorphic rock in this fashion. The early Church often constructed its edifices on top of pagan architecture, both to take advantage of the existing structures and to make a rather presumptuous attempt to usurp the places of older Gods.

I apologize for the cold. At this depth, the temperature remains a constant 56 degrees Fahrenheit, whether in the furnace of summer or the icebox of winter. I'm afraid the damp makes it worse, as well. You can smell it here – the dripping, seeping odour of silt and sediment. But I promise that you shan't suffer the chill for long.

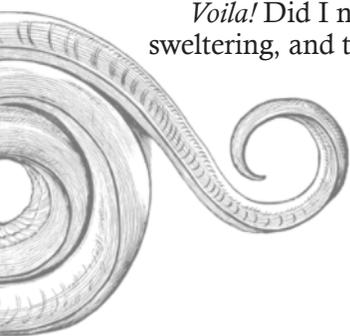
A few of you are already gasping for breath, so let us rest here in order that I may demonstrate another aspect of these stygian hollows. I shall briefly turn off this electric lantern and I strongly advise all of you to remain absolutely still when I do so. To shift even an inch under such conditions could be catastrophic.

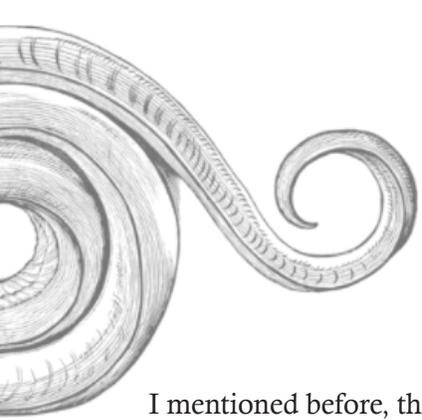
What you are now seeing – or not seeing, depending on your perception – is a *cave darkness*, the absolute absence of all light. I think you'll appreciate the paradox of how it makes the cavern feel unimaginably vast and oppressively close at the same time.

I can hear some of you panting with panic, so I'll switch on this nuisance of a light. There! Again, mind the worn steps as we continue down. On the lower, older stairs, the shallow bevels of parallel footsteps meld into a single deep groove, as if from the dragging of a saurian tail rather than the shuffle of human soles.

What was that? Yes, those markings on the wall are indeed a form of writing – a language sadly lost to all but we initiates of the Abbey. I could translate the passages, but you would probably find them tedious. *Most* of you, I should say.

Voila! Did I not promise you it would grow warmer? Where before you were shivering, you now are sweltering, and the clammy drafts of the sepulcher have become the hot, humid mineral breaths of a sauna. As





I mentioned before, this rock is volcanic in origin, the petrified stratum of what was once boiling magma. We are fearfully deep into the earth now. You can feel it, can't you? The weight of it compacting the very air around you....

Please note, as we pass, the hexagonal excavation of these cells in the walls, exquisite workmanship that I believe to be unique to this location. Yes, there *are* an incredible number of them – thousands upon thousands. No, those ovoid chrysalises you see in each cell are not sarcophagi. This is a place of incubation not entombment. Not a grave but a cradle.

Ah! We've reached the final flight of these winding steps. As you can see, the tunnel opens into an immense abyss. Would that this paltry light could plumb the farthest reaches of this titanic chamber! There you would view a city of living rock, the scale and splendour of which would beggar the most extravagant fantasies of the pharaohs, its colonnades and cornices teeming with the multitudes whose melodic shrieks are resonating in the stone around us.

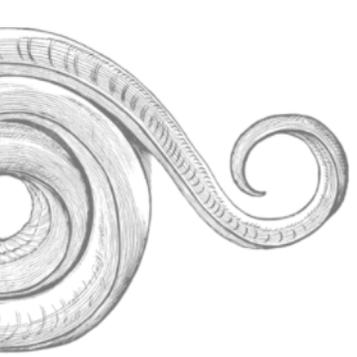
But this lantern is obviously quite useless, so I shall turn it off. Those of you who are like me – who have felt the Abbey and its underside calling to you in your dreams across miles and millennia – will have little need of it. Your cells, the cocoons of your larval renaissance, await you.

As for the rest of you, well...recall what I said about the quick and the dead. You will probably not wish to see what is coming.

This concludes our tour. Don't forget the guide as you depart....

THE END

Stephen Woodworth is a graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop and a First Place winner in the Writers of the Future Contest. His "Violet Series" of paranormal suspense novels includes the *New York Times* bestsellers *Through Violet Eyes* and *With Red Hands*, as well as the most recent volumes, *In Golden Blood* and *From Black Rooms*. His short fiction has appeared in such markets as *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and the venerable *Weird Tales*, and his short story "The Olverung" was recently included in Tor.com's *Year's Best Fantasy 9* anthology. Although he is a longtime Lovecraft devotee, rumours of his involvement with the Sect of the Elder Sign are grossly exaggerated. Those who dare to do so may visit him at www.myspace.com/woodworthsworldofwonders.





You will recall my experiments, initiated at the beginning of June, following that ancient and accepted dictum, namely, that the putrefaction of flesh has been observed to generate life of the lowest order without any apparent intervention.

ON THE GENERATION OF INSECTS

By Byron Alexander Campbell

Democritus bears witness that men first appeared in the form of small worms, which little by little assumed human shape... After a long period of fertility, during which many monstrous and marvelous generations were brought forth, the Earth Mother became at last exhausted and sterile....

- Francesco Redi, *Experiments on the Generation of Insects*. Trans. Mab Bigelow

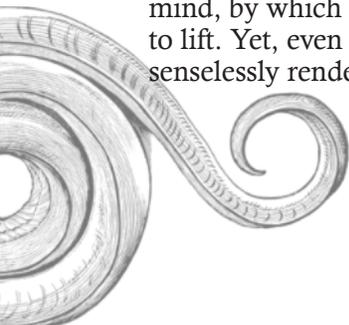
From a series of unpublished letters, addressed to his friend and colleague Carlo Roberto Dati, discovered in the possession of the renowned poet, physician and experimentalist upon his death on the 1st of March, 1697.

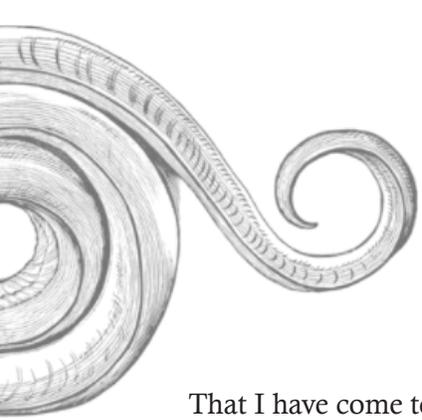
Prefatory Note

I have often in the past, Signor Carlo, found occasion to remark upon your goodliness and generosity. Upon these kindly traits, I feel justified, without obsequiousness, to heap the accusation of philosophical learning, for your vast knowledge of matters both Ancient and Modern has, on more than one occasion, added utility to a friendship built upon an unshiftable foundation of shared interest.

I fear, now, that plumbless knowledge for which you have garnered a well-deserved reputation must once again be tested. I have encountered a situation I find myself ill-equipped to comprehend, either as a Christian or as a follower of such distinguished observers of Nature as Aristotle and Galileo, upon whose experimental methods, as you know, all my studies have been founded. I pray that your education may find success where mine has met only humiliation and defeat; I fear otherwise for the sanity of my mind, as well as for the purity of my soul.

You will perhaps notice a disorder to the letters that follow, and wonder on it, having borne witness on many past occasions to my fastidiousness in regard to letter writing of all kinds, most particularly those notes chronicling the observations collected from my experiments. I can only answer that I have found my scrawlings of late increasingly haphazard; at times, it seems as though the letters, animated by some unknown *spiritus*, crawl about the page of their own will, reordering themselves in meaningless new configurations, else statements whose meaning is darkly opaque. I have held off sending them until now, for the disorder of my mind, by which I have been forced to pen draft after draft of the same missive, has only in recent weeks begun to lift. Yet, even in my restored state, I hold some small but worming fear that these words will mockingly and senselessly render themselves anew the moment I place my seal upon them.





That I have come to regard the subject matter of my experiments, now completed, with a measure of revulsion I did not hitherto consider possible only augments my hesitation. I am thrown again into a great turmoil of thoughts and emotions whenever I recall the legion-mouthed and serpent-limbed abomination of my dreams, or the half-formed grey creature I thought to be real, with a face that so resembled my own. Of the latter, there are times I have thought to have seen it, having now assumed the shape of an orphan boy begging in the alley, but before I can get close enough to identify it, it flees, or its features transmute into something less familiar.

I find that I am stuffing this prefatory note with material better suited for a postscript, if indeed it is suitable to be read at all. I will, therefore, step aside and allow my scribbling of the past months their own unmediated voice. I am, as always, your most grateful friend and companion,

(signed Francesco Redi di Arezzo)



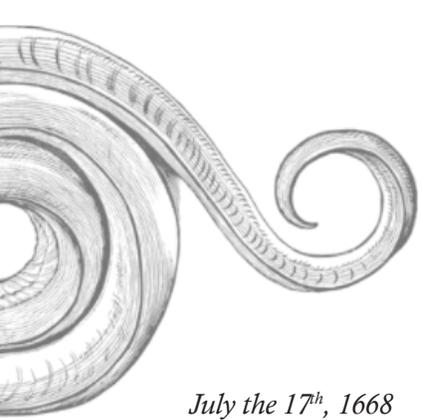
July the 10th, 1668

You will recall my experiments, initiated at the beginning of June, following that ancient and accepted dictum, namely, that the putrefaction of flesh has been observed to generate life of the lowest order without any apparent intervention. You have heard my views on the subject: that since the time of Creation, the Earth has brought forth no life independent of the insemination of plants and animals already in existence, and that all life, great or small, is engendered by others of its kind. The rot of flesh gives birth to naught save noxious fumes.

Having once enclosed three freshly killed snakes of the sort known as the 'Eel of Asclepius' within a lidless box, I watched a variety of small worms arise to consume the foul meat. I was most intrigued to observe an equal number of eggs of varying colours come to replace these worms. After a period of roughly a fortnight, these eggs gave issue to grey, dull flies with closed wings, misshapen as if half-finished. It took only minutes for these torpid creatures to assume the likeness of insects of a more familiar variety, from which I concluded my initial suspicions to be confirmed: the worms being the offspring or maggots of the flies themselves, deposited by their parents on the bodies of the snakes.

I have since continued my experiments, using as catalysts every variety of meats, cooked or raw, imaginable. The results are consistent whether the boxes contain fowl, horseflesh, or sheep's heart; or indeed, with ox, lamb, buffalo, dog, or lion; goose, hen, capon, or swallow; sole, swordfish, or eel. The worms or maggots have the maddening habit of disappearing to places unknown if I do not take great care to seal every aperture of the containers in which they are placed. Such was the case with the fat creatures that arose from the river frogs I had killed, skinned and placed in a dish of shallow water; I returned on the third day to find the foetid liquid in which they had sported empty save for the clean white bones of the amphibians.





July the 17^h, 1668

Addendum to the previous letter:

My experiments on the origins of worms, Signor Carlo, have taken a new turn which I believe will attract your interest.

In order to demonstrate with some finality that the maggots of flies cannot appear absent of the deposits of the flies themselves, I placed meats of varying description within a number of flasks. Some of these vases I sealed with a fine Naples veil, and some I left open.

I have wondered often why I did not postpone these experiments for a season less given to torridity; the warm, humid air has done much to magnify the stench of spoiled flesh, such that it now seems to have sunk into my skin itself. Everywhere I go, I carry with me the mark of decay. It is only through a liberal, daily application of scented oils that I am able to escape it by even the smallest degree.

I will postpone dispatching these letters until such time as I can report either success or failure in this avenue of experimentation.



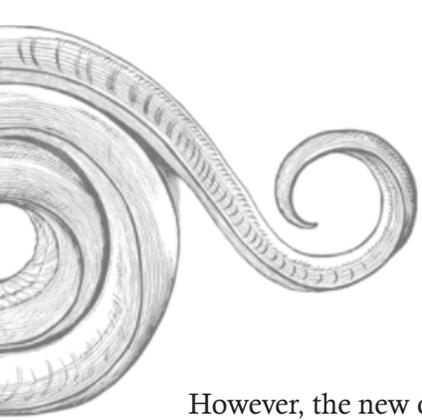
August the 1st, 1668

As predicted, the meats enclosed by the net of cloth brought forth no new life, although the worms that squirm moistly about the flask increase exponentially as the meat within is reduced to liquid.

This turbid substance, though potently offensive to the nostrils, is oddly translucent apart from some specks of grease that gather at the top. Meantime, the flies circle in frustration, alighting occasionally to deposit more worms upon the cloth.

The veil, at one point, sagged so beneath the blind, legless creatures that they nearly broke through the barrier. Such a disaster would have necessitated I recommence the experiments afresh, an operation I am inclined to avoid at any cost; I can no longer look upon a butcher's wares without imagining the churning of white bodies, and the choking stench, that will surely follow. Though I am aware that most butchers are in the habit in the warmer seasons of covering their meats with a clean white cloth for the very purpose of discouraging such contaminations.

I write to you now, Signor Carlo, in regard to a question of the foetor such things are given to produce, after their kind. During the last week, I began to take notice of an odour more intense, by several degrees of magnitude, than that stench that we can be given to expect in company of this natural decay of flesh from bone. Initially, I attributed this sudden olfactory intrusion to the effects of the humidity in the air, which, as you will recollect, was particularly heavy following the rainstorm that visited us this past Wednesday.



However, the new odour differed from the now familiar stench of decomposing flesh in several particulars: one, it carried an oddly spiced honey-sweetness, like that found in delicacies imported from India and the Exotic East. I will admit, to my great aversion, that I found it nearly as enticing as it was cloying.

The perfume is also peculiar in that its source cannot, at this point, be definitely identified. By reorganizing the positions of the flasks and their contents, I was able to determine only that it did not arise from any one of the meats, particularly. I am likewise unable to explain why its potency waxes and wanes at intervals counter-indicative of the effects of the stifling heat, becoming most noticeable in the evening once the moon has risen. As the moon has increased in fullness, so has the spice-bearing miasma. Many things in Nature are known to undergo changes in sympathy with the moon's phases, but I have never before heard of a case such as this one. It became so insufferable last night, as evening drew in, that I was compelled to conclude my observations much earlier than I had intended.

Through my training and experience as a physician, I have learned to ignore such things as would turn a lesser man's stomach. Yet, I find myself literally oppressed by this strange and powerful scent. With each passing day, the dominion of its influence widens. Two days ago, while discussing with my man the price of a deer's head whose contents I wished to examine, I was distracted by a whiff of this idiosyncratic foetor, despite the conversation being held over twenty paces distant from the laboratory.

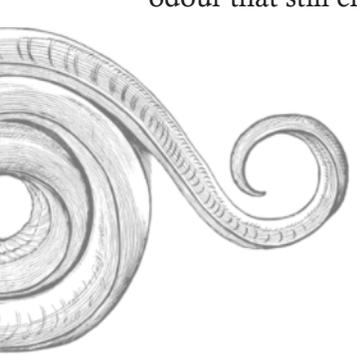
On occasion, I will awaken in the dead of night to find it overpowering in my nostrils. There are times I have madly conceived of it as a physical object, animate and filled with malicious intent. Battering away at my nasal cavity, it seeks access to the delicate meats nestled within the shell of my skull.

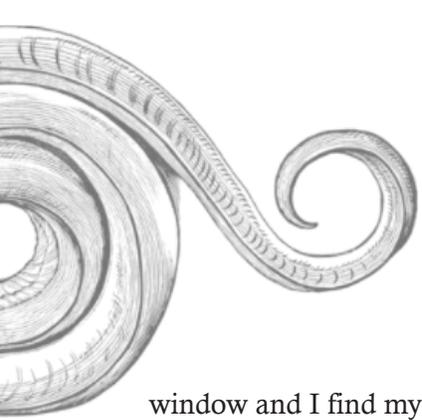
At times, I believe it to reside in the stones or foundations of this structure itself. I have unwittingly disinterred more than one of the hastily dug graves in which I had deposited some of my earlier experiments; you will recall that when an animal was buried before flies were allowed to alight, it remained free of the flesh-sucking worms when it was later brought to light. Following hours spent in proximity to that wild, unclassifiable stench, I admit that I found a sort of relief in the more pedestrian cloud of rot that surrounds these gelatinous, grossly swollen objects. I have caught myself with a half-destroyed strip of milk-fed veal pressed to my mouth as though it were a philtre of fine oils. I now observe my behaviour carefully, lest this occur with one of those items in which the worms have taken residence. The thought of breathing deeply of an air I believe to be all freshness, only to discover it clogged with those writhing creatures, revolts even a stomach as hardened as my own.



August the 12th, 1668

At this point in my experiments, the resources of edible meat being close to exhausted, nearly all of the worms have undergone the transformation into adult flies. The promise of sustenance, carried on the ripe odour that still clings to the depreciated bones that remain, ensures that they do not withdraw through the open





window and I find myself the resting place for the thousands of insects that hang thick and dark in the air as I work. Their drone is intolerable. At least the peculiar scent I wrote of earlier has begun to withdraw.

I suffer, of late, from an insomniac disorder, such that an hour or two of sleep at night can no longer be taken for granted. As a counter-measure, I have obtained several measures of the substance known as 'Opium', a preparation derived from the tears of the Poppy flower. I ingest a tincture of the miraculous preparation with my wine in the evening and it is not long before I descend into dreams of indescribable strangeness, quite unlike the ones I am used to experiencing. It is not always effective, however; often, I instead undergo a nocturnal paralysis. It is a peculiar sensation: I am aware of my own consciousness, but unable to coax my limbs into movement, while all sensations blur as the hours stretch in wracked silence. As I lie transfixed by the light of the waning moon that enters through my window, I consider myself luckier than on those nights I achieve sleep, for my dreams after ingesting the preparation are truly strange and violent in a way I cannot fully describe. I often waken weighted down by a vague sense of spiritual disquietude.

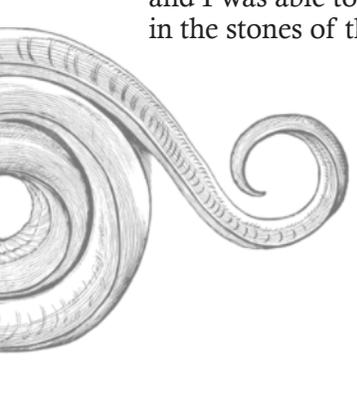
A fortnight hence, I was transporting one of the sealed flasks when an itching sensation in my upper arm caused me to drop the glass to the ground. The source of the sensation, unlikely as it may sound: my sleeve had become enveloped by a particularly fat variety of worm, some of which had already obtained passage through the fabric and were heartily gnawing at my exposed flesh.

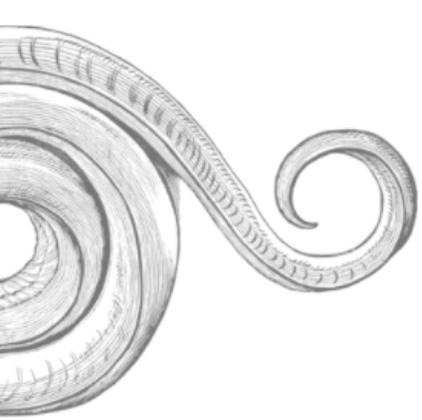
Batting them away, I noticed a discolouration had appeared on the skin of my arm, where the worms had been chewing. Stripping myself before bed, I was to find several additional sites of discolouration. As a physician, I can offer no explanation for this ailment, unless it be a result of my close and prolonged proximity to the bodies of things dead, which have been known to contain impurities that produce illness in the weak and young.

I have, however, no great worries for my continued good health; a surgeon of my acquaintance has assured me that rashes of this variety are common among his patients and has provided me with a paste of dung, myrrh and other medicinal standbys, to be applied, once at night before resting and once more upon rising in the morning, to the areas affected. Since the commencement of this treatment, the discolouration and irritation have superficially worsened, but many diseases of the body will become more pronounced before they begin to recede.

I notice I have drifted quite wide of my original purpose, which was to narrate the discovery which followed my dropping the flask upon the ground. The glass, in confirmation of my fears, had shattered. The jagged fragments twitched and crawled among a roiling profusion of the repugnant white creatures. After obtaining a replacement flask, I ordered to have the meat – I believe it was a lamb's heart – retrieved before the worms were able to despoil it.

My haste proved unnecessary, for the ravenous worms, in the space of an instant, had reduced the organ to almost nothing at all. Even more irritating, they had in that brief span managed to secret themselves somewhere and I was able to gather only a dozen or so when there should have been upward of fifty of them. A thin crack in the stones of the wall, nearby to where the flask had fallen, provided the most probable route of escape.





The crack was barely wide enough for the insertion of the smallest finger. Within, it was warm and slightly moist, and the wall possessed a sponge-like texture one does not normally associate with stone. I withdrew my finger and tested the surrounding stones to ensure that none of them had become soft or loose, but only the interior of the crack appeared to have been affected.

The stones did, however, radiate an unusual warmth. This effect covered an area of a pace to either side of the crack and a head higher vertically than a man stands.



August the 13th, 1668

Previous letter continued:

I mentioned earlier the strange dreams by which I have been visited, hoping that a vague and indirect reference would suffice in painting a picture of the torments by which I find my soul visited. After a particularly unpleasant episode last night, I find myself driven to confess all.

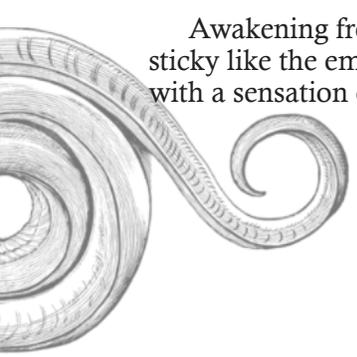
It is known that the visitations of dreams take two forms: either phantasms of the imagination or real spirits. The latter can be subdivided into forces benevolent, as in angels or the figures of those departed, or diabolical. I pray that my nightmares compass only the former category.

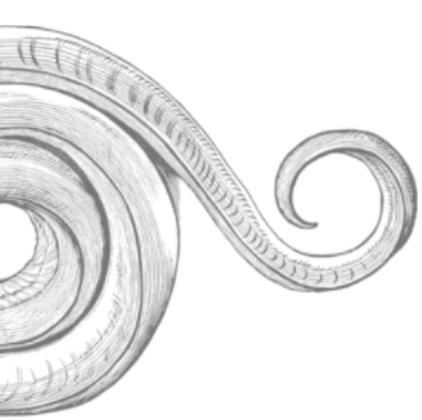
In brief, I am visited, when sleep comes, by strange and unholy visions of abominations not seen on this earth since its earliest days. They arise, as from the newly formed Creation's fertile but unseasoned womb, in a blind confusion of monstrous limbs. Of these strange figures, one in particular seems intent on addressing me, although its profusion of mouths, if mouths they be, produces nothing audible. Instead, it emits a humming vibration that causes my bones to itch. It feels like the drone of flies.

Only vague, portentous memories of this monster and its entreaties remain with me with the rising of the sun. It writhes with forms I would classify as worms, were they not the thickness of a man's leg and twisted in knots of such confusion that I cannot tell where one begins and another ends. All I retain of its wordless entreaties is a sense of mockery and of dread in equal measure.

I fear the intervention of a diabolical power, for often in waking, I find myself performing tasks to which I can assign no logical motivation. I have procured, at various times and in various states of consciousness, a vast collection of the hearts of various animals, several degrees of magnitude more than I can find a practical use for. I have awoken as from a swoon to find my hand buried deep within the carcass of a hen; through the viscera, I could feel the movement of those maggots which have become more familiar to me than my own family. At this time, I tasted blood on my tongue, a detail on which I refuse to dwell.

Awakening from these nocturnal episodes, I find a film of sweat to have enveloped me, strongly scented and sticky like the emissions of the deathly ill. The discoloured areas of my flesh will, on occasion, become afflicted with a sensation of turning, as though the skin itself were to writhe and crawl, although I can see for myself





that no such displacement has occurred. Bringing the affected area to my face, I find that it reeks of that same mixture of honey, exotic spices and decay that so plagued me in recent weeks.



August the 16th, 1668

I arrived at the laboratory to find a knot of worms gathered at the door, twisting over themselves in their efforts to escape. The creatures I have hitherto observed measure between an eighth to two thirds of a finger across, and would have no difficulty passing beneath the door, there existing a finger's gap through which to venture. These specimens, however, were uncommonly fat, the smallest exceeding three of a man's fingers in girth. They resembled, in all other particulars, the creatures which I have observed giving rise to a silvery-winged black fly with long, bright-red legs of a speckled white, a variety never before described, to my knowledge. I could not surmise how these particular maggots had grown so corpulent. I could neither tell from whence they had issued, since I had sealed all of the worm-bearing containers before retiring for the night.

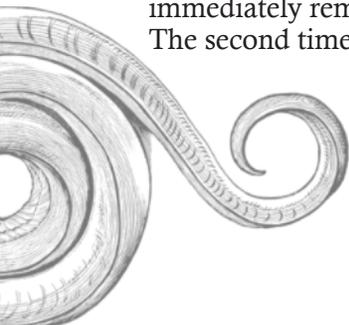
It is possible that an insignificant number of the maggots bypass the transformation into their adult form, taking advantage of their longer time as worms to increase the volume of flesh they can consume. This would explain these creatures' size, for I have observed that the worms themselves produce no waste, no matter how much they ingest.

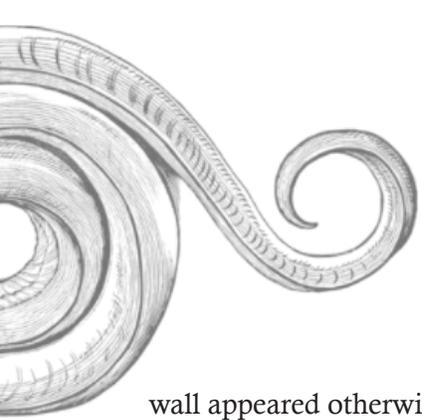
I gathered up as many of the creatures as I could and deposited them in a closed box for further observation. A few managed to wriggle away before I could capture them, but I believe that the numbers I gathered will be sufficient to teach me much about this aberration.

I caught a few more struggling to enter that crack in the wall I mentioned in my last letter. It seems to me that crack has now widened, to roughly one and a half finger-widths. A slight stain or discolouration has appeared in the stones of the wall above, where the warmth generated by them has increased.

Resting my hand against the wall, I was immediately stricken by a powerful irritation. I could not immediately remove my hand, the stone itself giving off the feeling of being coated in some adhesive residue. The second time I touched it, this sensation was supplemented by one of sinking as into clay or mud. The

It is possible that an insignificant number of the maggots bypass the transformation into their adult form, taking advantage of their longer time as worms to increase the volume of flesh they can consume.





wall appeared otherwise quite solid when I pressed upon it with wood or metal, and neither of these materials seemed prone to adhere to its surface.

I am perversely compelled to tear through the cloth by which these flasks are sealed, to pile their contents in a heap upon the floor and allow the worms their feast.

For the remainder of the day, I focused my observations on the creatures I had discovered by the door. Within the box, they exhibit none of the industriousness they had employed in trying to escape. They lie utterly motionless, as though dead. I have, however, observed an increase in their size by nearly half a finger-width, although I have provided them with no sustenance and, in any case, witnessed no signs of feeding.

After they had lain inactive for a period of several hours, I opened the container, believing the worms to be deceased. They immediately sprang to life, twisting against the walls of the box and attempting to wrap themselves around my hand. I was overwhelmed by that honey-spiced miasma, which had grown to fill the sealed container. These worms appear to produce it in lieu of physical waste.

Once I had replaced the lid on the box, they fell again inert. They still had not moved when I retired for the evening, although they had seen another increase in size of a quarter-finger.

Since then, in words that could not possibly be Italian, nor Latin, nor any language of Man, but which are nonetheless familiar to me, the abomination in my dreams now speaks at great length of things that are to come. I am a devout Jesuit and unlikely to partake of any actions on its behalf, should it prove a demon or some other maleficent creation.

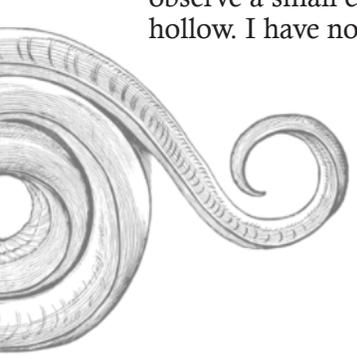
Though I did not and could not speak, it has sensed somehow my curiosity as to its nature. It has instructed me to call it LORD. At other times, it refers to itself as 'Adam the Progenitor'. Other times still, it assigns itself a strangely shifting name which I can neither pronounce nor define.

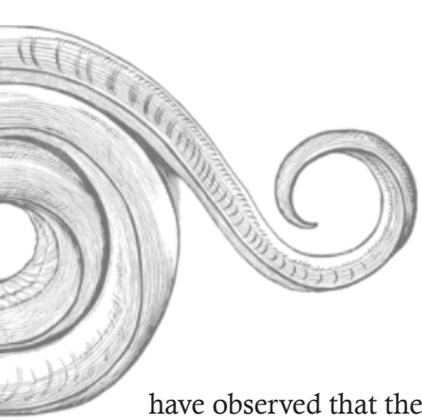
It communicates all this, in its incomprehensible way, with a tone suggestive of derisive laughter.

The irritation of my skin had reached a new level of intolerability. Last night, when I pulled aside the bedclothes, I found a number of small maggots at work upon my arm and chest. I have observed neither fly nor any other insect within my bedchamber.

I arrived at my laboratory early, eager to continue my observations of those oversized new variants. However, my plans were thwarted, for they had somehow managed to escape from their captivity during the night. I discovered one, as before, trying to squeeze through the crack in the wall, and I transported it to the container for observation. It exhibits the same uninteresting behaviours as before.

The crack has again widened, or so it seems, as a result of the worms' dogged efforts, and one can now observe a small cave or opening behind it, although the angle makes it difficult to discern the actual size of this hollow. I have not attempted to touch the stones again, so distasteful was my experience the previous day, but I





have observed that the discolouration has deepened and assumed the shape almost of a human figure, though a couple of arms taller and imperfectly formed.



August the 25th, 1668

Nothing of note has occurred in the several days following my most recent writing, which I have again postponed sending as, upon review, I found it to be rife with errors, inexplicable passages and jumps in continuity.

The large worm, unlike its companions, has remained within its confines. This may be the result of my more thorough approach to sealing the container of even the minutest apertures, or perhaps this specimen is simply lazy. It could actually be dead this time and not pretending. It has not grown since the third day, although, by this point, it has assumed a considerable size, as large as a boy's arm. The box can barely contain it.

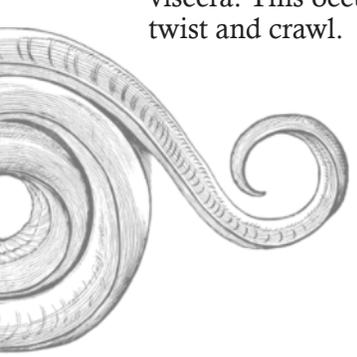
I have spotted several of its compatriots near the crack in the wall. I then formed the opinion that the large worms may actually have originated from whatever space the crack in the wall has now revealed. It no longer seems likely that they had come from the same parents as the worms in my experiments, or any insect yet recorded in history.

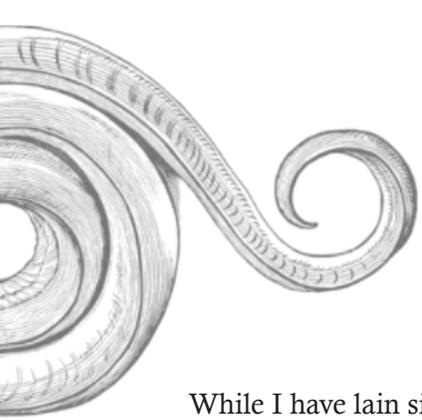
On the seventh day, something occurred which left me so deeply shaken I was forced to retire to my rooms, admitting no company, for three days in succession, unable even to observe the status of my latest experiments. I only now feel I have regained the strength to pen this note.

Those inexplicable urges and periods of black memory which I mentioned earlier had, I had thought, largely subsided. True, I have developed a general distaste for any foods but the rarest of meats, seasoned with strange and heavy applications of exotic spices, but it is not so unusual for a man to experience abnormal hungers. Though my ability to sleep through the night has seen no increase, I am no longer affected mentally.

No, that is not right at all, given what I am about relate.

I mentioned, I believe, my acquisition of the hearts of animals in some abundance. This is apparently what I did between the hours of dawn and dusk. I can recall nothing that occurred that seventh day before glancing up and seeing the moon, a few days now from full – and what will I be made to do once that fullness has been reached? The abomination will not tell, though it buzzes with glee at the mention of it – rising over my window. The warm, gluey sensation against my palm I initially took for night sweats. But my hands and arms were smeared with blood up to the elbow. I held in my right hand the heart of a medium-sized mammal – a dog or a cat? I was engaged in shoving it through the stones of the wall. Or attempting to, for I could not possibly have been successful. At my feet, a small heap of similar organs was piled and the wall was slick with blood and viscera. This occurred directly above the crack, through which a congregation of dim shapes could be seen to twist and crawl.





While I have lain sick, my nights have grown more restless still. I have increased my dosage of the Opium tincture to triple the original serving and though it assures that I lie through the night still as a cadaver, it does little to reduce my fatigue upon the sun's return. The hours of night seem each to compass an eternity. I watch, paralyzed, the torturous progression of the moon across the sky through my window, unless I am in congress with that serpent-entwined abomination that appears with almost total frequency. Though I stop my ears to its pernicious drone, its words nonetheless infect my thoughts with an impatience quite out of pace with my physical and mental exhaustion.



August the 30th, 1668

I disposed of the flasks that remained, along with their contents.

The affliction of my skin has worsened yet again, although the idiot surgeon continues in his assurances that it will soon recede. Black and red boils, hard and somewhat reflective of light like the shells of eggs, now pimple my body. They are exceedingly warm to the touch. I find more and more worms beneath the cloth of my garments. They spawn from the flesh itself. No. Such things would run counter to every observation I have made into the Natural order.

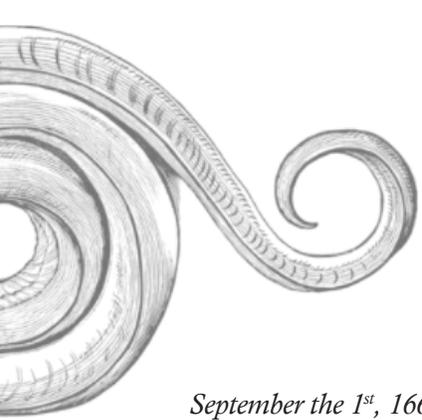
Thinking my captive aberration long dead, I did not expect to have missed anything in my long absence. The grey, shapeless form within the box seemed at first to support my theories of its demise. However, the thing twitched as I moved closer. It became very active when it sensed my approach, though it has no eyes I can speak of.

It appears to have undergone a transformation, after all. I curse myself for having missed its initial stages. It now resembles one of those inchoate beings found within the bellies of deer and cows slaughtered while bearing young. It has continued to develop, but on that day, it bore no definite features. With some observation, a head and the beginnings of limbs could be discerned.

It gamboled blindly as I stood near the box, which I did not open for fear it might escape. The creature's activities began again to die away once I made to move off from the box. At a distance of four meters, it became entirely inactive once more.

The day following, I observed the creature to have taken on some characteristics of an infant of one of the higher orders of life. More-detailed limbs suggest hands or paws. I shudder to imagine it flopping against the walls of its confines and staring at me with that blank, eyeless face. The more I observe it, the more it comes to resemble a human infant, though of course, no higher being can arise from a lower, just as no life can arise without a parent. 'Yxtava', as I have finally come to understand it is called, tells me that the worms which feasted on the flesh of the Divine should be counted as higher than the greatest King among men. It tells me the time will soon come when His children shall rise up to return to His bosom.





September the 1st, 1668

This time, the abomination appeared within the walls of my own room. I could feel, in the vibrations that wracked my body like the drone of a legion of flies, that the monster took great pleasure in my fear. It indicated, somehow, for me to rise and I did so.

The light of the moon through my window burned like something unclean, causing the boils upon my skin to erupt in scores of wriggling maggots. I could not escape it without moving closer to Yxtara, the loathsome abomination.

It moved, by some uncertain process, from the room. Following it, I noted fat worms like the one in my laboratory drop from its flesh. They squirmed off into the shadows of the night.

Yxtana brought me to the laboratory, housing now only the single grey creature, which became very active upon seeing what I now know to be its parent. The sound it made was somewhere between the mewling of a kitten and the hum of a mosquito.

I removed the lid from the box and cradled the creature in my arms. The wet clay of its flesh adhered to my hands and the sweet stench of spices was intoxicating, like that of a powerful wine. I lowered the child to the floor and it toddled happily away, burbling incoherently.

Its physiognomy, now more closely resembling that of a human, was disarmingly similar to my own.

Yxtala then brought me to the stain above the wall's crack, made even darker by the half-light of the full moon. Its shape matched precisely that of the abomination which stood beside me. The thing pressed my hand against the stone, which, though it appeared solid, offered no more resistance than a pudding. I ignored the searing in my flesh. My hand sank within until it contacted something solid: a shoulder bone, larger than that of a human, although the shape was roughly analogous. I grabbed hold of this object as firmly as I could.

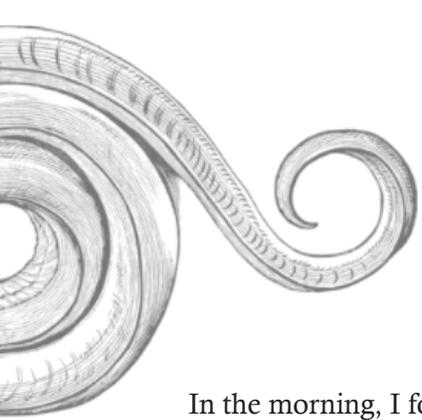
At that point, the sucking motions of the wall reversed. The body that had rested within the hollow for a millennium and a half began finally to push outward. A face emerged, pocked with countless droning mouths, no longer soundless. My organs quivered with their vibrations. It wore a ring of discolouration around its forehead, in the shape of a hoop of thorns or nettles.

Then emerged a body, writhing as though wreathed with countless white serpents. The Yxtaga which had led me there had then vanished entirely. I doubt it was ever there at all.

The grey creature frolicked joyfully about my feet. I was overwhelmed by a sense of something reaching culmination and I feared in that moment for my eternal soul, though I can no longer tell you the nature of my fears, or of the terrible actions which I then believed myself to have unwittingly undertaken.

We followed the fat worms into the cradles of infants and into brothels. We splashed merrily in the basins of churches. We fed upon the hearts of mongrels. When the full moon reached its zenith, Yxtawa ascended on a cloud of spice and honey.





In the morning, I found the lock securing the door to the laboratory to have become twisted out of place, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The grey creature seems finally to have made good its escape. I searched the ground, but could find no footprints, either mine or the creature's. Yxtawa had moved in a fashion so peculiar as to leave no traceable evidence of its presence, regardless. I went out into the street and called to my child, its child, the grey infant creature, but received no answer for my troubles.

I found the stones of the wall cool and hard to the touch.



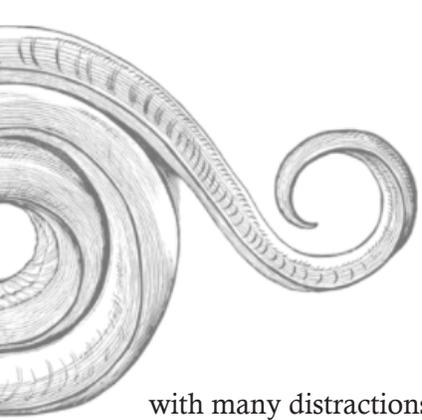
Undated Postscript

Signor Carlo, I ask that you consider everything contained in these letters as only the most intimate confidences shared between close friends. I will not publish them. I was unable to gather any meaningful observations from this adipose specimen, if it ever existed outside of my hallucinatory ramblings. I will have, anyway, no opportunity to repeat the experiments, for even were the impossible creature to have existed, it is long since departed now. I have thought to investigate that crack in the wall, to see once and for all what lies behind it, but something prevents me from doing so. I do not know if it is my soul's own terror, or the influence of some external force guiding still my actions. Lit by the sun, the stones' discolouration no longer seems so clearly delineated; I can, with effort, make out the form I had seen previously, but I can also discern any number of other shapes from it, or no shape at all. I can no longer see beyond the crack to the cave I thought to have glimpsed there.

I find my memories of that bizarre month increasingly uncertain. It is akin to the experience of waking from a dream and finding its worlds and people slowly dissolving in the warm bath of the sun. In the revision of these letters, which, as indicated elsewhere, often diverted into gibberish and madness, or devilish utterances I choose never to reproduce, I have often resorted to sheer guesswork in approximating my original intentions. There is at least one happy effect of my increasing distance from these events; that is, I no longer find my sleep disturbed, nor my actions steered by desires alien to my own mind and soul. With the return of sleep, the affliction of my skin has finally begun to lessen and at such a pace that I think that within a fortnight, no trace of its presence will yet remain. This only proves what I have often suspected, that the restorative effect of a night's rest knows no peer in the practice of medicine.

In addition, the disturbance of my faith which these incidents engendered, and which prompted my drafting of several of these letters in the first place, fades even now from my memory. Reading over these pages, I can no longer recall why I found myself so disturbed, though much of it does appear to be the scrawling of a lunatic. Much of this, I regret to say, can be attributed to the effects of the self-diagnosed Opium preparation, which I have concluded can visit more grief than good upon a man's well-being. It has visited my once-crystalline mind



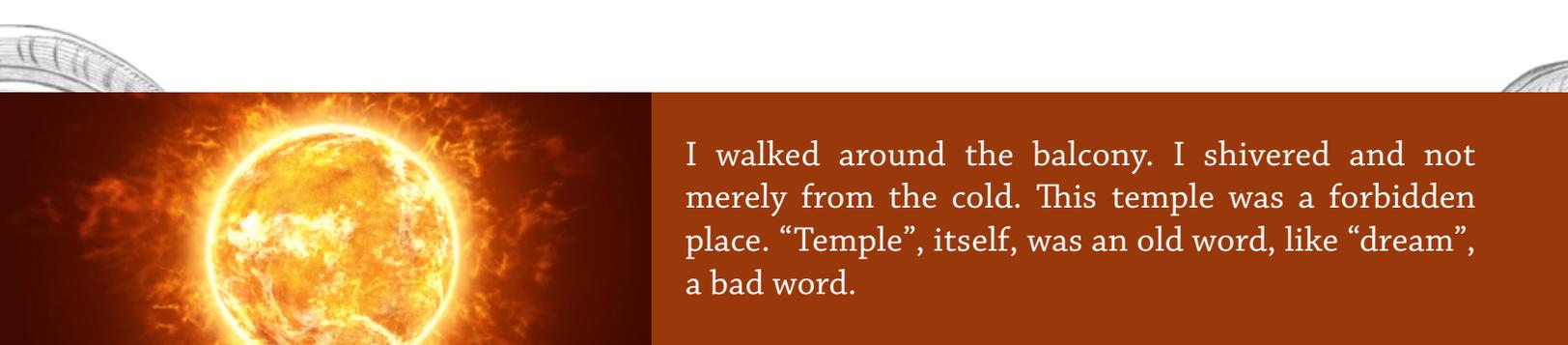


with many distractions, difficult even now to shake. I find in the contents of these letters so many particulars unworthy of the attention of a man of such esteem as yourself that I am loathe, now, to trouble you with them at all.

I shall look this packet over again in the morning and then I shall decide whether, in the end, it is best sent or destroyed.

THE END

Byron Alexander Campbell is currently pursuing his MFA in Writing at the California Institute of the Arts in suspiciously sunny Valencia, California, where he serves as editorial assistant for the *Black Clock* literary magazine. He is preoccupied by notions of dream-space, horror and the unreal. Author of two interactive novellas – Lovecraftian Christmas kitty comedy *A Very Hairy Fish-Mess* and surreal dark mystery *Room 206* – his work can also be found in the anthology *A Commonplace Book of the Weird: The Untold Stories of H.P. Lovecraft*. His homepage is: <http://theyearisyesterday.wordpress.com/>.



I walked around the balcony. I shivered and not merely from the cold. This temple was a forbidden place. “Temple”, itself, was an old word, like “dream”, a bad word.

NYARLATHOTEP

By Don Webb

For Elizabeth Berkeley

I stood on the high balcony, looking eastward to the rising sun. The pillars were deep-red and the roof slightly curved, suggesting “China” to me. But it was not China – at least, not the China of now. Below me, the grass glowed slightly, a bluish-green, and I could feel the throb of the waterfall. Its rush dominated and canceled all other sounds. The fall was gigantic and it had been cutting into this mountain for generations. I could feel it through my sandals, through the cold, black marble upon which I stood. I realized then I couldn’t think of the name of this place, and part of me knew that if I remembered my where or when, I would be full of fear.

Despite my mind’s fear of its own contents, some strange and archaic words came to me. Was this a “dream”? I knew that “dream” was a very old word and a very bad word. I think it also meant “trauma”. But that couldn’t be right; when did “dream” become a taboo word? I knew it belonged to another time, to another mood.

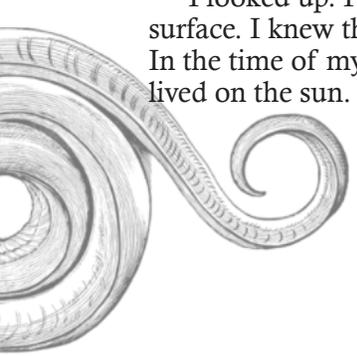
I walked around the balcony. I shivered and not merely from the cold. This temple was a forbidden place. “Temple”, itself, was an old word, like “dream”, a bad word. I looked down at the mist-filled valley. I began to remember something. The mist in my mind hid something the same way the mist in the valley hid Something. We all trained ourselves as children not to think of its Names. With the Name, you might see it. It liked to be seen. It had made humans see it in dreams for millennia after the ice had melted the first time.

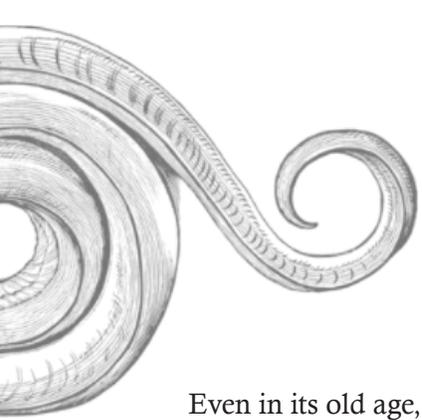
I knew that I did not want to see what the mist hid. Why had I come here, the place where It could be seen? There was. There was another. Her name was...Her name was “Lover”. She had stood here and looked down and was no more. She.

She had come on the day of the Red Sun, a day when the old sun suffered. She had seen and was no more.

We had quarreled. It was over some foolish thing, some old fight. We had quarreled and she had come here. At first, she had watched the thousand reddened rainbows that the waterfall made every day, as it ate the earth. She had waited and fought the call of the west. Then she walked to the western side, as I have done. She looked down. By then, even the Red Sun had cleared the mist, so she saw.

I looked up. I could see the old sun. The sun was not having a good day. Scabrous storms boiled brown on its surface. I knew the creatures that crawled on its crust were fighting today. I could see the blue-green lightning. In the time of my ancestors’ ancestors, when “dream” was not a bad word, you could not see the creatures that lived on the sun. It was white and young.





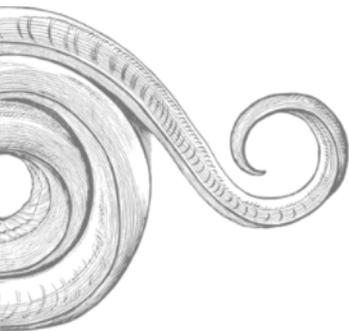
Even in its old age, it could still drink the mist. If I tarried long enough, mist would no longer hide It.

I remembered Lover.

I steeled myself. I would look down. When the sun had driven the mist away, I would look.

THE END

Don Webb has been writing Lovecraftian fiction for 25 years. His stories have appeared in *Eternal Lovecraft*, *Black Wings II* and *Cthulhu's Reign*.





The wind, allied with the sand, howled through the halls, but left the sand untouched. The unearthly sand, fine grains, completely black and immune to the wind, sickened Orin's mind even more than did the unnatural angles of the castle.

BLACK SAND

By Regina Gleib

Despite his many layers of clothing, Orin almost froze to death and cursed the Elders who had sent him on the journey through the plain to the Cone Islands in the Lake of Stone.

It had taken three days to cross the plain and the first mountain range. The only living thing that he and Lyda had seen during their journey had been a nameless, thorny shrub that hid between rocks from the constant wind.

Orin stared at the Lake of Stone below him. In its very middle lay the two, almost-identical islands. Both were perfectly-shaped cones, with flattened tops like volcanoes, and utterly bare of vegetation. A single glance and Orin knew these islands had not formed naturally. One of them bore the ruins of the castle that loomed over the lake and the islands. Orin huddled deeper into his coat.

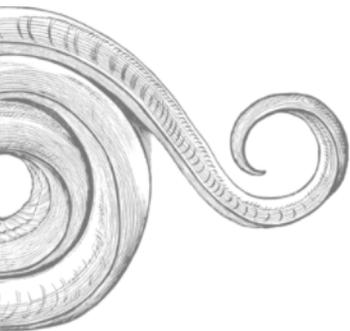
What if the beast rose? What if the stories were true that people went mad if they looked too long at the castle?

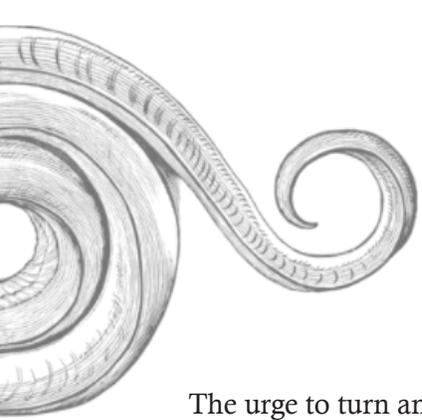
But how could Orin not look at it? How could anyone who saw it not stare and try to understand its sick angles, which were all wrong, confusing the human eye, making Orin dizzy. The castle was carved out of one monstrous piece of smooth, seamless black stone. It loomed high into the sky, its bizarre, crooked, needle-shaped turrets scratching at the clouds.

Orin had never set foot in the castle and yet, he saw its halls before his mind's eye as he stared at the structure. The castle, which easily could have housed Orin's entire village, was empty except for the sand. Fine black sand covered the glossy stone floor. The wind, allied with the sand, howled through the halls, but left the sand untouched. The unearthly sand, fine grains, completely black and immune to the wind, sickened Orin's mind even more than did the unnatural angles of the castle.

Orin hardly took his eyes off the structure, while his shying horse descended the mountain path towards the lake, following Lyda's.

The castle whispered to him. Its presence got stronger with every step towards it. A humming rose from it, as if the stars played music: utterly unearthly, beyond understanding, sending a chill into Orin's bones that he knew would never leave him again.





The urge to turn and run was overwhelming, but they needed the essence. His village was blessed, the people further south said. Those people honoured and fed them and worshiped their Elders as holy men and women. Only the Elders of Orin's village knew how to brew healing potion out of the essence of the Cone Islands. They anxiously protected their secret and with it, their power, passing their knowledge on from generation to generation. Nobody disobeyed the Elders, ever. Their potion healed every wound, cured every illness, let everyone who drank it live at least a hundred years.

The healing potion came at a price, though. After what had happened to Antar and Vern, the Elders would only send unmarried youngsters who wouldn't leave mourning wives and children behind.

If Orin refused to cross the lake and set foot on the island that bore the puddle with essence, they'd banish him from his village, send him away, shunned and humiliated. But would anybody care in the lands south, far from home?

He looked at Lyda. Her eyes glowed in excitement and fascination. A hot stab of shame hit him. The girl was braver than he? Impossible.



Orin and Lyda secured their horses in front of the boat-cave and carried the small boat to the lake's shore.

Icy cold bit through their clothes and yet, the lake never froze. Legend said it hadn't frozen in thousands of years, no matter how cold the air.

They rowed towards the naked island, but stared at the castle on the sister island most of the time. The sky, a dark, leaden gray, reflected in the lake that was as gray as the clouds above it.

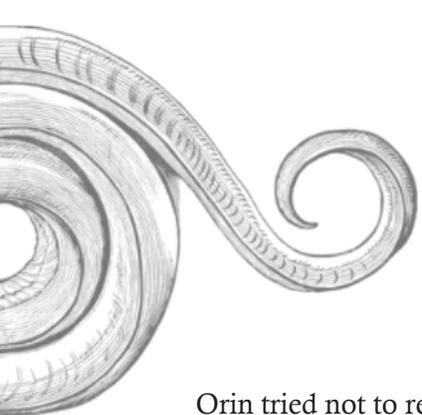
The fluid that Orin and Lyda parted with their paddles seemed like liquid stone. Their hands would freeze and crumble to dust if they touched it. It wasn't water; nobody knew what it was. The slick, oily surface shimmered silvery, calling, pulling Orin in. He forced himself to look at Lyda's back, and beyond it, at the island ahead.

Antar had survived his journey to the Lake of Stone, but he wasn't well; his mind had never fully recovered. Vern had not returned. The beast had risen and taken him. It had snatched him out of the boat and carried him away. Antar had not been able to do anything but watch. The beast's wings had whipped up a wave that had caught Antar and cost him an arm.



The fluid that Orin and Lyda parted with their paddles seemed like liquid stone. Their hands would freeze and crumble to dust if they touched it.





Orin tried not to remember Antar and Vern as he dipped his wooden oars into the liquid stone. He tried not to remember Antar's sad and lonely face, or his desperate wife, who was now married to a broken man who mumbled nothing but nonsense.



The closer they came to the island's shore, the fouler the smell. Something smelled rotten, impossible in this cold, and yet, the stench was unbearable, even through the mufflers covering their mouths and noses.

With numb fingers, they dragged their tiny boat ashore and turned towards the slope before them. The castle on the sister island loomed threateningly over them, watching them as if the very stone had eyes.

Large patches of black sand covered the steep slope to the top of the island and didn't stir in the icy wind. Close to the top, the sand covered every patch of soil. Orin saw no route around it.

The unmoving black grains of sand crunched under his boots as he walked carefully. The merciless wind tore at his robes, howled in his ears. His straining breath froze almost immediately to ice in his scarf.

They finally reached the top. The tiny puddle in the very center of the cone was much smaller than Orin had expected. Not water, but an oily, sticky, slimy, black fluid filled the puddle – the black sand in liquid form. Around the puddle lay more sand, heaps of it that encircled the puddle, again as untouched by the whipping wind as the liquid inside. The puddle measured not even three arm-lengths in diameter and, judging from the flatness of the cone, could only be a few handspans deep. The villagers had diminished the amount of essence over the eons.

Orin fumbled in his clothes for a little flask, as he carefully stepped over a smaller heap of black sand at the puddle's rim. Streaks of poisonous violet shimmered inside the black liquid. Orin bowed down to fill the flask with the liquid, careful not to touch it.

The Elders would use their magic to tame the essence and thin it down to gallons. In its raw form, the liquid was pure acid; it would etch the flesh of his fingers down to their bones if he touched it.

“We can't stay here for long. We'll freeze to death,” Lyda shouted over the wind.

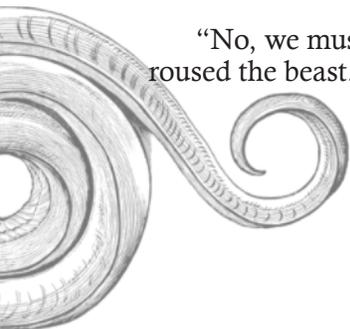
“Yes, we have to go back immediately.”

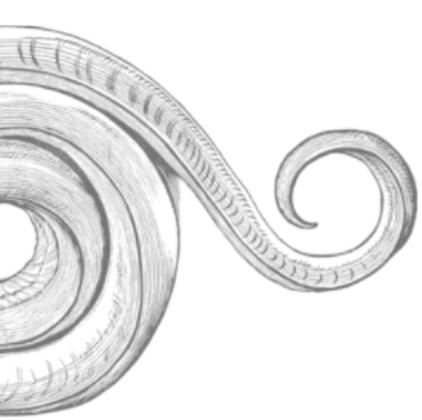
Lyda gave him her flask to fill. “Shouldn't we take more?” she asked.

“Two flasks, one for each of us, that's the rule.”

“Come on; let's take more. Why not take more?”

“No, we must do what the Elders said. No more than two flasks. Others have taken more before and that roused the beast. Come on; let's go home.”





“The beast also rose when we took only two flasks. Antar and Vern didn't take more and you know what happened to them.”

“No. I will not disobey the Elders.”

Lyda scoffed, fumbled in her robes, got out yet another flask that he hadn't known anything about, stepped over a heap of black sand and bowed down to fill it.

“Lyda, damn it, no!”

“Shut up.”

He had never liked her. She disobeyed, failed to show respect, talked behind people's backs. She dared what he didn't.

The flask was filled and she closed it. He stowed away the two they were entitled to. Both rose, turned around and screamed.

The black sand had moved behind them, crawled together to form a wall. Lyda managed to stand still; Orin almost stumbled backwards into the puddle.

For a second, they stared in shock, then Orin went to the side where the sand was still inactive, but the wall moved with him.

“Oh, no,” Lyda said.

“Pour it back! Pour the contents of your flask back!”

“No, that has nothing to do with it.”

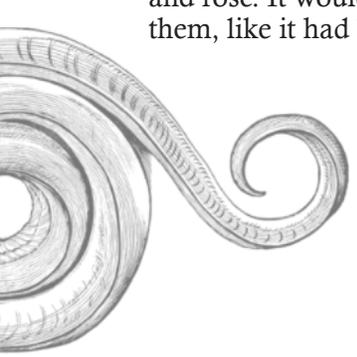
“Damn you!”

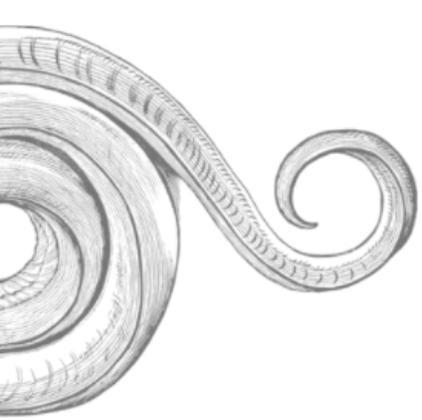
The wall of sand still rose and rose, even as they spoke.

“Jump through,” Orin shouted.

“No!”

The wall in front of them changed, it formed to a creature, a yet-shapeless flapping monstrosity that rose and rose. It would become the beast; it would grow and grow; it would get wings, be able to fly and it would kill them, like it had killed Vern. Fear, colder than the wind, grabbed Orin's heart.





The villagers knew of no weapon and no defense against the monster – when it awoke, you ran.

Orin grabbed Lyda's arm and jumped through the wall of sand. She screamed in protest.

The slope was steep and Orin and Lyda lost their balance. They stumbled and fell, rolled over and over down the hill through less and less black sand. The sand gathered to form the winged something. Beneath the sand was nothing but gray and poisonous dirt.

They stopped rolling just short of the lake, 50 arm-lengths from their boat.

Lyda scrambled to her feet and tore at Orin's robes to make him get up. He screamed. His hood had flipped back and he wiped hysterically at his left ear.

He tore his gloves off, shook his head and ruffled his hair.

“What are you doing?!” Lyda's voice screeched in his ears.

Black sand had entered his hair, stuck to his cheek, and some had trickled into his ear.

Orin screamed. He banged his ear, frantic. The sand had to get out! Out! Out! He felt it reaching out for his very soul; it raped him, gnawed at his sanity.

Without having to look, he felt the flapping monstrosity forming behind him. It had no shape yet, no face, but it was huge, getting bigger by the second. More and more sand rose into the air. Sand flew over from the castle to join the sand of their island.

“Get up! You have to get up!” Lyda shouted.

He didn't see the monster. He felt it – in his ear.

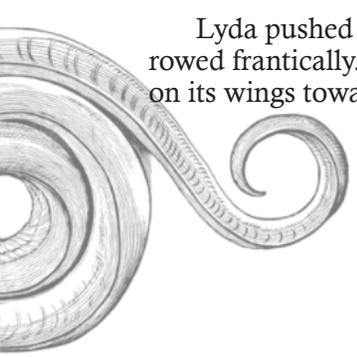
A terrible roar shook his bones, so terrible that it lamed him. The sound of the universe echoed within him, reached him from whence the monster had come – the depths of space, beyond the stars. He felt it rising, shouting into his ear.

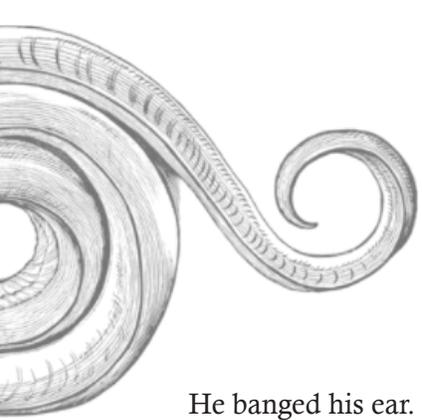
The only thing Orin could do was bang his head.

Lyda managed to get him to his feet and dragged him to their boat.

He screamed and screamed to silence the roar in his ears.

Lyda pushed him into the boat and the boat into the water, jumped in herself and grabbed her paddle. She rowed frantically. Orin didn't see the lake or the monster. He felt it, he heard it and became one with it. He flew on its wings towards the castle.





He banged his ear. His voice was not his own, anymore. He screamed and the depths of the universe seemed to fill his lungs. No, no, no, he didn't want to enter the castle, but he did. On the monster's wings, he flew inside, through its torn angles with terrible speed. He swept through the castle and suddenly, he saw, understood, the angles made sense. He felt them, their sick beauty, their screeching dimensions.

He banged his ear and forced himself to look at Lyda.

Lyda kept on paddling, naked fear of death written on her face.

She screamed as she stared back at the flapping thing that grew bigger and uglier by the second. It was too dark, too alien, too big, and too unfathomable for the human mind. Lyda ploughed on with her paddle, and splashed lake water onto her clothes...he tried to care, to tell her, but his tongue wouldn't move, only for screams.

They reached the shore. Lyda grounded the boat, jumped out and tore at Orin, who bled from the ear and nose. He beat the side of his head with all his might. He hurt himself and yet, he didn't scream in pain but in naked terror. His screams came from beyond this world.

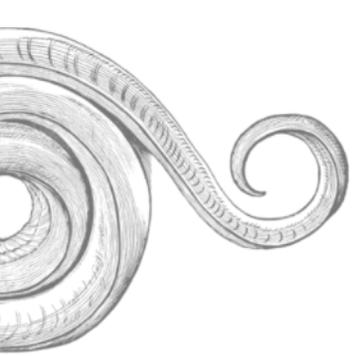
She made him stumble towards their horses. The animals neighed and reared up. They saw the beast and the whites of their eyes showed. Lyda pushed Orin onto his horse, released it and the animal galloped back the way it had come. Only one path led through the mountains and the horse took the way it knew by instinct. Under the roar in his head, he heard Lyda's horse galloping behind his.

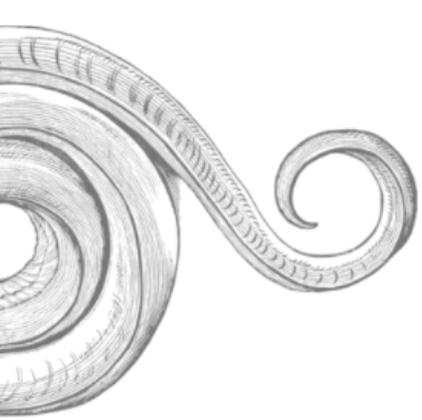
The horses didn't have to be spurred. They only lowered their pace when mountains blocked the view of the lake and its two islands.

Orin didn't see the monster rising and flying over the islands. He didn't have to; he knew what the monster did, how it looked, how it felt. It was lonely, sad, it wanted to go home, but couldn't. They had left it behind. The creature's loneliness swept over him with such might that he drowned in despair. Banging his ear, he wept for the creature. So lonely. So alone on this strange world where everywhere was too warm, except for that much-too-small lake and where the angles were all wrong.

After they had put the entire mountain range between themselves and the lake, the roar in Orin's ear eased a little. It let him breathe. He managed to stop beating himself. Exhausted, he lay on his horse, hugging the nervous animal's neck. He felt the warm, living creature underneath him and gave himself up to its guidance. He still moaned and groaned and sobbed and knew, in a moment of intense clarity, that he would never fully recover from the terrible darkness he had seen and heard.

Night fell over the desolate mountains, hiding the darkness that had risen from the Cone Islands in the Lake of Stone.





In the first light of dawn, Orin regained consciousness. He found himself on his horse as it trod along, tired but still eager to get away from the terrible mountains.

He had the taste of blood in his mouth and was deaf in his left ear. His whole face burned and felt like an open wound. He still heard the roar inside his head, still felt the beast. It had flown around the islands for a while, had rested on top of the castle and howled its loneliness into the night. Now, it had settled back next to the pond with essence and wept.

Orin managed to look up and saw Lyda's horse in front of him. She lay on it like he did. Her left arm dangled lifelessly back and forth in the rhythm of the horse's movements. He caught a glimpse of her face: it was gray, her lips blue, her eyes wide open and staring into nowhere. The lake's water had killed her. Death had blessed her.



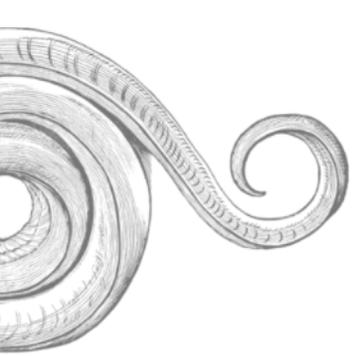
Not knowing what else to do, the Elders fed Orin with healing potion. His face healed, but he remained deaf in his left ear. His only clear moments were when he drank from the beast. The roar in his ears eased when he did that. He pitied the beast. He wanted to speak to it, but didn't know how.

He was convinced that the creature was unaware of the fact that humans were sentient beings like itself. He spoke to the Elders about this, but they only patted his arm condescendingly and gave him more potion. They didn't understand. They couldn't.

Orin gave up on the Elders. His pains would end one day, but the beast's would not. The poor thing couldn't die. He could and smiled.

THE END

Regina Gleis was born in Germany, but nourished a fascination for the Far East ever since she was a little girl. She graduated in Japanese Studies and has lived and worked in Japan for ten years. Her other fascination is with words and, although she does speak and read/write Japanese, she still prefers to write in English. Living far away from her home country for so long has surely influenced her writing, too; it's speculative and sometimes weird.... You can find news about Regina and her publications on her website: <http://www.juka-productions.com/>.





The young girl cried out and backed away from him. The sharp sound of her voice seemed to agitate him and Mr. Murray clawed at the right side of his head with his right arm, but the left side of him flopped and twitched like a beached fish.

EVERY LITTLE SPARROW

By Melissa Sorensen

Phebe Alexander shook out the coarse black folds of her day gown and pulled them over her nightclothes. She also put on her unseasonably-thick woolen stockings and added protective garments donated by one of the Lucyspoole Female Orphan Asylum's benefactors: thick and ill-shaped black cloth gloves that went up to her elbows, as well as a broad-brimmed hat made of plaited straw, dyed black, with a surprisingly fine-woven black veil that was meant to be tucked in around a girl's neck. The extra layers of protection were against the peasefly, a revolting insect that cut incisions in flesh and inserted its maggots into the wounds. The tiny worms began to stand out from the skin within a few days, creating a swelling that looked like a pile of split-and-dried peas.

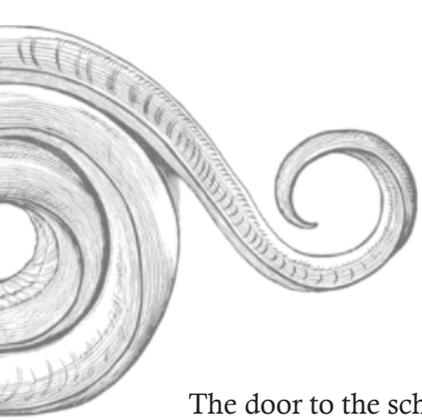
The hat-and-glove benefactor had donated only ten sets of protective clothing – far too few for the 50 girls who normally lived at the Orphan Asylum, but just right for its current healthy population. It had been a bad summer for fever, the worst the doctor could remember, and many girls who had no one in healthier country to take them in had found permanent homes in the earth. A few even lay in the pits dug for peasefly sickness victims, their bodies covered over with lime and molten lead.

Phebe had overheard one of the nurses saying that Ruth White, Phebe's 12-year-old best friend, would be the next to be lowered into such a lead-lined pit.

The nature of peasefly sickness meant Ruth could not join the other girls in the infirmary. Instead, she was isolated in the schoolroom, since all classes had been cancelled. Phebe was determined to go see her. Other friends had been swallowed up by hushed, nurse-guarded places, never to reappear except as burdens in plain pine boxes. It was intolerable to think of Ruth slipping into oblivion this way.

At an undersized 11 years old, Phebe was one of the smallest of the Orphan Asylum's students and the floor scarcely creaked under her slight weight. Even still, she carried her shoes in her hand to keep them from making their customary “klop, klop” noise as she slipped through the dormitory, headed for the door that led down through the refectory and then to the outside.

The girls' schoolroom was a small, squat building beyond the garden, built as close to the standing water of the swampy English woods as possible without the stones actually sinking into the muck. Phebe shoved her feet into her brass-buckled shoes as soon as she'd snuck out the front door and immediately began a mad run down the puddle-pocked gravel path toward the school. It was not a long run, but the air was full of heavy, stinking mud smells and she imagined fever drifting deep into her lungs every time she took a breath. Peaseflies were sluggish at night, but they still often left their oozing, festering wounds upon the neck, hands and shoulders.



The door to the schoolroom seemed to be barred from inside with something too heavy for Phebe to move, so she tried the windows. They had no locks, and were propped open often on hot days, so they moved easily when she planted her palms against the wood of the sash and pushed up. Climbing up the fieldstone wall in her layers of clothes was difficult, but not impossible, and she was soon able to drop down onto the schoolroom floor. The hard soles of her shoes made a sharp report against the wooden planks and for an instant she froze, half expecting some officious nurse to storm over and box her ears. However, the only sound in the room was the crackling collapse of logs in the fireplace and the only movement a brief shower of orange sparks.

Whatever Phebe had expected when she reached the schoolroom, it was not the bizarre tableau in front of her. There was a raging fire in the fireplace – far larger than was necessary to chase away midsummer dampness. In fact, the Orphan Asylum girls were seldom allowed such an expenditure of wood in the winter. Even more incongruous were the little ceramic cottages, set here and there, which puffed the thick, sweet-herbal smell of sickroom incense through their chimneys.

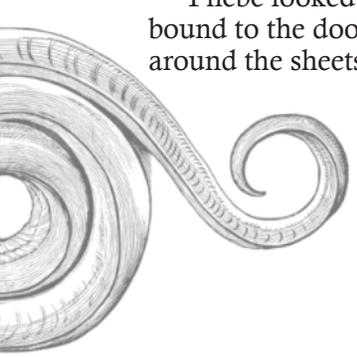
By the large fireplace, there were two figures, both absolutely still. One was a soldier, sitting on one of the teachers' chairs and leaning his head against the stone chimney breast as if he'd been drugged. The ruddy light of the fire picked out the brass buttons on his open uniform coat and cast a long, blood-red sheen down the barrel of his propped-up musket. Startled and frightened though she might have been by the strange man and his gun, Phebe scarcely knew what to make of the second figure, which looked like little more than a bundle of old sheets. It was cocoon-like, bound with cloth strips to a door laid flat upon two of the benches the girls normally sat on during their lessons. The fire cast flickering light over the knob and hinges of the thick door, but the swaddling of the sheets left the bound figure's face in unrecognizable half-shadow.

Phebe ran over to the small, shrouded person. Though her shoes made a clattering sound on the floorboards, the soldier never stirred. The child tied to the door did, however. A turning of the head revealed a spill of strawberry-blond hair that confirmed Phebe's worst fears.

“Ruth! Don't worry, I'll have you free in a moment.” Phebe dropped to her knees beside the strange door-bed and stripped off her hat and gloves. Then she began picking at the knots with her fingers and teeth.

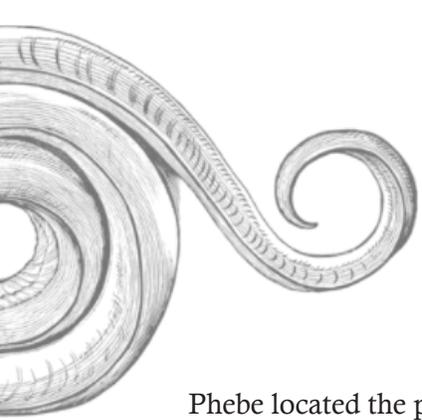
“Phebe, don't,” came Ruth's surprisingly weak voice. “All I want is water...just a cup.”

Phebe looked at her, and saw that her eyes were glistening and unfocused with fever. In addition to being bound to the door, Ruth had been swaddled like an infant with wide bands of torn fabric wrapped around and around the sheets that covered her. These, too, were fastened by tight knots.



It was cocoon-like,
bound with cloth strips
to a door laid flat upon
two of the benches the
girls normally sat on
during their lessons.





Phebe located the pitcher of water and tin cup sitting on the floor by the unconscious soldier's feet. She was disgusted by the distinct impression that the soldier had drunk the pitcher to half-full himself.

Once she'd filled the cup, Phebe lifted her friend's head and held the drink to her lips. Ruth sucked the water down as if she'd been desperate for it.

“It was cruel of them to tie you to a door! You can't even get your own water. And who is that man? Why has the headmistress let him sit all alone with you, when you ought to have a proper nurse?”

When Ruth had drunk the cup dry, she paused to breathe laboriously for a moment and then said, “These bindings are here to protect you and everyone else at Lucyspoole. As for that man, he was meant to help me, until the time came. His name is 'Mr. Murray', and he was ordered here by Captain Prescott because he fell ill and can no longer dig the great, square graves the regiment is making now. Before his head began to hurt so much, he said that they'd buried almost as many of his fellow soldiers as they have villagers, mostly from fever. Mr. Murray won't admit he's very sick, but I'm sure he is. Would you check on him, Phebe? I'm afraid I will need him before morning, whether he is ill or not.”

Phebe shook Mr. Murray's shoulder, and got no response but a low, thin moan. When she shook him again, his eyes opened briefly and she could see that the pupil on the right side had blown so wide that there was almost no iris left. It made him look worse than dead. The young girl cried out and backed away from him. The sharp sound of her voice seemed to agitate him and Mr. Murray clawed at the right side of his head with his right arm, but the left side of him flopped and twitched like a beached fish. For a moment, Phebe was sure he was going to lurch into the fire, but he dropped against the chimney breast again, groaning and holding his head. A final shudder sent his musket crashing to the floor, inches away from where the cherry-red embers lay.

Phebe knew enough about guns to understand that a single spark was enough to set them off and she snatched the weapon up before the heat radiated down to where the powder rested. She found the weapon surprisingly heavy and about as tall as herself, even without the long bayonet at the end.

Ruth groaned softly. “He's going to die, isn't he?”

“I don't know,” Phebe said. “Should I try to give him some of your water? I'd rather save it for you.”

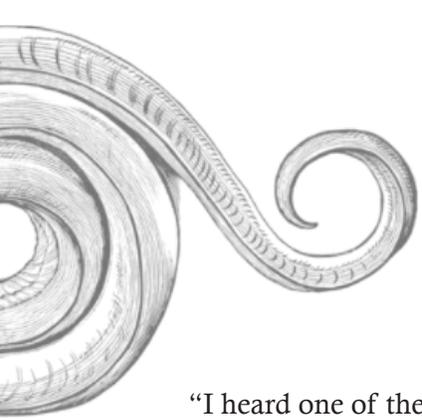
“Do it,” Ruth said. “He's the only one here who can fire a musket.”

“Why would we want someone to do that?” Phebe asked, although she did as Ruth asked and poured another cup of water.

“Because,” Ruth said in a very small voice, “he's here to shoot me.”

“He's here to what?” Phebe demanded, whirling so abruptly that half the cup's water slopped on the floor.

Ruth eyed the sparkling liquid longingly. “I have peaceably sickness,” she said softly. “The devil's death.”



“I heard one of the nurses say so. But peacefully sickness can't always end in death, can it? I know that surgeons treat it and you were well enough to run around the garden two days ago.”

“I was bitten on the neck and the doctor says that's the most unlucky place to be bitten. He could not get all the worms out before their poison corrupted my blood. The skin there is black now, Phebe. This sheet is like a great dressing over the wound. With the wrapping in place, I don't have to see the skin anymore, but the smell! I would run from it if I could. After you try to revive Mr. Murray, would you bring one of the pastille burners closer?”

Horrified, Phebe nodded. She felt as if her body were made of wood as she tried tipping the tin cup of liquid into Mr. Murray's mouth, only to have it all dribble out the slack left corner. She wondered if Ruth had noticed. The blond girl was staring fixedly at the ceiling, breathing through her mouth, as if trying to concentrate on anything but a smell.

Thus far, Phebe smelled nothing but the woodsmoke of the fire and the flowery, resinous scent of the burning cones of gum arabic and herbs within the pastille burners, but then, she wasn't wrapped up tight in a sheet with her own blackening flesh.

She crossed to the place where one of the study tables had been pushed against the wall and picked up one of the smoking ceramic cottages that held the cones of incense. Phebe carefully set the little pink-and white confection on the floor by the door that was serving Ruth as a bed.

“Is that better?” she asked, managing to sound passably ordinary, although she was unable to get the image of her best friend's worm-poisoned blood out of her mind. However much she loved Ruth, she was now fighting the urge to run. In carrying the burner over to Ruth's side, she had noticed that several tables and benches had been pushed up against the door, as if to prevent someone from escaping.

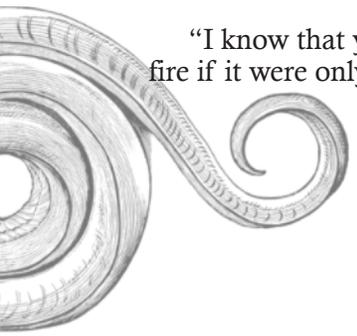
“Yes, much better,” Ruth said, lifting her head from the door's wood and inhaling deeply. “I wish the doctor and the nurses hadn't left me, but I suppose I don't blame them, considering what's going to happen.”

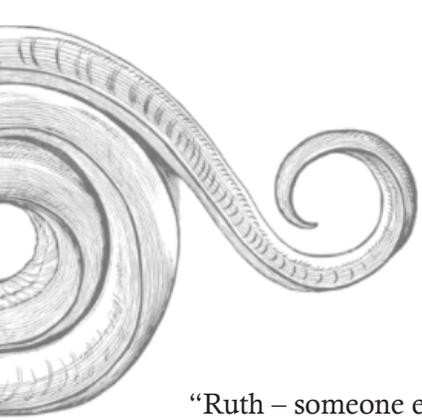
“Nothing's going to happen. You're going to get better. You're not nearly as sick as Mr. Murray – you can talk and reason, and all he can do is drool. He should be tied down on that door, not you.”

Ruth shook her head slowly no. As she did so, the sheet at her throat gaped and Phebe became aware of a nauseating odour. “Phebe,” Ruth said, through lips that had peeled and cracked through her feverish need for water, “will you do it for me? Will you shoot the nest in my throat, so that once my soul is gone, the flies hatching in me can't hurt anybody? If you miss the musket shot, I believe Mr. Murray has a pistol somewhere about him, as well...he may have let it fall beneath his chair.”

Phebe felt her spine go rigid with horror and, although she heard her own voice, she could hardly believe she was speaking aloud. “I don't know how to fire a gun.”

“I know that you must click the hammer back two times. I remember my father's fowling piece would not fire if it were only clicked back once.”





“Ruth – someone else....”

“Who else?” Ruth pressed. “I’m sure none of them know any more than you do about firearms. Headmistress Marwood might be brave enough to run out on foot to find another man of Captain Prescott’s regiment, but she might not arrive safely and, even if she did, they wouldn’t let her return to you for days or weeks. That’s the whole point of keeping men out on the road, to make sure everyone stays inside until the peaseflies and the fever-dew have passed.”

The Orphan Asylum kept no stables – it barely had enough donors to keep its residents in stockings and shoes – and so, all journeys had to be undertaken on foot. Phebe remembered her own heart-hammering fear at going outdoors long enough to run to the schoolroom. Ruth was right that hunting for another soldier might be useless at best and fatal at worst. That left only the girls and teachers of the Asylum itself.

For Ruth’s peace of mind more than from her own commitment to shoot, Phebe said, “All right...I’ll do it.”

Ruth relaxed, seeming to flatten and lengthen in the process. A soft sigh escaped her and she said, “Thank you, Phebe. If it weren’t for the danger to you, I should have wished for you from the first, instead of a poor, sick soldier.”

“Ssh, now. Have some more water,” Phebe said, pouring another tin cupful.

Ruth drank the contents of the cup eagerly and settled back upon her makeshift bed. Phebe then crept up to lie upon the door, as well, and wrapped her arm around her sick friend. The smell of putrefying flesh made the meager contents of her stomach roil, but now and again, a wafting ghost of burning anise and violets would wash over her, and give her just enough of a respite to remain where she was.

“I will take care of you, Ruth,” Phebe said, and squeezed the other girl tighter.

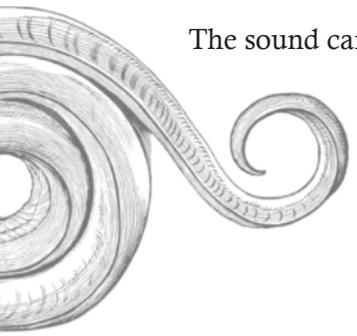
“I know you will, Phebe. I trust you,” Ruth answered.

Eventually, the sick girl’s breathing grew slow and regular, as if with healthy sleep. However, when Phebe caressed her sweating brow, she found that the side that faced the fire was surprisingly cool, while the other side was positively cold. It was worrisome that anybody could seem cold so close to a fire, but Ruth’s presence and soft, familiar breathing was calming. Before long, Phebe was asleep, despite the smell and the hard discomfort of the door.



She awoke to a high, thin screaming. In her abortive dream, she had thought the sound came from a starving ghost, begging at one of the schoolroom windows. She scrambled off the door and fell, instinctively fleeing the sound, before she was fully alert and aware that reality was far worse than her dream.

The sound came from Ruth, who lay very still on her back, her mouth open in a wide, expressionless ‘O’.





In the grey, pre-dawn light, Phebe could see that both her pupils had been blasted unnaturally wide, as Mr. Murray's right one had been. Mr. Murray himself was collapsed on the floor in a strange, froglike position, making occasional grunting noises as he clutched at his head. Phebe could smell that he had vomited on the hearth.

She turned back to Ruth, who continued to keen, even as she stared blankly up at the rafters. Phebe called out her friend's name, uncertain.

There was no reply. Phebe tried not to think about what she had promised to do earlier. Instead, she grabbed the other girl by the shoulders and shook her, shouting, "Wake up!" again and again. Her shaking met no resistance, and Ruth's head flopped like a rag doll's, even as the rest of her body remained still, bound rigidly against the door.

Then suddenly, Ruth turned her head and snapped at Phebe's hand, as if trying to catch and crush a finger in her even, white teeth. Phebe pulled her hands back as if she'd been burnt. Worse, the biting motion had required Ruth to stretch out her neck, and Phebe turned sharply away, fighting back rising bile.

As Phebe staggered back toward the wall of the room, Ruth began to struggle with her bindings. She lunged again and again at the spot where Phebe had been, as if the girl had left some impression there that incited mindless aggression.

"Mr. Murray!" Phebe cried. "Mr. Murray, what do I do?" But the soldier continued to grunt and groan and clutch at his head.

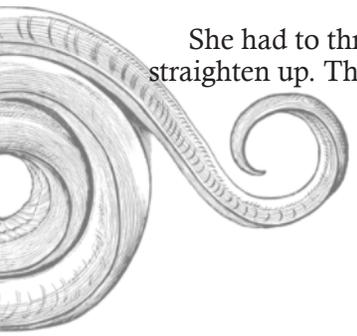
Phebe did not want to pick up a gun and shoot her friend, the closest thing she had to a sister, even if Ruth was dying the devil's death. "Please, Ruth, not yet! Lie down and go to sleep again. I can't – " Her words ended in a shriek as Ruth's violent struggling flipped the door off its bench supports and sent her crashing to the floor, face down.

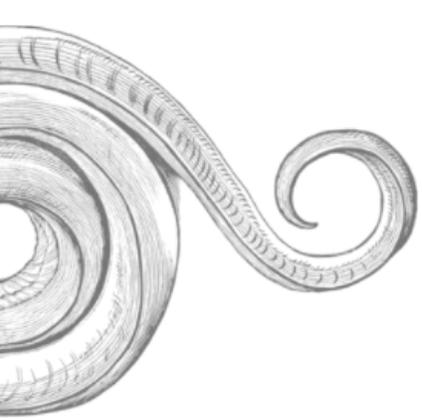
For a time, there was no movement and almost total silence, except for Phebe's terrified, sobbing breath. In the brightening dawn light, she could see a pool of something that looked like dark, thick blood and stank like decay spreading from under the door.

"Can you...still hear me?" she called out shakily. The door trembled slightly. Phebe longed to lift it up and find her friend underneath – injured, perhaps, but herself. She told herself it was possible that the fall had knocked reason back into her. It was only the smell that kept her away.

Giving the quivering door a wide berth, she crept around to the hearthside, where she'd left the soldier's musket. Not for real use, she told herself, just in case. Avoiding the fluid that leaked out from under the door, she pushed the barrel of the long gun under a corner of the thick wood and heaved up, using the weapon as a lever.

She had to throw all her strength into lifting, placing the gun's stock on her shoulder and fighting to straighten up. The bayonet at the barrel's end began to bend at its base from taking the full pressure of lifting,





but the door slowly began to swing up toward its thin edge, as if it were opening from an unnatural place in the floor.

Eventually, Ruth was revealed underneath, with blackish liquid running from her nose and lips. Worse, she seemed to be compulsively tearing with her teeth at the fluid-soaked fabric on her chest and side. Her face was smeared with the substance, as though she were a child gobbling jam without a spoon.

She'd already done a good job of shredding the band that held her chest to the door. Even if she shredded them all, however, she would still be bundled and tied in the sheets that were wrapped tight around her. Phebe told herself there was no real threat of Ruth breaking out and using her stained teeth on others. No need to shoot. Not yet. Please, not yet.

Even still, Phebe hurried to put on the closest thing she had to a helmet and armour – her black straw hat and veil, and the thick, baggy, cotton-linen gloves meant to protect her from the peaseflies.

She took the musket with her when she ran over to a wall and grabbed hold of one of the school tables, carefully lined up there as on all non-school days. The tables were normally moved about by teams of girls, and it took her some time and effort to shove one over onto its side. Once she did, however, she had a thick, rough, oak-plank fortress to crouch behind. While she was setting up her defenses against whatever smelled so strongly of death, she could hear the soft, horribly-wet rip and pull of Ruth eating her way out of her stained bonds.

Phebe balanced the musket on the edge of the table, pointing inward toward the room. “Don't worry, Ruth,” she said to the creature she was increasingly sure was no longer Ruth. “When full dawn comes, they'll miss me and they'll come looking for us. Maybe Mr. Murray can't help us, but I know our teachers will.” She didn't mention that she had no idea what any of the handful of adults left at Lucyspoole would do.

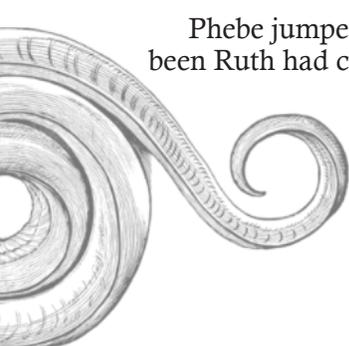
Her words were followed by a long, tearing sound and the damp slither of something wet being dragged over the floorboards. “Ruth?” she called out, very quietly this time.

There was no answer. Phebe's hands began to tremble so badly that the bent bayonet tip of the musket shook like a ship's mast-top in a storm. She could not see Ruth – or what was left of her – because the door was still propped up on its edge against the school benches. The same obstacle kept her from seeing much of Mr. Murray, except for the lower part of his legs in their grey trousers and black shoes. He seemed motionless, but now and then, he groaned.

After a short time, the slithering sound stopped, and for the space of perhaps a minute or so, the only sounds were the creaky chorus of insects outside and the occasional, warbling call of a blackbird.

Then the door crashed down and Mr. Murray began to scream.

Phebe jumped to her feet, hauling up the heavy musket, and began to scream, too. The thing that had been Ruth had crawled free of its bindings like a blowfly emerging from its pupal case. Everything around the





creeping body was covered in dark, sticky liquid. Some had landed in black splotches on Mr. Murray's red coat, and Not-Ruth was worming toward him, half-swimming through the mess by dragging herself on her splayed elbows and knees.

Worse – thick, fingerling lumps squirmed beneath the flesh of her ruined neck and Phebe recognized instantly what they must be. Peaseflies. Adults, by the size of them, ready to fly and spread poisoned blood.

Phebe had not really meant to keep her promise to shoot Ruth, but she raised the musket now, pressing its butt plate against her shoulder the way she had seen in pictures of the Army. It was too heavy and awkward for her to manipulate with one shaking arm and she had to scrabble with her left hand, trying to grip the underside of the stock with at least two fingers, while fighting to use her thumb to push the hammer back one, two times.

Not-Ruth had reached Mr. Murray by that time and had fallen upon his befouled chest and belly. He shrieked like one of the damned, waving his one functional hand as if he were trying to strike her away while blinded.

Phebe tried to aim at her former friend's neck, but the gun barrel shook too much in her hands. Yet, if she dropped back down behind her table shelter, the door would act as a shield to the horrible scene unfolding on the floor.

She would have to come out of her hiding place.

Phebe's shoes seemed to thunder on the floorboards as she ran out to the benches that propped up the door. The sound got Not-Ruth's attention and she turned her horrific, filthy face away from Mr. Murray. Her pupils were so wide now that they seemed like holes, devoid of any colour at all. The parts of her face that were not covered in a red-black mess were as pale and expressionless as the moon.

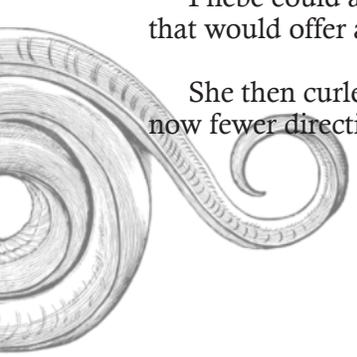
Phebe took aim at her, using the edge of the door as an aid to steady her weapon, and pulled the trigger.

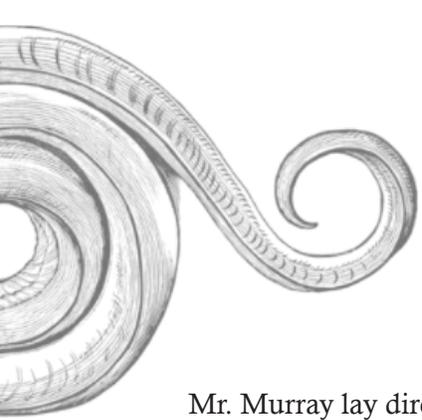
The gun roared and plumes of white smoke erupted from both pan and bore. The door clattered to the ground, partly covering Not-Ruth, where she lay sprawled with a grape-sized hole in her chest. Her hands appeared to open and close reflexively, and she made a strange, thick, gurgling sound, but she did not seem able to move.

The peasefly-shaped swellings beneath her blackened throat did move, however, and they pumped and writhed madly, as if struggling even harder to hatch now that their host had collapsed. Phebe threw down the musket – she had no time to reload it, even if she'd known how – and dove for the pistol that the living Ruth had pointed out beneath the soldier's chair. The chair's legs knocked her over-broad hat off and the veil was torn away from her face as her gloved hand closed over the pistol's barrel.

Phebe could already hear the thin whine of wings as she fought beneath the chair to replace the veiled hat that would offer at least some protection to her head and neck.

She then curled up as tightly as she could, shoving her back against the stone chimney breast. There were now fewer directions the hatching flies could come at her from.





Mr. Murray lay directly in front of her and the remains of Ruth had collapsed barely two feet beyond that – almost close enough to touch. Not-Ruth's face was turned toward Phebe and Mr. Murray, and Phebe gagged as she watched hatching flies begin to chew their way out of the black skin on her neck.

Mr. Murray screamed again as the first gnawing insects fell upon him. The flies appeared drawn by both the blackish ooze that had come from Not-Ruth's wounds and the living blood in the soldier's veins. Flies landed on Phebe as well, rubbing their wings with their hind legs, as if eagerly readying themselves to take on a new host. The fabric barriers held just long enough for Phebe to knock the insects off. A few she managed to crush upon the stone hearth beneath her shoe.

Desperate now, she pointed the pistol at Not-Ruth's seething throat, even though the other girl's red-tinted blond hair still shone in the morning sunlight and her dead eyes were still the same sweet almond shape that Phebe had looked to for cheer and comfort in the hard, grey world of the Orphan Asylum.

“I'm sorry, Ruth,” Phebe whispered, her eyes tearing in the smoke and smothering odour of decay.

Then, before she could give in to cowardice, she pulled back the pistol's hammer, and fired into Not-Ruth's neck.

Once the roaring of the pistol shot had stopped ringing in her ears, she could hear people beating on the door to the schoolroom.

“Don't open it!” Phebe cried. She threw the chair off of herself and crossed the room at a run, not daring to look down at Not-Ruth's motionless remains. She did, however, inadvertently step on a few half-blasted peacefully carcasses.

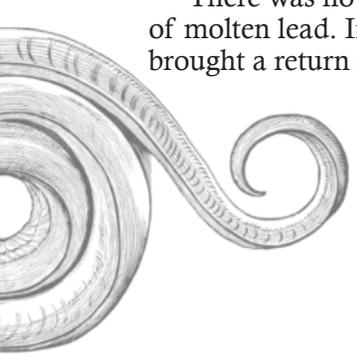
Grey gunsmoke now drifted across the schoolroom's length, adding the stink of sulfur to the other, more repulsive odours. Phebe could hear the remaining flies blundering around, batting their heads into windows and searching for her.

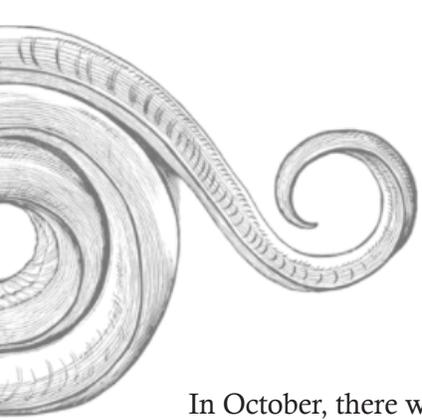
When she reached the window she'd crawled in through, she saw Miss Marwood, the headmistress, on the other side, as shrouded in black as she herself was. Miss Marwood helped her haul the sash up just enough for Phebe to escape, and then slammed the panel of wood and glass down upon a peacefully that had nearly darted free.



Later, Phebe's clothes were burnt and she was carefully examined for bites, but her protective coverings had done their job, if only just.

There was no saving Ruth or Mr. Murray, and both ended up in a communal grave under a silvery coverlet of molten lead. In a way, the schoolroom died, too. It was deemed unfit for further use and as autumn finally brought a return of students and general health, the girls were educated in the refectory.





In October, there was finally a church service for all the dead. The pastor (who helped lay in the meager provisions at Lucyspoole) tried to smooth over the large number of deaths that had occurred in an institution for poor orphans. He waxed philosophical about how God's eye knew every little sparrow and so, no orphaned girl could ever truly be called 'neglected'.

Phebe sat with her hands folded and listened. However, she could not forget the empty beds upstairs in the dormitory, or the empty places at the refectory table.

Ruth, she thought, I wish God had spent less time watching the little sparrows and more time watching over you.

THE END

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OUR COVER ARTIST

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