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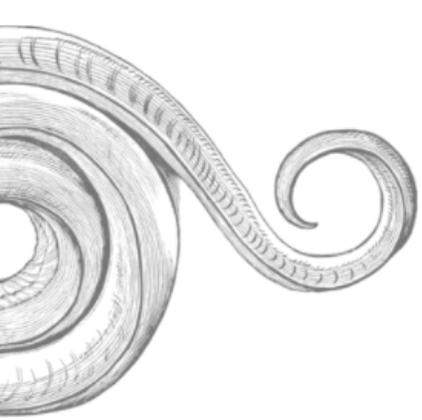
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EDITORIAL

If you've paid attention to the cover of this issue, you might have noticed something different. From now on, '*Innsmouth Magazine*' will be the name of our triannual fiction issues, while 'Innsmouth Free Press' is the name of the micro-publishing company that publishes *Innsmouth Magazine*. It's a small change, but one that will help avoid confusion, as we launch more anthologies and books in the next few years.

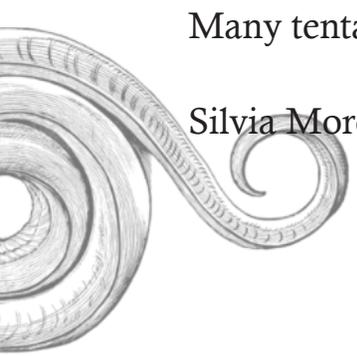
Talking about launches, this is the first issue of *Innsmouth Magazine* that is available for purchase as an e-book. The online and PDF versions of *Innsmouth Magazine* will remain free, but if you want a handy Kindle or ePub file, head over to Amazon and Smashwords. Each issue is only a dollar.

We rely on donations, and the profits from the sale of these issues, to keep going. Do consider supporting us this way. Or, you can always purchase copies of our books: *Historical Lovecraft*, *Candle in the Attic Window* and *Fraterfamilias*.

Now that we've dealt with business, we can sink our teeth into the fiction. This issue contains six tales of horror, ranging from a snowy, apocalyptic end of the world to an ancient secret hidden in the scorching desert. Cover artwork is by Italian artist Andrea Bonazzi.

Many tentacles,

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





The writer used a medieval Slavic language once spoken in Diokletija, which some now call 'Montenegro'. The text reads: *'In this vale lurks the temple of the Necrophagi. Enter not lest ye be devoured. Seek not the Second Sphinx.'*

THE SECOND SPHINX

By Rebecca Steffoff

A month before I was to leave for Egypt with Napoleon's army, the Comte d'Erlette asked me to call on him. "My son, you do not have to go," my mother said to me three times, but I was more than willing. It was past time for a reckoning with the Comte. I would demand an accounting and swear to repay all that he had spent on us.

D'Erlette's note gave directions to his house in the rue d'Auseil, deep in one of Paris's oldest neighborhoods. The way was labyrinthine, but once I had kissed my mother and closed our door behind me, I thrust the paper deep into a pocket. I'd dreamed for years of meeting the Comte. The spidery black message, in script so old-fashioned that it must be his own hand, was burned into my mind.

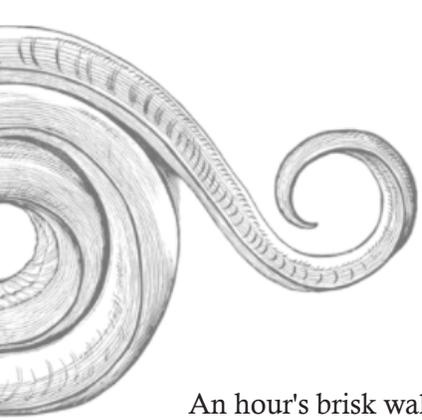
The note was worded as an invitation, but I knew it for a summons. The terrible old man, for such the Comte d'Erlette was rumoured to be, had paid for my education. No doubt he wished to see what he had bought. He'd purchased the rooms where I lived with my mother, too, and other things, although she had always deflected my questions. "He knew your father," was her sole reply. "The arrangement was made before you were born."

Three girls descended from a carriage at the corner of our street, chattering like finches. Lilac, pale-yellow, greenish-white, the cool silk of their spring dresses gleamed under the sycamore trees in the evening light. I smelled violets as I approached. They fell silent and smiled; after I passed, I heard their soft laughter. Of course they thought me gauche, a young man whose threadbare clothes said, "Poor student," whose pose of deep concentration screamed, "Proud, shy, stiff!" I ached to speak to them, but I had no prospects, nothing to offer a worthy girl, too much honour for any other kind.

Would I ever have anything to offer? Oh, I'd done well enough in my studies to earn a place in Bonaparte's corps of scientists and scholars — "You do not have to go," my mother had said to that invitation, too, but I, head swimming with visions of scholarly glory in far-off Egypt, barely heard her. Yet, even if I returned with a chance at a university position, such a post would not make me rich, and I was determined to repay every centime to the Comte d'Erlette, no matter how many years it took.

If I returned....

My father had gone abroad as a young man, too, and died horribly before I was born, or so I'd gathered from whispers over my head, when I was a child feigning sleep while our servant gossiped with the tradespeople. My mother had dismissed the servant, but not before the old woman had hinted that d'Erlette must have had something to do with my father's death. Why else would the Comte support a widow and her fatherless boy, neither of whom he ever saw?



An hour's brisk walk took me into a maze of ancient streets off the Place d'Enfer. As I gazed up the steep, sooty-cobbled rue d'Auseil, I felt an inexplicable reluctance to continue. More than inexplicable — absurd. Had I not imagined this meeting a thousand times?

The April day died behind me as I climbed the street. Gloom lay heavy in that narrow defile between buildings so crooked with age that they seemed to meet over my head. The blank facade of the Comte's high, narrow house gave nothing away, not so much as a lighted window. I looked at the door for a long moment before I took up the knocker, a lump of iron that looked, in the fast-falling dark, like a dog's head.

The servant who admitted me was a Turk, or perhaps a Syrian. He led me in silence through an ill-lit hall. I caught hints of a curious odour: old cloth and dust and some acrid spice.

At the back of the hall, the attendant opened a door. I blinked in the sudden flood of lamplight. With a sardonic smile — for surely I cut a risible figure, a nervous young man striving to appear suave — the servant waved me into the room beyond and closed the door behind me.

The Comte d'Erlette sat in a massive chair of carved wood, appraising me.

I'd expected a wizened, withered centenarian; his age was said to be immense. I found him old, yes, but fat and flabby. Wrinkles sat on his face like a cobweb laid across a pallid, greasy moon.

I bowed and advanced. He pointed to a chair and I sat. The speech I'd rehearsed, expressing gratitude as well as my firm and honourable intentions, melted from my lips under the Comte's scrutiny. I glanced away, into the room's dim corners. Quivering lamplight touched the curve of a painted globe, piles of dusty books, masks leering from the walls. A long table was piled with the skulls of what I took to be foxes, jackals and wolves.

"Jules Duchene." D'Erlette's voice was hoarse, and deeper than I expected. "No doubt you've been told that you look much like your father."

I had not. My heart raced, but my voice remained composed. "I understand, sir, that you had the honour of knowing him."

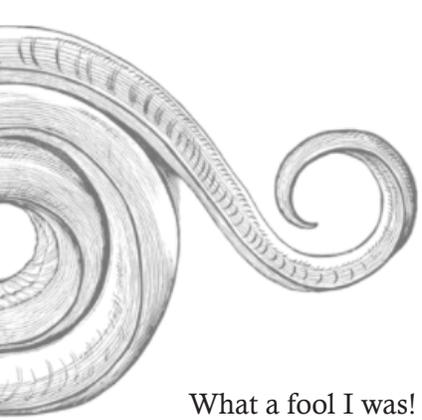
The vast bulk of him heaved slightly. "I knew him, yes."

The Comte lifted a finger and then let it fall, as if even that small exertion tired him. Or bored him. "But I called you here tonight to talk about your coming voyage."

I stared at him. "You know of that?"

Again, that soft quaking. "You received the invitation from the Institut d'Egypte, yesterday."

"How —?" Disappointment and embarrassment pierced me as the truth dawned.



What a fool I was! I'd fancied myself well-thought-of, recommended by my professors for my intelligence and diligence. But Bonaparte's cadre of savants sparkled with luminaries: Monge the mathematician, Berthollet the chemist, Saint-Hilaire the naturalist. My own specialty, the monuments of antiquity, was superbly filled by Baron Denon, the noted collector and artist. A humble graduate such as myself, his university course barely complete, would not have been plucked from obscurity to join these eminences unless influence had been brought to bear. D'Erlette must have ample influence to have retained fortune and favour through so many regimes.

It was a bitter blow to my pride, but I took it like a gentleman. "Then, as you are the author of my good fortune, allow me to offer my thanks for this opportunity...and for much else."

The Comte's pale-grey eyes glinted above bulbous cheeks when he smiled. "How it must chafe to feel yourself in my debt."

Horrible that he'd sensed it, appalling that he'd said it. "I assure you, sir —"

"Never mind." Red lips pursed in marmoreal flesh. "I know something of your character" —*How?* I thought, and then, belatedly, *Why send me to Egypt?* — "and I'm certain that you consider yourself honour-bound to repay all that you and your mother have received from me, even though reimbursement is neither required nor expected."

Before I could summon a dignified reply, he cut me off.

"What would you say," he continued, watching me closely, "to one more opportunity? There is a task you could perform on my behalf, which, if successfully completed, will not only recompense me, but leave me in your debt — a debt which I shall pay in gold, not the new francs. It will also win you great acclaim, make you the toast of Paris and the educated world. Will you undertake it?"

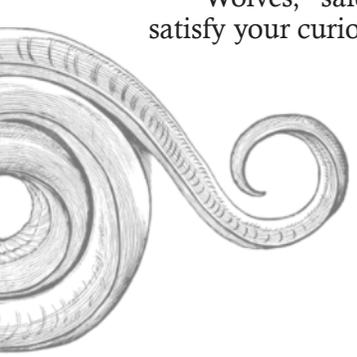
Excitement flamed within me at the old Comte's words. To be free of my odious obligation, rewarded and renowned! "I will, sir, if it be any honourable task."

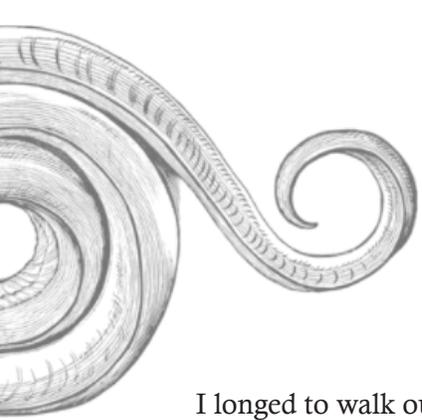
"I hoped as much." He sipped some dark fluid from a crystal glass at his elbow. He offered me nothing, but I was relieved; I seldom partook of strong drink and did not want to risk giddiness.

"You boil with questions," d'Erlette said. "I'll tell you what you need to know, no more. First — "He fingered his glass and looked sidelong at me. "— do you know how your father died?"

Nothing but his clothes...in pieces...fainted when she saw them. I stammered, "He was...I've heard he was — torn apart by wolves?"

"Wolves," said the Comte. "Yes. I will tell you something about his death, but mind, I called you here, not to satisfy your curiosity, but to discuss my proposition. Do you understand?"





I longed to walk out, but not as fiercely as I longed for the freedom this old man offered. If I must act the puppet, dancing dutifully to his tune, so be it. Wooden smile, stiff nod. “Perfectly, sir.”

“Your father,” said d’Erlette, “set out on a mission for me, as you will soon do. In earlier times, I would have gone myself, but for many years now, I have been unable to travel.” For the first time, I noticed the Comte’s legs. Covered by a crimson laprobe blazoned with unfamiliar glyphs in gold thread, the limbs were grotesquely swollen, each foot as big as his head. One of the dropsical ailments, I supposed.

“What I would not give to be young and strong again, as you are,” he said. “But never mind that. Do you know anything of my work?” His expression was mildly quizzical, his tone bland, but I sensed the need for caution. In truth, I knew next to nothing, just scraps of wild rumour and mad speculation.

“I have heard, sir, that you are a scholar of ancient myths, an historian of alchemy and the other so-called ‘mystic arts’.”

“‘An historian’ — nicely put. I am an investigator and a chronicler of certain antique beliefs, not in any sense a...devotee.”

“Of course.” Where was this leading?

“For many years, now,” d’Erlette said, “I have been writing my masterwork. I call it ‘*Cultes des goules*’.”

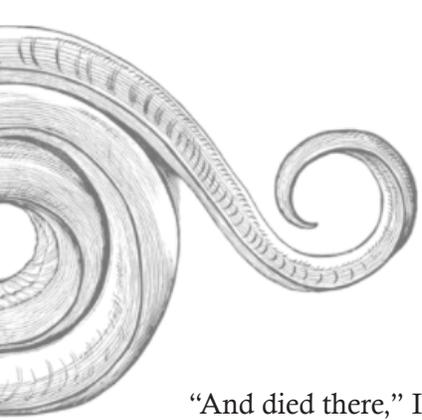
His pale gaze sharpened. “I alone have unearthed one of history’s long-forgotten oddities — evidence of a religion that once had cults and sects across the ancient world. How manifold are the religious vagaries of mankind! The followers of this lost faith worshiped, not a benevolent or all-powerful deity, but beings of darker imagining: prowling ghouls that were said to feast on the dead.”

I must have shuddered.

“Have I offended you by equating a primitive superstition with your belief in your own god?” His tone was amused.

“Not *my* god, sir. I am a rationalist. All religions, ancient and modern, are superstitions, and equally worthy of study for what they may illuminate about our human nature and history.”

“One of the new men of science.” His chuckle was the croak of a vast toad. “Then you understand my desire to learn all I can about the ancients who imagined corpse-eaters and worshiped them. Which brings us to your father. I’d found hints that an ancient document about the origins of the ghoulish cult lay forgotten in the mouldering archives of an Aromanian monastery in Thrace. Your father ventured into the forbidding mountains of northeastern Greece to obtain it for me.”



“And died there,” I said, unable to keep all bitterness from my voice. How desperate must my poor father have been, to set off on such a journey, leaving his pregnant young wife.

“Quests into wild and remote places are not without danger,” said the Comte, “as you may find. Your father did not, however, die in vain.”

“You mean —”

The Comte nodded, chins jiggling over his dirty, black velvet collar. “Our agreement was binding, whether he found the document or not. But he found it. Then he perished. His remains were buried on the spot. It would have been...impractical to send home what the searchers found. His clothing and effects, however, came to me. I, of course, sent them to your mother, after looking through them for my property. I found the document sewn into the lining of his greatcoat. It had been somewhat damaged in the attack.”

The Comte d’Erlette gestured to a leather folio on the table, beside his glass. “See for yourself.”

Suddenly, I thought of striking him and was aghast. Not at the idea of violence against one who, however callous, was nevertheless an elderly cripple. No, it was the thought of my fist sinking into that pulpy flesh that revolted me. My hands trembled as I opened the folio.

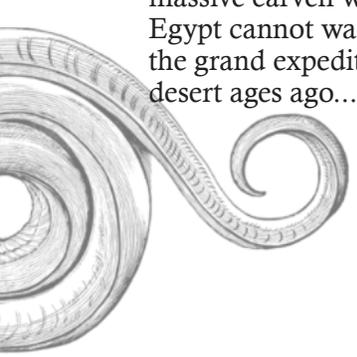
My father had died for a torn, discoloured parchment. It had been on him when the wolves brought him down. The rents were the work of their slaving fangs, the rusty stains his blood. I didn't know whether to fling the parchment from me or press it to my lips.

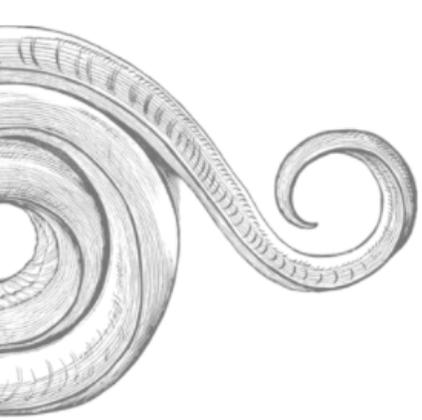
“It is, as you see, a map of Egypt.” The Comte seemed unaware of my turmoil. I forced myself to follow as he traced the line that led away from a familiar sea. “A map from the time of Ptolemy, perhaps. Here, the Nile. And here —”

A fat, white forefinger jabbed the map at a point that must be hundreds of kilometers south of the Delta, between the sinuous Nile and the blank immensity of the Saharan desert. The finger lifted, revealing a small drawing and several lines of tiny, crabbed characters. The drawing was of a hill or mountain, with two jagged peaks, a palm tree and what looked like an animal’s paw — the rest of the image was obscured by a bloodstain. I could not read the text. The characters were Latin uncials, but the tongue was unknown to me.

“The writing is old,” d’Erlette said, “but not as old as the map. I believe it was added between the sixth and eleventh centuries. The writer used a medieval Slavic language once spoken in Diokletija, which some now call ‘Montenegro’. The text reads: *‘In this vale lurks the temple of the Necrophagi. Enter not lest ye be devoured. Seek not the Second Sphinx.’*”

I stared at the map while the Comte continued. “Everyone has heard of the famous Sphinx of Gizeh, massive carven wonder of the antique world. Denon and the other savants who will be your colleagues in Egypt cannot wait to measure and clamber about on it, I assure you. Now, imagine your fame if you, out of all the grand expedition, discover *another* sphinx, a Second Sphinx, one as yet unknown, lost and forgotten in the desert ages ago....”





Oh, I could imagine it. Every door would open to me — salons, universities, the haunts of the rich and powerful. My reputation would be made, my future secure.

I looked into the Comte's glaucous eyes. "Tell me what I have to do," I said.



Half an hour later, I left the Comte d'Erlette's house to walk home under the stars. Their icy light seemed to prickle my flushed skin as the Comte's story spun through my mind.

D'Erlette had long believed that somewhere in the East lay a lost temple of the ghoulish worshippers. Twenty-three years ago, he'd acquired the Thracian map that gave him its location. But he'd sent no agent to Egypt to seek the temple, he told me, because the Ottoman Sultan and his Mamelukes, the rulers of the land, were notoriously inhospitable to foreigners. I suspected that he *had* sent agents, but none had survived. Either way, Napoleon's expedition gave d'Erlette a new opportunity. When the Comte learned that the General planned to take a cadre of scholars and scientists to survey Egypt, he arranged to have me included.

To act on his behalf, I'd have to strike out into the Western Desert and search for the landmarks on the map: the double peak and the oasis that was, the Comte assured me, indicated by the palm tree. There I would find the temple, "the Second Sphinx," which must be a counterpart to the great stone monument outside Cairo.

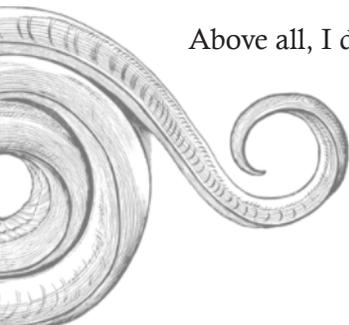
All of the glory, d'Erlette said, would be mine. He wanted one thing only: a piece of carved stone that had been the temple's chief treasure in ages gone by.

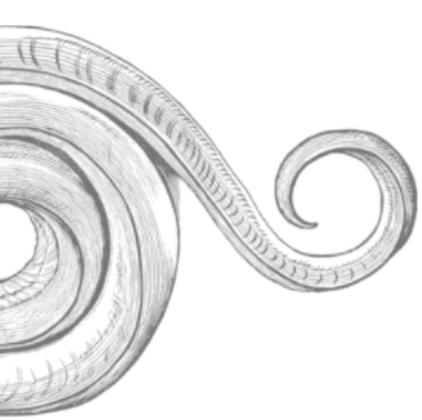
"The amulet is of no great intrinsic value," he told me. "Riches far more splendid await you; do not doubt it. The inscriptions on the amulet will complete my researches; that is all. They are said to be the prayers or invocations with which the hierophants beseeched their grim ghoulish-gods for the gift of everlasting life. Once I have translated them, my long task will be at an end, and I can publish the *Cultes des goules*."

A phantasmagoria it seemed, yet the Comte believed it. The pouch of coins in my pocket testified to that. "You'll need money for supplies and bribes," he had said. "There will be more, much more, when you bring me my amulet." I left half the Comte's coins with my mother when I departed. The money, I said, was a prize from the university for winning a place in Bonaparte's company.

The embarkation from Toulon, the voyage to Malta and on to Alexandria — all of it was a nerve-wracking, nauseating hell. I was miserably seasick. I was disgusted by the coarse talk of the soldiers and too many of the young engineers and scholars, their jests about slaking their lusts on the women and girls of Egypt. My own fantasies were nothing so crude — schoolboyish daydreams of rescuing a beautiful, high-born maiden from brigands, of her silks and perfumes, of how she would cling to me and draw me into her damask tent to show her gratitude....

Above all, I dreamed of the Second Sphinx, waiting for me in the desert.





We scholars and scientists, engineers and mechanics, stayed safe aboard the ships of the line during what Bonaparte at once called “the glorious victory of the Battle of the Pyramids,” even though the fighting took place kilometers from those brooding tombs and the glory consisted in cannon mowing down spear-wielding cavalymen.

When our corps of savants entered Cairo, I followed my fellows like a sheep, dazed by the strangeness of muezzins keening on high, alien mysteries in their rising and falling cadences, of smells and filth and jostling in the pitiless clear light, of dust everywhere, as though the world were older here than anywhere else, and crumbling to atoms.

Napoleon issued a proclamation to the sheikhs, telling them that he had come to usher them into the modern world. By that time, I’d realized — not without chagrin at my naiveté — that our supposed expedition to “liberate the oppressed people of Egypt” was a pretext to seize territory and interfere with British trade routes to India. The British realized it, too, and sent a fleet under Nelson to sink our ships at Abukir. The loss of our ships meant that we were committed to Egypt until France could break Britain’s control of the Mediterranean and bring us home. So, Napoleon’s soldiers set about pacifying Egypt, and his savants set about mapping and excavating it.

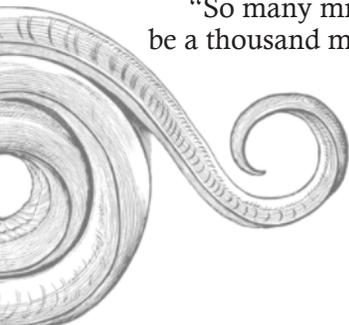
I set about making myself known to Baron Denon, the eminent artist and scholar of antiquities. Rumour had it that Denon would accompany a military campaign upriver — the direction in which I must go. The surest way to get within striking distance of the Second Sphinx was to win Denon’s favour and attach myself to that campaign.

The first Sphinx opened the way. As d’Erlette had predicted, Denon ordered the measuring of that monument. It was while helping the engineers and senior scholars prepare for that enterprise that I found my opportunity.

Denon and two other artists were sketching the panorama of Cairo, as seen from the Gizeh plateau. When one of the engineers ordered me to fetch more servants with measuring chains, I contrived to pass behind the artists. Pretending to read a note, I loitered for a moment, listening.

“So many minarets,” grumbled a black-whiskered gentleman who scribbled on his pad with charcoal. “Must be a thousand mosques in Cairo.”

I followed my fellows
like a sheep, dazed
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cadences, of smells
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“Three hundred, sir,” I said, and when the three of them turned to stare at me in surprise, I added, “According to Frederick Norden, who was here 60 years ago.”

“Ah, young Duchene, is it?” said Denon.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you have read the work of the Danish traveler?”

“The *Voyage d’Egypt et de Nubie*? Indeed, sir. It was necessary. So few European accounts of the region have been published since Ottoman rule began.”

“Three hundred mosques,” Denon said to his comrades.

Black Mustache shook his head. “Twice that, at least,” he said.

“Would you like me to count them for you, sir?” I asked with exaggerated deference and a hint of slyness, calculated to appeal to Denon’s good humor.

It worked. Denon laughed. “Set a servant to do it, Duchene. I think we can find better uses for your time.”

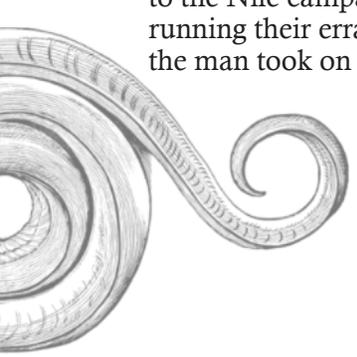
Two days later, it was announced that General Desaix would lead an expeditionary force up the Nile in pursuit of the warlord Murad Bey. To record the monuments along the river, Denon would accompany the troops with a few assistants. I petitioned for a place in the baron’s retinue, and got it.

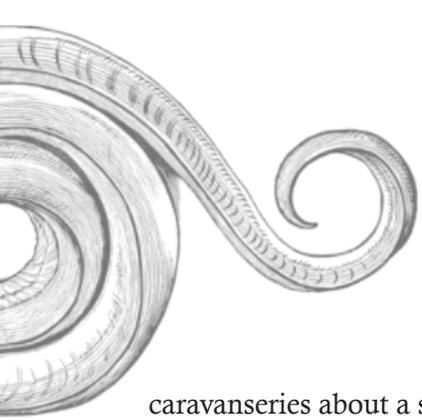
Desaix never caught up with Murad Bey, but Denon, who always lagged behind or darted off to sketch some new-found obelisk or tomb amid the drifting sands, was several times attacked by roving Bedouin bands, no doubt in the warlord’s pay. By luck alone, Denon and the three of us who accompanied him remained unscathed, although we lost bearers and servants. Along the way, our hasty excavations reintroduced me to the smell I had encountered in d’Erlette’s house. Dusty linen, balsam, and a hint of corruption — the odour of mummies.

Above Edfu, the land grew stark and barren, and the heat sickened us all. By the time the column reached Aswan in February 1799, we were reeling from hunger, fever and exhaustion, but Denon’s enthusiasm was undimmed. As soon as we were settled, soldiers and savants sharing a garrison, he began laying plans to explore the ruined temples on the island of Philae, whose barbaric inhabitants were said to worship crocodiles.

I looked for an opening to make my way westward. Feyoud found it for me.

Of the Moors and Levantines brought from France as interpreters, Feyoud had been the only one assigned to the Nile campaign. Fortunately for me, he had survived it. In Aswan, Desaix and Denon kept Feyoud busy running their errands and dealing with the swarms of servants, merchants, and beggars that besieged us. Still, the man took on a private task for me, in exchange for a gold coin. I asked him to inquire in the bazaars and





caravanseries about a steep, two-pointed peak in the western desert. “Something,” I told him, “that I once saw on an old map.”

One day, Feyoud brought to me a Bedouin with knives thrust through his belt and narrow eyes shaded by his head wrap. “This man, ‘Rahman’ is his name, he knows where to find that mountain you seek.”

I looked at Rahman, who stared back, unblinking, like a lizard.

“He speaks only his bastard version of Arabic,” Feyoud said.

I pointed toward the setting sun and then, in the dirt at my feet, sketched the outline of the mountain as I had copied it from d’Erlette’s map. Rahman spoke to Feyoud, who said, “Yes, yes, he can guide you. He has not been there, you understand, but he has seen it from the distance.”

Further exchanges established that the mountain was “ten or fifteen days’ march” west. Payment was proposed, chattered over, and eventually agreed on. Rahman looked far from trustworthy; I instructed Feyoud to tell him that the greater part of his pay would come only after he had led me safely to the mountain...and back to Aswan. The man spat scornfully, but agreed.

Now it remained only to have Denon send me out on a survey. I had to rouse his interest, but not so high that he would go himself. He was preoccupied with his Philae project, so when I told him I’d heard local talk of a site off to the west — “a minor ruin, no doubt, but perhaps a quick scout would add a useful note to your report?” — he decided to send me.

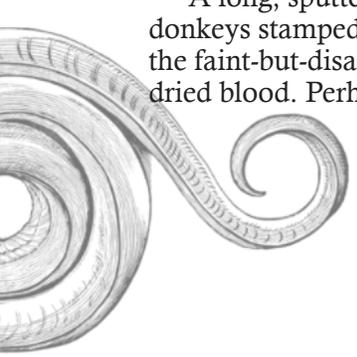
Denon insisted that the young geologist Laurent Casabien accompany me. I agreed with good grace; to protest would have aroused curiosity, even suspicion. I would simply have to ensure that I, not Casabien, made the great find. The geologist could occupy himself at the peak, turning over rocks.

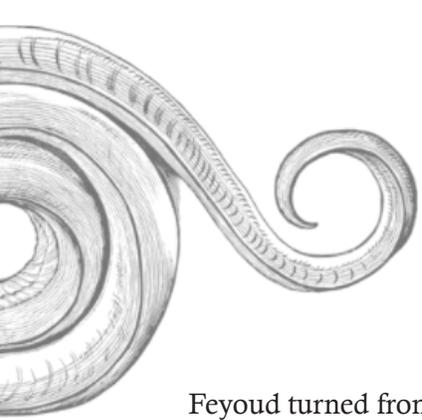
Preparations were agonisingly slow. With great effort, I hid my urgency. No one must think that I was undertaking more than a minor, doubtless insignificant, sortie. All the while, though, I reveled in thoughts of the high and singular destiny that awaited me.

Finally, all was ready. Casabien and I waited at the western gate of the city with six soldiers, and the three servants in charge of our pack animals and supplies. When Rahman showed up, he was not alone. A figure trailed him, robed and veiled, eyes alone exposed, and those downcast. The soldiers grinned.

“He cannot bring his woman!” I protested to Feyoud, who had come to see us on our way. “Tell him so at once. This is no place for a woman — these soldiers, tell him that the soldiers are a danger to her — I won’t have it.”

A long, sputtering exchange followed, to which the woman appeared to pay no attention. The horses and donkeys stamped their hooves, flattened their ears, and skittered away from her. I wondered why until I caught the faint-but-disagreeable odour emanating from her. An animal smell, sweet and slightly rotten, like a taint of dried blood. Perhaps the wretched thing worked in a slaughterhouse.





Feyoud turned from Rahman and said, “She is not his woman, she is a — what is your word — a refugee, perhaps? She is the last of her tribe, and growing old, and she wants to return to the place where her people once lived. Rahman says he is under a blood-debt and must help her. He says she will be safe; she will cause no trouble. And,” Feyoud added ingratiatingly, “she will be useful to you. Rahman says that she, too, knows the way to what you seek.”

Rahman stared boldly at me. The woman, as tall as he but unbowed despite the age he claimed for her, waited in the shadow of the city wall. Casabien plucked at my sleeve, nattering about how it could not possibly be allowed.

“Very well,” I said. “Tell Rahman that her fate is in his hands.”

I said farewell to Feyoud and we passed through the gate, Casabien muttering direly to himself.

I felt it out there waiting for me, a cryptic mass of carven stone that might have been a magnet, so strongly did it draw me. The Second Sphinx, and mine would be the glorious fate of going down in history as its discoverer.



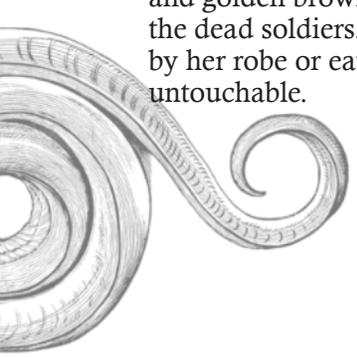
The first disaster came on our fourth night from Aswan.

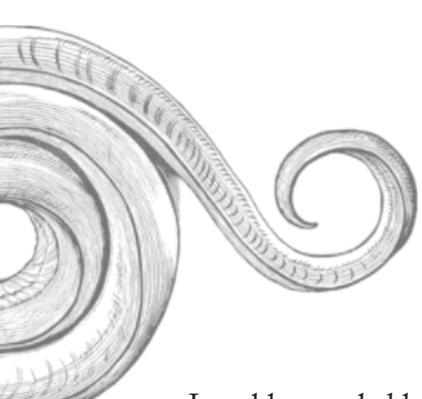
The river had long since disappeared behind us, along with dwellings, cultivation, trees; the world was all rock and sand. At noon that day, we emerged from a region of vast tumbled boulders and outcrops onto a wide sandscape like a sea. We inched across it toward the sun as it fell. Evening found us among great dunes that whispered with the wind-stirred hissing of countless grains.

Late that night, shouts and the crashes of rifle fire jerked me awake. By the time I had stumbled, shaking, from my tent, the swift raid was over. Two of our soldiers lay dead. Another was missing, along with several pack animals and half our supplies. Three Bedouin lay bleeding on the sand. One of them was still alive and twitching; I vomited, but did not protest when a soldier put a bullet through his head. I took a pistol from one of the fallen soldiers and tucked it into my jacket, hoping I would not need it. I had never fired a gun.

Then I realized that Rahman was gone. Treacherous bastard. The raiders were probably his men. I hoped we had inflicted enough damage to keep them from returning. Turning back to Aswan was, of course, out of the question, although Casabien went on and on about it until I reminded him, in front of the remaining three soldiers, that Denon had named me leader of our little expedition.

I turned from putting Casabien in his place to see the woman watching me. The sun was rising. Its first rays showed rusty stains on her faded black robe and head covering. Her eyes between scarf and veil were large and golden brown. I gestured her roughly away and she went to help the servants scrape holes in the sand for the dead soldiers. They cringed, but accepted her help. Her fellow natives, I'd noticed, avoided being brushed by her robe or eating food she had handled. No doubt some caste system, akin to that of India, rendered her untouchable.





I could scarcely blame the servants — or the soldiers — for their aversion to the creature. She must have been truly filthy under that robe; I could not seem to escape the smell of her. It was worst at night, when the vagrant breezes carried her earthy, raw scent to my nostrils. It brought me strange, cthonic, red-and-black dreams.

We had lost some of our waterskins in the raid. I sent a soldier and a servant ahead to look for a well or watercourse. Two days later, we found them, men and horses, dead beside a pool of muddy water. The men's corpses appeared to have been gnawed by jackals, but there was no sign of what had killed men or horses.

Casabien wanted to refill our empty waterskins at the pool.

“No,” I said. “Perhaps these men, these horses, were killed by poisoned water. Chemicals, leaching into the pool from the sand.”

The woman was the first to kneel for the grave digging. Casabien and I pitched in, this time. No one wanted to linger there.

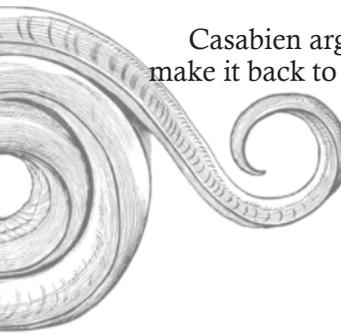
The dreams continued and my sleep became tormented. I ran endlessly through a shadowy maze under a blood-red sky, driven by gnawing hunger for something, I knew not what, that I half-feared to find. I did not run alone — I heard the pattering footsteps of others and smelled their hot breath, but they never caught me, or I them. Often, I woke in a state of arousal, panting and dripping, unable to return to sleep until I had relieved my lust, to my shame, in the only way I could. By day, I felt her eyes on me as if she knew.

One of the two surviving soldiers met his fate a few days after the waterhole. In the middle of the night, he went into the dunes to relieve his bowels. His shrieks of terror roused us, but ceased before we found him, pants around his ankles. He'd been mauled and killed by an animal, maybe a pack. I took this as a promising sign. The presence of lions or jackals or wild dogs was evidence of a water source not far away. I said nothing of the Comte d'Erlette's map, of course, but I was convinced that we were near the oasis.

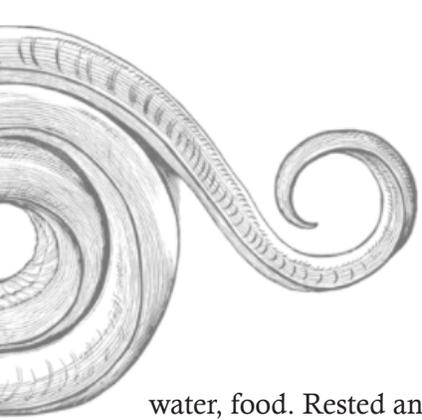
Dawn revealed two sharp bumps on the horizon. I exulted at the first sight of the twin peaks — all was happening as the map had said it would. Closer, we saw that the peaks were the highest points in a range of rugged hills that stretched north and south out of sight. The only way west was a narrow valley between them. Closer still, and a shimmer in the valley hinted at water. Even Casabien roused from his sullen dejection at the sight.

We were now out of food as well as water. I ordered the single remaining soldier to kill the last horse. When he and Casabien protested, I did it myself, using the pistol. The poor animal screamed dreadfully until I finally managed a killing shot. The soldier and Casabien watched resentfully as the servants butchered the beast. That night, though, the soldier gorged himself. He died in agony a few hours later, feverish and raving. Felled, it may be, by some swift-acting pestilence that spared Casabien, the two servants, the woman, and me.

The next morning, flies covered the horse's carcass and the stench made me gag.



Casabien argued long and loud for an immediate retreat to Aswan. I remained firm. We could not possibly make it back to Aswan in our sorry state. Our only hope was to push ahead to where we might find an oasis,



water, food. Rested and resupplied, we could plan our return. Casabien, with gestures, tried to urge the servants to retreat with him along the eastward trail. They merely stared at him, unwilling, or afraid, to abandon me. The woman shouldered two of the empty waterskins and looked at me. His little attempt at mutiny a failure, Casabien followed us into the valley.

We stumbled into the oasis as night fell. *Oasis*, such a deceptive word, evocative of waving palms, blue water, fruit. We found only a brown, near-empty pond and a few dry and leafless acacias. There was no food here, yet that mattered little in the wreck of all my hopes. Beyond the little oasis lay only swelling sand dunes between the valley's rock walls, as far as I could see. No sign of my sphinx.

Despair consumed me. Impossible to remain here, impossible to make it back to Aswan — I would die here in the desert, but better that than living with the death of my deluded dreams.

The servants sat on one side of the valley, whispering to each other. Casabien sat on the other, watching them with a pistol across his lap. The woman had disappeared. A full moon slid into view from behind one of the peaks, pouring cold light onto the dismal scene. Warily, I pitched my tent.

Deep in dream, I smelled something thrilling, a warm and meaty odour, irresistible, that penetrated and promised the pleasure I had never known....I woke, inflamed and desperate with need.

Afterward, I left my tent to cool myself in the night air. On a little hillock beyond the pond stood a figure. Its back was to me, but I knew it was the woman, face upturned to the moon, arms weaving. A guttural song reached my ears — a chant, I supposed, in whatever degraded faith she practiced. The rising wind molded her robe to her body. When I found myself creeping closer to look, I turned and crawled back into my tent, shivering. I didn't venture out to search for her, even when the wind became a howling storm that lasted for hours.

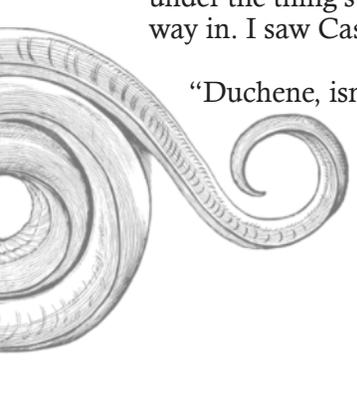
Silence fell in the grey light before dawn. The walls of my tent sagged with sand, but I pushed my way out. A slope of unbroken sand rose where the two servants had sat. Casabien's tent was empty. Then I turned to look down the valley.

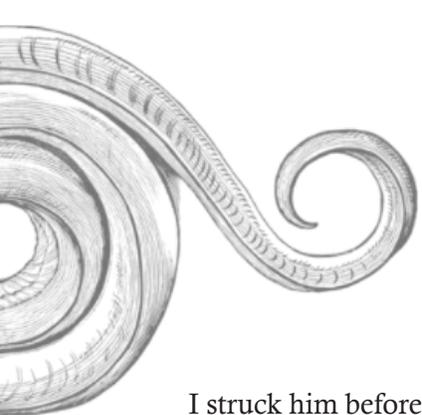
Not two kilometers away, sand lapped at its flanks. Last night's windstorm must have uncovered it.

The Second Sphinx. Larger even than the monument at Gizeh. I saw the first rays of the rising sun touch it, and then I ran stumbling and gasping, tears of joy and awe on my face.

Halfway to the monument, I realized that this was no counterpart to the Gizeh Sphinx, no pharaonic visage gazing sightlessly across the ages. Short ears stood cocked, as if listening, but the head was neither the jackal of Anubis nor a dog. The glaring face of my sphinx, the almost-human eyes above the short, slit snout and the gaping, fanged jaws, was like nothing I had seen. It must be the dread face of the ghoulish-god itself. Darkness under the thing's chin proved to be a roughly hewn doorway, like a cave entrance. Sunbeams from behind lit my way in. I saw Casabien's back before he heard my footfalls. When he turned, his face was ecstatic.

"Duchene, isn't it wonderful? Look at this!" From his upraised hand dangled an amulet on a chain.





I struck him before he said another word. I didn't plan to do it. I don't even remember picking up the rock. He crumpled onto the altar and didn't move.

She must have followed me into the temple. Suddenly, she was there. She looked from me to the body and then, with shocking strength, she picked it up and carried it from the place without a backward glance. Blood from Casabien's crushed skull left a trail on the dusty floor.

I picked up the amulet he had dropped. The chain was of iron. The medallion was a lump of bloodstone, carved on both sides with words I could not read. I slipped the chain over my head. The stone felt warm against my skin, for I was numb as with cold. I could scarcely believe what had just happened, but in my mind, I still heard the sickening crunch.

The damage was done. Casabien had given his life, in a way, for the advancement of science. The worst part was that, having killed an innocent man, I felt little. Remorse was meaningless next to my desire to survive, now that I had reached my goal.

Weak, tired to death, perishing with hunger, I could manage only a cursory look around the temple. The low, dark chamber was empty save for the altar. Anger flared — where were the treasures d'Erlette had promised? — and I reminded myself that the Sphinx itself was a treasure like no other.

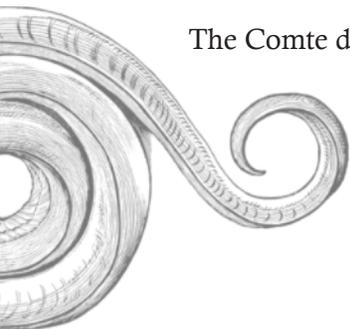
Peering into the gloom, I saw a few long, narrow bundles on ledges in the walls. So, this temple was also a tomb. What kings or priests had been laid here?

Something about the shape of those cloth-wrapped heads....No, impossible!

I tore at the wrapping of one of the mummies. The rotten linen, stiff with aged resins, broke apart like plaster. Inside, I found, not the shriveled flesh of a true mummy, but a skeleton picked clean. The limbs looked almost human. The skull had a short, broad snout and wide, fanged jaws.

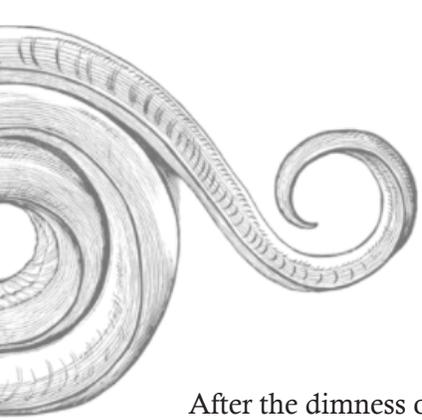
I staggered from the chamber, barely able to comprehend that my discovery was more earth-shattering than I could have dreamed. The ancients who had built this place were not just cultists who worshiped bestial, necrophagic gods — they had actually *been* subhuman, a race of ghouls that once shared this earth with man. At one glance, everything I'd known, all science, all history, had flown into insubstantiality, as a footfall raises a cloud of dust.

The Comte d'Erlette...had he suspected? Known?



The rotten linen, stiff with aged resins, broke apart like plaster. Inside, I found, not the shriveled flesh of a true mummy, but a skeleton picked clean.





After the dimness of the sanctum, the shock of sunlight struck me like a blow. The last thing I saw was the mouth of the Second Sphinx looming over me, jaws wide in a mockery of laughter, as I fainted.

I woke in my tent. The woman must have carried me back to camp. I wouldn't have believed it possible had I not seen her handling Casabien's corpse.

Something was cooking. Meat. She must have made a fire with one of those dead trees....But what had she hunted? We'd seen no trace of game here.

A short time later, she brought me a long stick with gobbets of charred, half-raw, pale meat on it. She held it out to me, insistently. Finally, I took it, but spewed after the first bite. She picked a few of the better-cooked morsels from the stick and made me eat them, despite my revulsion. This time, I kept them down. An unfamiliar vitality flowed through me, hot and strong. I felt a quivering, a tingling, above my heart. It was the amulet, as though it knew what I had eaten and relished it.

The tent flap fell shut when she left. I heard her eating outside. I covered my ears and burrowed into my blanket and finally fell asleep again.

Again, I dreamed that red-and-black dream, smelled that visceral odour, woke with that insistent ache. Only, this time, the smell was stronger when I woke, and I had already loosened my clothes. I groaned and reached helplessly for myself, and then the tent flap moved and she was there, on her knees, facing away from me, her robe pulled up. She presented herself to me like a beast, and like a beast, I succumbed.

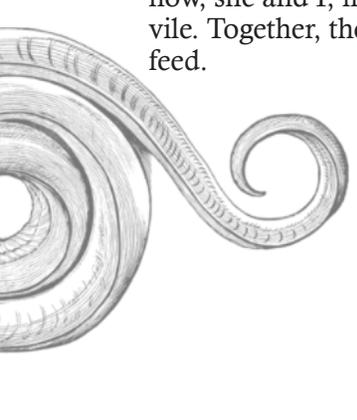
I grasped her lean hips, felt the grinding of her bones. I thought I'd hurt her. I wanted to. I swear I thought of thrusting her away. Instead, I pulled her to me, and heard her low laugh.

Her heat enveloped me. Her smell bloomed around me like some dark, fleshy flower. This was nothing like my perfumed, silken fantasies. She was dirty and rank, and the hem of her ragged robe stirred the dust as she rocked with each of my gasping plunges. No languor, no tenderness, only fevered urgency and repugnance. In my loathing, I beat my fists on her back. Her response was a snarling, convulsive spasm that drained me.

I shoved her away, then, and scrambled, shuddering, across the floor of the tent, muttering, "Go, go!" But she squatted on her haunches and swivelled to face me. Her hands went to the veil; it billowed and began to fall. At that final moment, I might still have fled, past her and out into the desert to whatever fate might befall me, but I sat still as the Sphinx, heavy with foreknowledge. My fate had come to meet me. I didn't faint or even look away from the sight of her slit snout and grinning jaws.



Desert winds tear at the rags of the tent, but the sands have not yet covered the great stone ghou. We den now, she and I, in the temple cave. The change in me is almost complete. I've grown used to meat I once found vile. Together, the meat and the amulet have given me a new life, one that, I now believe, will last for as long as I feed.





Soon, there will be young and they'll have a father. I will never leave them. They'll learn to dig and gnaw and worship in the moonlight, and when they have grown strong enough, we'll follow the trail of graves back to the Nile and then downriver, to the battlefields and charnel houses of the Delta. Others of our kind, if any there be, will join us — or be enjoined, as I was. Beyond the foolish printing presses and measuring chains of Napoleon's new rule, we'll lurk in shadows unilluminated by science, until I find a way to take my family to Paris. Home. An old, old city, with secret places and centuried dead enough to sustain hordes of us, living free.

I dream sometimes of loping up the rue d'Auseil to visit that fat old man again. I want to show him my amulet.

THE END

Rebecca Steffoff lives in the Pacific Northwest, where gambrel roofs are sadly rare but eldritch Craftsman bungalows abound. She has published many nonfiction books, mostly for young readers, including a recent biography of Stephen King and a YA adaptation of Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*. "The Second Sphinx" is her short-fiction debut. She's on Twitter, on Facebook, and at www.steffoff.com on the web.



He walked in silver moonlight. Once, such a night would have filled him with wondrous delight, but on this night he roamed with misery pulsing his heavy heart. The boy he had loved was dead, a victim of self-destruction.

GRAFFITO FLOW

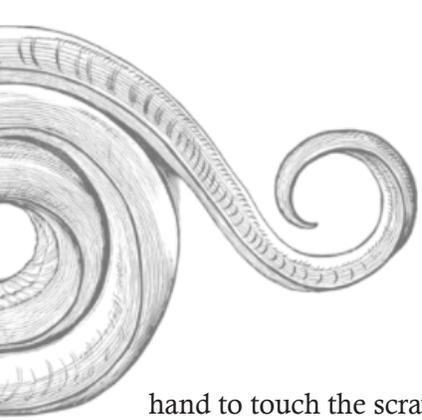
By W.H. Pugmire

Silver moonshine filtered through the mist of dusk. Lifting her eyes to heaven, a blind woman sang to darkness. Autumn wind brushed against her lank hair and moaned softly at chapped red ears. She listened to the sound and whispered an accompaniment as the breeze embraced her like a friend who kisses throat with chilly fondness. Night and wind and invisible moon were her ancient friends; they would not mock or mar as others had done. Moonbeams illuminated the pale patches that had once been eyes; they played on scars etched into flesh of face. Madness tugged her mouth.

A distant sound approached, and music was swept from her lips; she mumbled, listened to heavy footfalls, pressed her lean body into a shadowed crevice of stone and clutched her face with twitching fingers. Ragged nails dug into her face. Streams of scarlet, dark and smooth, trickled down the flesh. The man passed without hesitating. She could sense this unseen mortal, feel him flow by her like some thickness of shadow in the obscurity of her shattered existence. The footsteps faded and were gone. Staggering into cool lunar light, she sucked in air. Ah, how moonlight washed its spectral madness to her withered brain. Cracked lips, discoloured by tiny streams of drying blood, flapped open into wailing song.

He walked in silver moonlight. Once, such a night would have filled him with wondrous delight, but on this night he roamed with misery pulsing his heavy heart. The boy he had loved was dead, a victim of self-destruction. Spasms of guilt and misery shook his flesh and churned his stomach. He shuddered with self-pity. His wide hands flew to his mouth so as to smother the scream that threatened to crack open his foaming mouth as streams of lunar light illumed the tears that stained his eyes. Such a light had played on the dead eyes when he had found the boy's corpse on the floor of their bedroom, a razor near the slit of opened flesh, that black and crimson gash in his beloved's throat. He had howled to such a moon at that hour of tragic misery.

"I must escape you!" he cried out. "You damn me with your dead light!" Shaking with impotent rage, with moist hands clutching at his hair, he fled into the gloom of an alley. Crumbling mortar, ancient brick and soft shadow soothed both mind and soul. He edge his way along that portion of the alley that was not consumed by edacious moonlight. Halfway into the passageway, he stopped and smoothed head and hands against cool brick. From somewhere beyond he could hear the faint sound of a woman singing. Beams of light streamed onto the wall of building opposite him, and his attention was drawn to what looked like an odd pattern of graffiti. Something in the weird shape of the thing drew him to it, and thus he stepped into the chilly celestial light. The figure on the wall had so caught his attention that he had not noticed the bundle of discarded clothing until having stepped upon it. Kneeling, he fingered the damp attire, and then he reached for the shard of shattered wine bottle that lay next to the pile of garments. He held the jagged piece of glass to moonlight and squinted as a splinter of light pierced into his eye. Standing, he examined the glass again, and thought that he could make out a mockery of his damned face reflected thereon. Looking again at the wall of brick, his allowed his free



hand to touch the scrawl of graffiti, the surface of which was warm and soft, coaxing. His fingers tingled. He leaned closer to examine a portion of the queer shape, one that seemed to contain an image of a human face that was blurred disproportionately, its features stretched fantastically.

He pressed the piece of glass against the facial semblance on the wall, tracing its outline. Again, the glass caught moonlight, glinting as did the razor held in a dead boy's hand. His brain ached with cursed memory. Tenderly, he pushed the shard of glass into the back of his hand. Flesh parted.

He looked again at the facial mockery on the wall and raised his wounded hand to where the image seemed to have a mouth. "Drink. Blood is life." Overwhelmed with sudden weeping, he let his body fall against the aged brick. His face pressed against his stain of blood, the taste of which soaked into his mouth, the mouth that tingled and grew hot. He tried to push his face away, but the effort was difficult. When at last he had succeeded, his eyes widened at the sight before him. The shapeless pattern was moving sluggishly in different directions, like some thing newly awakened. It had absorbed his blood. He watched in horror as his hands, still pressed against the image, began to spread with its movement. Those hands flattened. They began to spread, to flow. He gasped for air as pain pounded in his skull to the palpitation of his frantic heart.

Strange mist rose from the flowing shape that crept before him, an emanation that found his gasping mouth. His force of resistance ebbed from him, and once more he fell against the wall. His face, as it smashed against the wall, began to fall apart and spread. His frame of flesh and bone shriveled, consumed by the flowing substance. The shard of glass fell from what had once been fingers, and his clothing dropped and joined the other heap of accoutrement. How numb were his lips. How weird it was to feel one's wretched body twist and spread and fall apart. What ghastly horror gripped the remnant of his brain.

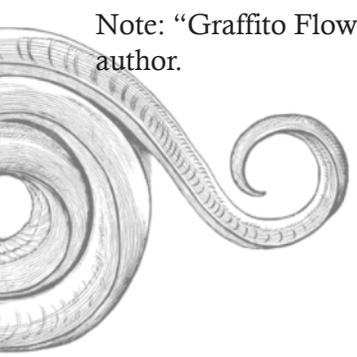
What had been his face turned away from the wall, to moonlight. As he was pulled higher along the surface, he could feel the detestable moon burn into his eyes. There it floated, that symbol of lunacy and romance. It was his final sight.

Somewhere in the distance, a wretch raised her voice in eerie song.

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: "Graffito Flow" first appeared in *Heart Attack* #1, 1991. This version has been completely rewritten by the author.





Imagine the things that live in the darkest depths of the oceans, the things you can only glimpse in nightmares. Now put them in a partially-thawed tomb in a city buried under the Antarctic ice.

WE ARE ALL GHOSTS

By Peter Darbyshire

This is the way the world ends.

Not with a bang but with the silence of the grave.

I don't bother testing the walls of the tomb you've buried me in. I know there's no way out. After all, you built it to contain not only me, but what's inside me. I cannot escape. We cannot escape.

But I must tell you — I'm not the villain you think I am. Not any more than I was the superhero you once thought I was.

I'm just a man. A man with a curse you don't understand. Not yet. But you will comprehend it someday. Not that it will do you any good.

I know what the pipes leading into the tomb are for. I would have done the same thing. But it won't work any better this time than it did for the inhabitants of the Frozen City.

Instead of looking for a way out after I drop into your trap, this tomb, I stand by the coffin and rest my hands on it. Providence's coffin. I suppose I should thank you for that, even though it's empty inside. There's nothing left of her.

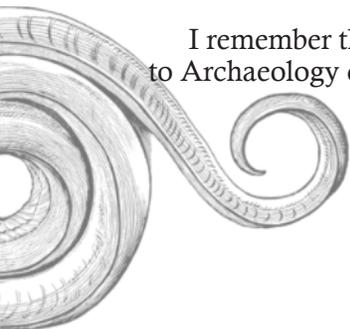
Nothing but the memories.

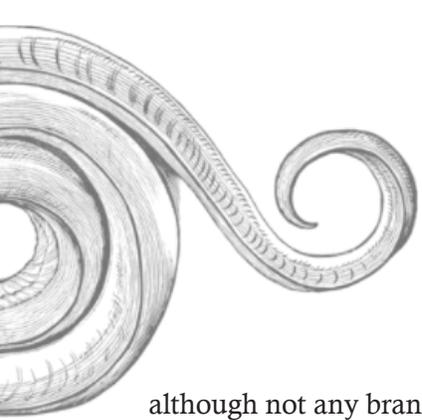


By now, you've probably figured out the stories I told you in the mission debriefings were lies. Maybe you knew it even then, in the interrogation rooms after you flew me back home. How could you not suspect there was something different about me when I was the only one who returned from the Frozen City? When I said I had no memory of what happened to the others, no memory of what happened on the mission at all before waking up on the icy floor of that sunken tomb, in that forgotten city? When I said I didn't feel any different than before?

The truth is — I remember everything.

I remember the afternoon that Smyth was sitting in my office when I returned from teaching my Intro to Archaeology class, even though my office door was still locked. He said he worked for the government,





although not any branch I'd ever heard of because it didn't have a name. He pulled out a phone and showed me the satellite shot of a dark mass buried in ice. I remember the question he asked.

"What does this look like to you?"

I studied the image. A Rorschach blot.

"Bones," I said.

He put the phone away and stood. He looked at the door like he'd already forgotten me.

"The bones of a city," I said. Because, why else would he seek out an archaeologist with a picture like that? He thought the ruins of a civilization were buried down there. Close. It was the ruin of civilization.

Smyth looked at me again, but his expression didn't change.

"You're going to assemble a team," he told me. "No one who knows anyone else on it beforehand. No one who will talk. No one who can't leave their life behind the minute I call. If word of this gets out, I'll never call. And you'll never have your chance to explore this city."

And then he left me there, wondering why he'd chosen me. I wasn't anyone special. I'd done a few digs in Peru and written a few papers on the religious customs of a tribe that had sacrificed themselves to extinction centuries ago. I was a nobody in my field.

I understand now that's why he came for me.

I was expendable.

We were all expendable.



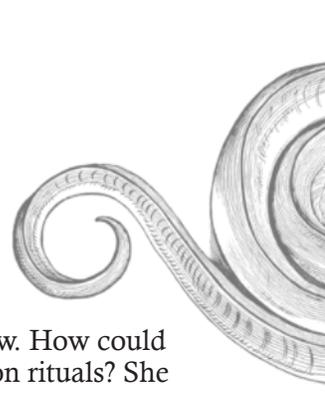
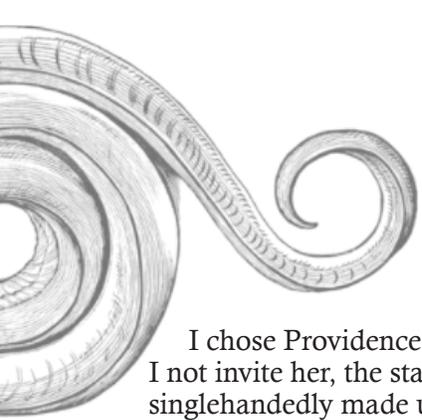
A scream from the pipes breaks the silence. You've opened something. The security gates or airlocks or whatever it is you've put in place to keep me in this tomb. Or rather, to keep what's inside me in this tomb.

I wish you luck.

I open the coffin and look down at the empty space where Providence should be. I think of the last time I saw her.

The time I killed her and doomed us all.





I chose Providence to be on the team, even though Smyth wanted only people I didn't know. How could I not invite her, the star student of the department, thanks to her work on Aztec transformation rituals? She singlehandedly made us rethink everything we knew about their religious sacrifices.

And, of course, we were in love.

I know it's a cliché. The aging professor and the star graduate student. Maybe Providence was young and naive. Maybe she was just using me to get ahead. Maybe she would have left me, after she graduated and secured a job somewhere. But maybe she wouldn't have.

I'll never know.

We had dinner with wine and candles, and I told her what Smyth told me. Then we made love, with more wine and candles. That was the last time we even kissed.

Providence said we had to pretend we didn't know each other. She said we had to treat each other like the Aztecs treated their sacrifices. So, we sat in different parts of the military cargo plane that flew us to Antarctica when Smyth called. We shook hands with everyone else on the team I'd assembled — all strangers to me, I swear, and all nobodies I'd found through their scholarly articles. Providence and I introduced ourselves to each other on the plane like we'd never met before. She was so good at not knowing me that I wondered if she'd been practicing it.

When we reached Antarctica, we all ate together in the cafeteria of the base camp that had been built over the Frozen City and talked about what we'd find when the robots finished digging the hole down through the ice. Some of us thought perhaps another Easter Island, monuments dedicated to a race that wiped itself out. A couple of us wondered aloud if it was perhaps the lost city of Atlantis. Even though we were all academics, none of us was willing to make disparaging remarks about that. We were all gathered there in Antarctica, after all.

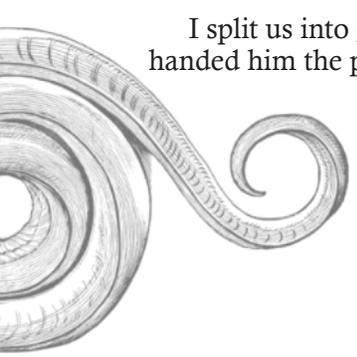
Providence was the only one to voice what we were all secretly thinking. That maybe it was something older than we'd ever dreamed of finding. Something more ancient than Easter Island and even the idea of Atlantis. The city of a forgotten race. That put an end to our speculation and we spent the rest of our wait in silence.

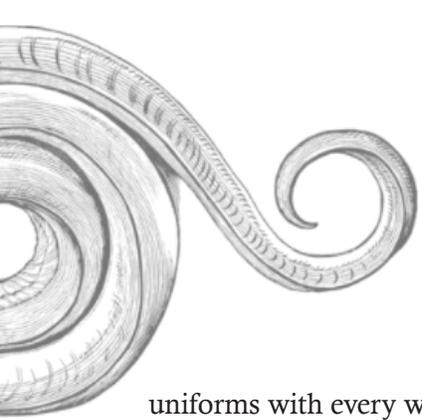
We held our breath in the control room as we watched the first camera feeds of the Frozen City's empty streets, of the strange, melted buildings lit up by the robots' lights.

We huddled in groups and tried to make sense of the glyphs inscribed on every surface, of the undulating pathways paved with some glittering substance we couldn't identify, of the abstract sculptures that looked as if they'd been carved from bone.

We looked for signs of life, for bodies or skeletons, but saw nothing. Whoever or whatever had lived in the city was gone.

I split us into groups for the initial exploration and I teamed up with Providence. Smyth just nodded when I handed him the paperwork outlining the survey plans. He assigned each group a military escort. Men in black





uniforms with every weapon I could imagine — assault rifles, handguns, grenades, knives — but no insignia on their uniforms. For all the good they did.

And down we went into the Frozen City.

I know you've seen the recordings we made with the handhelds. But the films don't capture what it was really like. The stillness in the air. The silence except for our steps and the drips of the ice melting from the buildings. The way the twisting shapes of the buildings made you dizzy if you looked at them too long. The way shadows fell where they shouldn't fall.

I shouldn't have lied. I don't mean to you in those debriefings, when I said I didn't know what happened. I mean I shouldn't have lied about not knowing Providence. Then Smyth wouldn't have let us come. Then Providence would still be alive and I wouldn't be what I am now.

Then maybe the world wouldn't be ending.

But I did lie and here we are, buried together.



There's a moment of silence after the metal sounds. Then the pipes start to shake and rattle in place. I know what's coming down them.

Like that'll stop the ghosts.

I feel them stirring inside me now, restless to get out. The periods between them waking are growing shorter. Soon, they won't sleep at all.

Soon, they will be free.

The water erupts from the pipes and pours into the room. Within seconds, it's up to my ankles. And there's nowhere for it to escape. It'll rise until it reaches the ceiling.

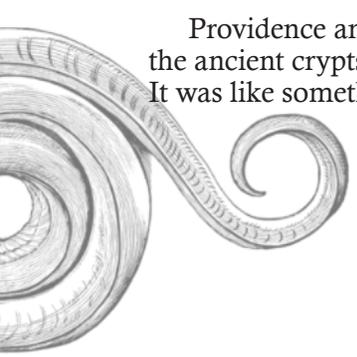
And then you'll turn the temperature down and freeze me, won't you? You'll turn the water to ice.

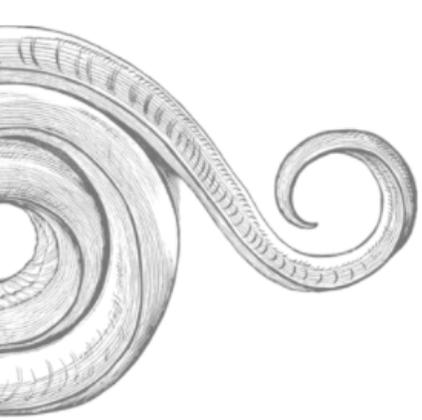
You'll freeze me the way the ghosts had been frozen all those ages.



The thing I didn't tell you in the debriefings was that I was the one who woke the ghosts.

Providence and I found a tomb half-melted out of the ice. A stone building with a stone door. It looked like the ancient crypts you see in cemeteries, once you saw past it not having any right angles, or even straight edges. It was like something fluid that had been fixed in place by the ice. Or maybe just our lights.





The soldiers forced open the door with a crowbar and scanned the inside with their guns, then nodded at us. So, that tells you how much good they were.

The tomb was empty except for the sarcophagus. Which resembled any sarcophagus I'd ever seen as much as the tomb resembled a human tomb. It was a rough oval shape, but there were stone outcroppings here and there in what seemed like random directions. As if it housed filaments, or maybe tentacles. Or who knew what?

Except, of course, we all know what it housed now, thanks to the things that haunt our city. The things that live in the shadows. The things that spread the shadows.

Providence and I decided it was a sarcophagus because that's what we were looking for as archaeologists. And we were right. So, we opened it, as we'd opened so many similar resting places before.

No.

I opened it.

I took the soldiers' crowbar and levered it into a crack in the sarcophagus and popped the lid. It made a sound like the screaming of the pipes when you released the water.

And the screaming went on as the ghosts came out.

How can I explain them to you?

Imagine the things that live in the darkest depths of the oceans, the things you can only glimpse in nightmares. Now put them in a partially-thawed tomb in a city buried under the Antarctic ice. And try to imagine the way they felt, waking after being trapped there for thousands of years.

Maybe I was spared because I was the one who freed them. Maybe because they needed a host. I have no idea. But I wish they hadn't spared me.

Yes, I know what happened. They took the others. They took Providence and the soldiers. They went out into the Frozen City and took everyone. Nothing but screams escaped the shadows.

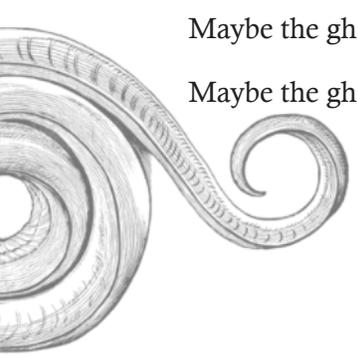
And they hid them in me.

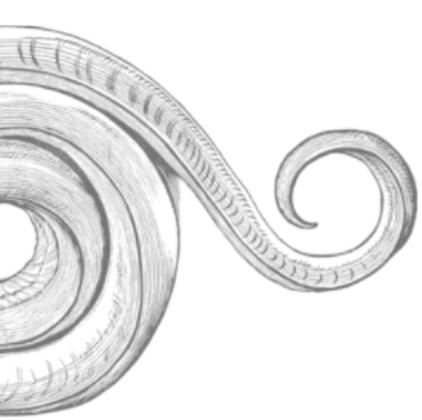
Who knows why? Maybe the ghosts are feeding on them while resting in me, growing stronger.

Maybe the ghosts turned Providence and the others into more ghosts.

Maybe the ghosts saw how much I loved Providence.

Maybe the ghosts saw how I would do anything to free her.





I get into the coffin to stay dry a few minutes longer. I stare up at the blank ceiling overhead. The water splashes around the edges of the coffin.

I know you're trying to do the right thing.

Just like I tried to do the right thing when I came back from the Frozen City.

They sealed the tunnel with ice when I climbed back out of it, alone. They left the robots down there and watched the live feeds, but nothing else happened. The ghosts were gone. They were in me now.

They put me on a plane back home. The plane arrived filled with soldiers and left with me and no one else. Smyth and the others who had stayed in the base while we descended into the city flew out on a different plane. I was dangerous cargo now.

I spent a month in quarantine. They studied me with x-rays and MRI scans and radiation meters and all sorts of things I didn't understand. They didn't know what they were looking for. So of course they didn't find it.

More men named 'Smyth' interviewed me in a conference room with metal walls, deep under the city. They asked the same questions over and over, and recorded the answers on multiple recorders. They wanted to know what had happened to everyone who had disappeared. They wanted to know what had happened to Providence and the soldiers who had been with us.

I told them I didn't remember anything.

I told them I didn't remember anything because I didn't want them to know what I had done to Providence.

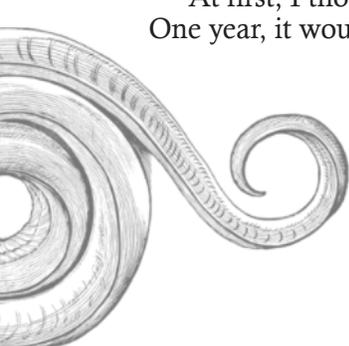
I told them I didn't remember anything because I still didn't understand what had happened.

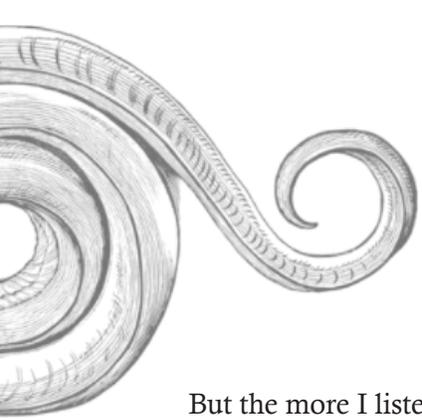
So, I said nothing and they let me go back to my job. The men named 'Smyth' said they'd be in touch.

I didn't have any teaching duties, as I was officially on sabbatical. I'd been expecting to be part of the exploration team of the Frozen City for months, if not years. I had nothing to do. I sat in the quiet of my office and tried to make sense of things.

Instead, I heard the voices.

At first, I thought it was students playing some new instrument outside. They were always experimenting. One year, it would be Japanese drums, the next it would be Mongolian battle horns.





But the more I listened, the more I realized it wasn't music. It was voices. It sounded like chanting but chanting underwater. It took me days of listening to realize the chanting was coming from inside me. It followed me around, in my office, in my home, in the grocery store, fading in and out. No one else showed any signs of hearing it and I worried I had caught some sort of illness from the Frozen City.

I couldn't sleep. The voices drove me into the night. I roamed the streets in my car, wondering what they were trying to tell me. Until I came across the men assaulting the woman.

And that's how I became a superhero.

I saw them dragging her off the street and into the dark parking lot behind a church. Three of them. I jumped out of the car and ran at them without a second thought, because I saw her face.

Providence.

I screamed at them to free her. Only, it wasn't a scream that came out. It was a ghost.

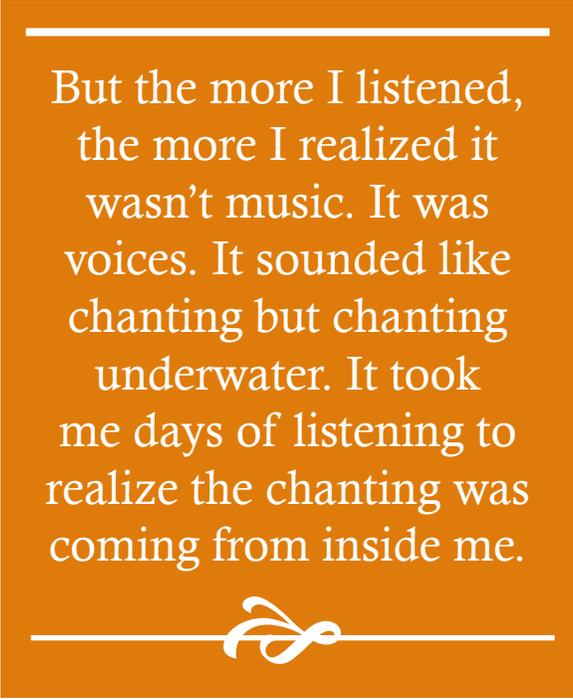
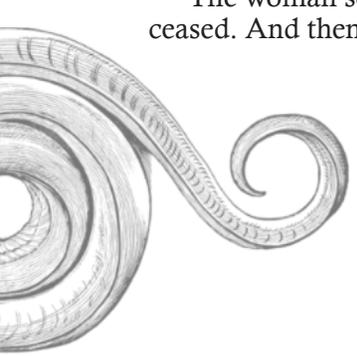
The same chanting voice I'd been hearing for days rose up inside me. "*Fhtagn ssw'nafh!*" I cried. Or, more accurately, I burbled. For now I sounded like I was talking underwater. That may have had something to do with the ghost exiting my mouth.

Even now, after so many of the ghosts have escaped into the world, I still find them hard to describe. This one was like a cross between a jellyfish and the remains of a man. It flopped onto the ground and shook for a moment, and we all stared at it. Me, the other men, the woman who I saw now wasn't Providence at all. I'd never seen her before in my life.

"*Wgahst'nar phl'unk!*" I said. I suddenly felt so empty that I fell to my knees.

And the ghost rose up and threw itself at them. The men screamed as it dragged them into the shadows behind the church. And then the screams turned into other sounds I still don't know how to describe. But I don't have to. You've heard them at night while you cower in your bedrooms.

The woman screamed, too, but it left her alone. She ran off into the night and the sounds in the shadows ceased. And then it was just me and the silence, again.



But the more I listened, the more I realized it wasn't music. It was voices. It sounded like chanting but chanting underwater. It took me days of listening to realize the chanting was coming from inside me.



Only, I wasn't alone. I could feel the ghost in the shadows. Watching me. Waiting. For what, I didn't know at the time. All I thought was that it was over. That whatever had crept into me in the Frozen City had left me now. It wasn't my problem, anymore.

I threw myself back into my car and drove home as fast as I could. I locked myself in my bedroom and kept all the lights on. For the first time in days, I slept.

I woke to a story in the newspaper about what had happened. The woman who wasn't Providence had gone to the police. She said three men she didn't know had grabbed her on the street when she was walking home after her shift at the bar. She said they'd been drinking in the bar all night. They were trying to drag her into an empty parking lot for God knows what, when another man had shown up. She said he yelled at them and something came out of his mouth, something that took the other men into the shadows. She said she thought he was some sort of thing, because she saw tentacles waving from his face, and his hair was floating, like he was in the water. The police cautioned women about walking alone at night and taking drugs.

I went in the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, but I didn't see any tentacles. My hair stayed matted to my head.

I got in the shower to wash away the memories of the night before. And the voices started inside me again.



You know the rest, of course. That woman was just the beginning. There were many more after her. Too many to just pass off as drug hallucinations or mental illness. You didn't know what was going on. Neither did I.

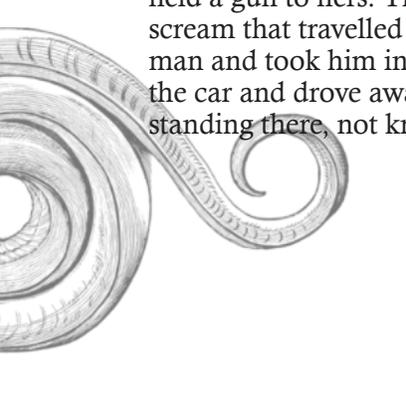
All I knew was that the voices grew inside me with their strange chanting, night after night — “*Urbl'phhar mypr'ttsh urbl'phhar*” — until I couldn't stand it any longer and went out into the dark to escape them.

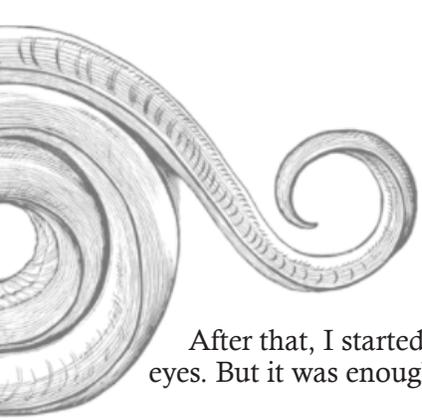
And, every night, they drove me to Providence.

Providence being pulled into a van by two men in the parking lot of a grocery store, until I jumped out of my car and yelled at them. And a thing like a squid with crab legs slipped from my mouth and ran at them, wrapping them up in its tentacles and dragging them into the van. It slammed the doors shut behind it. The woman who wasn't Providence screamed and got into her own car and drove away, leaving the groceries lying on the ground around a trail of water and slime that led from me to the van.

Providence being beaten by a man in a house as I drove past. I stopped and got out of the car and yelled at him. A thing like an eel made of a thousand other eels flew through the glass without breaking it, and the lights inside went out and the screaming began.

Providence being held hostage in a liquor store robbery. The man inside wore a stocking over his head as he held a gun to hers. The police turned to look at me as I hit the brakes on my car and jumped out, screaming. A scream that travelled through the air like a manta ray made of writhing shadows, a darkness that engulfed the man and took him into the back room, where he disappeared forever, just like all the others, as I got back in the car and drove away, leaving the woman who wasn't Providence shrieking with terror in my wake, the cops standing there, not knowing what to do at all.





After that, I started wearing a mask I bought in a gift store. It was really just a white strip that covered my eyes. But it was enough for the media.

“Ghost,” they called me. The first real superhero.



The water is at the edge of the coffin now, so I close the lid. That won't stop it from getting in, of course. But after decades of digging up the dead, I know there's a custom to these things.

I hope you've inscribed the proper warnings on the outside of this tomb. I'd add my own if I could. But, as we all know now, the warnings only work if the people who dig up the tomb can read them.

And who knows who will find us?

“*Pthhh'gatt mlew'hag*,” I say, the words escaping me. The ghosts sense something happening. They sense another entombment. They want to get out.

And I can't stop them.

I've never been able to stop them.

And the truth is, I've never really wanted to stop them.



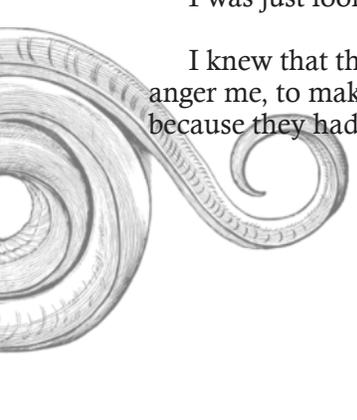
I roamed the night, fighting crime. Releasing the ghosts within me to take the criminals into the shadows. To make more shadows in the corners of the city.

Like any hero, I even had a secret sanctuary. In the days, I visited Providence's grave. Sometimes, I brought her flowers. I sat on the grassy plot for hours at a time, listening to the music inside me. I felt most comfortable there when it rained.

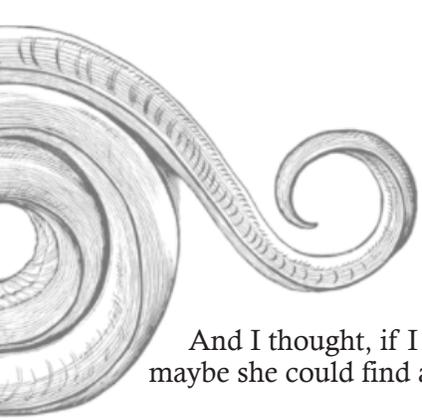
There had been a small funeral service for Providence after I returned from Antarctica. I signed off on the termination paperwork. Cause of death was listed as 'disappearance while on a freelance dig'. Not connected to the university at all, so the department wasn't liable. Everyone came out to the service. I was the only one who wept. Which is probably how someone put things together and started the rumours that brought Smyth back to me.

Yes, I had the secret sanctuary, the tragic past, the mask. All the trappings of a superhero. I wasn't really fighting crime, though. I wasn't really a superhero.

I was just looking for a way to free Providence.



I knew that the women I kept seeing as Providence weren't her. I knew it was just a trick of the ghosts to anger me, to make me release them. I figured the only way they could know about Providence and me was because they had her in there with them, trapped in me, somehow.



And I thought, if I let enough of the ghosts out, maybe she could slip out, too. Maybe they'd free her, or maybe she could find a way to escape. Maybe we could be together, again.

So, I started looking for crimes where maybe none existed.

I drove down to the hooker stroll. I put on my mask and stood near a couple of sex workers on a corner. They looked at me, but I shook my head, so they went back to waving at the passing cars. Every now and then, one would slow, but it always sped up again when the driver saw me.

I only had to wait a few minutes before a man got out of another car parked down the street. He told me to stop harassing his women. I told him I was just keeping an eye out for criminals. He told me to move along before there was a real crime. I told him I was here for the real crime. He lifted his shirt to show me a gun tucked into his pants. I opened my mouth and screamed ghosts. Two of them came out. One took him into an alley; the other went after the women. I didn't care. They were criminals, too, in their own way.

Neither of the ghosts was Providence.

I stopped at a random bar. I put my wallet on the counter and pulled money out of it to pay for drinks. It was stuffed with twenties. I'd gone to the bank, first. I made sure everyone could see my money. I got drunk and then I left. I heard men following me.

I staggered into an alley and fumbled my mask on. When I turned to face them, they had knives in their hands. They dropped them at the sight of my mask and ran. They didn't even make it to the street before the ghosts pulled them deeper into the alley.

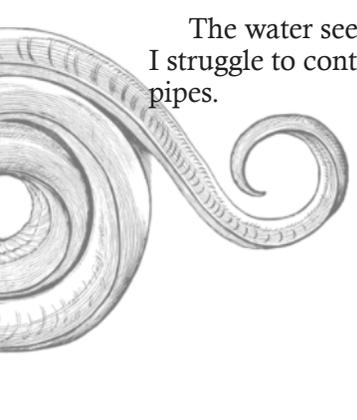
The ghosts weren't Providence.

Sometimes, I didn't even need crime to release the ghosts. I was stopped at a red light when I was rear-ended by a taxi driver. He got out of his car, saying something about the brakes. I got out of mine, screaming, and the ghosts took him and slithered down a manhole with him. The people in the backseat filmed the whole thing and sold the film to the media. Luckily, I still had my mask on from when I'd gone after some street-corner drug dealers. But things changed after that.

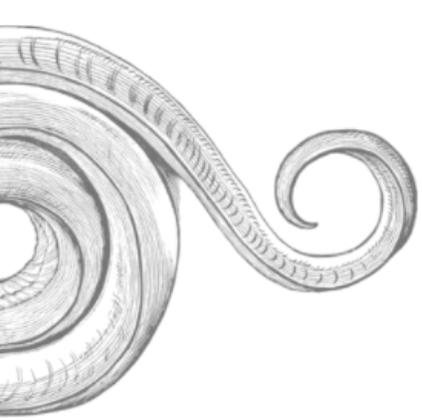
And the ghost wasn't Providence.

The next morning, I woke up to a new headline: Superhero? Or Supervillain? A photo of me, with something unrecognizable emerging from my mouth. Something long and sinewy, and wet and serrated. My eyes were completely black. It was the first time I'd seen myself releasing a ghost.

I didn't recognise the man in the photo.



The water seeps into the coffin, now. Streams of it coming in through the cracks. My whole body shakes as I struggle to contain the ghosts. I can hear more metal sounds, as you do whatever it is you're doing with the pipes.



Releasing the chemicals that will turn the water to ice?

Releasing poison?

Releasing something you've come up with to make the ghosts sleep?

None of it will matter. The ghosts always wake in the end. The ghosts always escape.



You knew it was me when the city started to change, didn't you?

When the buildings began to cast dark shadows that didn't move, no matter the position of the sun.

When the buildings began to twist upon themselves in impossible shapes.

When the symbols started to appear on the sidewalks and on the walls.

When the voices began to chant in the night, from the alleys and the sewers and the abandoned buildings.

When people started to go missing in record numbers.

That's when Smyth came to visit me in my office. I was sitting there, listening to the songs inside me, when he walked in without knocking, even though the door was locked. He looked at the glyphs I'd marked on the walls with a knife and my blood, and then he sat down in the chair where students had once sat.

Where Providence had once sat.

"You need to tell me what's going on," he said.

"*Ssshllaat'in verden'tik*," I said.

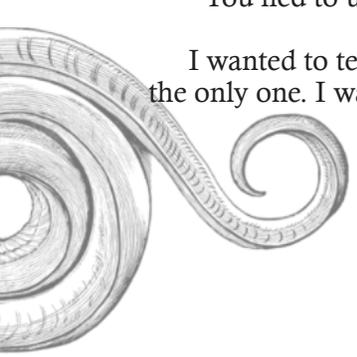
"Tell me what happened in the Frozen City," he said.

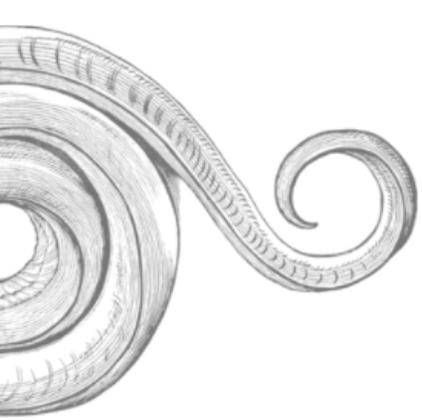
"*Ia ia ia ia*," I said.

He looked at my desk. At the photo of Providence, surrounded by a ring of teeth and bits of bone and fingernails and other things.

"You lied to us," he said, "and you're the only one who came back."

I wanted to tell him I wasn't sure I had come back. I wanted to tell him that, even if I had, I thought I wasn't the only one. I wanted to tell him I thought maybe the others were inside me.





“*Fffhtg’pp*,” I said instead, the voices welling up inside me.

“We’re going to have to do something about this,” he said.

“*Myllrhet’et*,” I laughed.

After he left, I went down the hall to look at myself in the restroom mirror. My eyes were black, and my skin was writhing, flesh-colored worms. The head of the department came into the restroom, but stopped when he saw me.

“Ghost,” he said. “You’re the Ghost.”

So, I unleashed the ghosts on him.

After all, whether I was a superhero or a supervillain, I had to protect my secret identity.

And then I went out into the melting city, in search of Providence.



You know how this story ends.

I stalked the streets of the city. I turned day into night and night into nightmare. The mayor declared a state of emergency and people fled, but no one came to help. No one would come, while I was loose.

The government revealed the secret of the Frozen City and you exchanged your theories about what had happened.

I was a host for some horrible disease that I’d brought back from the Frozen City. Scientists said I should be called “Vector”, or maybe “Carrier”, not “Ghost”.

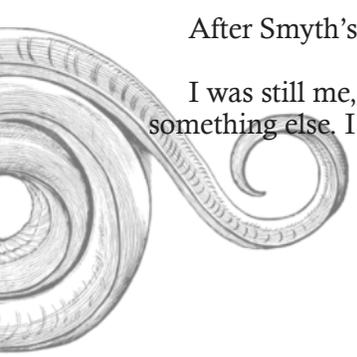
I was a superweapon, released from a lab of the Frozen City, or maybe even developed by our own government, using technology from the Frozen City.

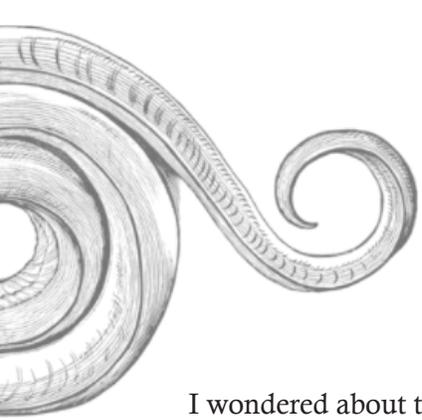
I was an inhabitant of the Frozen City who had switched places with the real me. I’d escaped into the world to wreak havoc and set the stage for an invasion of the rest of my kind.

None of these things was true.

After Smyth’s visit, I knew what was true.

I was still me, the same me who’d gone to the Frozen City with Providence. But I was turning into something else. I was turning into a real ghost, the kind I carried around inside me.





I wondered about them. I wondered if maybe they, too, had once been people like me. I wondered if they'd been changed by the Frozen City.

I wondered if Providence was a ghost like the others, now.

And I wondered if I no longer carried her inside me at all, if I'd already released her into the world, but hadn't realized it.

I kept visiting her empty grave every day. Maybe I was waiting for a sign. Maybe I was waiting for you to finally do something. Which you did when the grave plot opened beneath my feet and I fell into this waiting tomb, and then the ceiling slammed shut again.

But by then, it was too late, wasn't it?



The water rises up around me in the coffin now, lapping at my face.

I wonder how many other Frozen Cities are out there, buried in the ice.

The ghosts inside me cry out. They want to escape their tomb. They want to escape me.

I wonder who will find me in the future. Who will break open my grave and release me?

Now, the water is at my mouth. The ghosts scream.

Providence, I am so sorry.

I open my mouth and the ghosts rush out of me in a flood that cannot be stopped.

THE END

Peter Darbyshire is the author of the novels, *The Warhol Gang* and *Please*, which won Canada's ReLit award for best alternative novel. He can be found online at peterdarbyshire.com, as well as the usual social haunts.



And then, from the ripped cavity in her chest came a float of butterflies. They whispered in some strange language, as they swam through the air, and their wings had patterns on them that looked like unblinking eyes.

AND OUT CAME WORDS OF FIRE

By Paul Jessup

At first, I thought they were burns — like some form of branding. Bruises along her skin, raised under the flesh. She was barely married — I could see her hair was tied in the traditional newlywed knots, which swung in a pendulum arc around her head as she stumbled along the stone steps to the Temple of Saxis.

She danced into the large round room I was in, her eyes glassy and the colour of autumn leaves; her hands clutched something in a package towards her chest. When she saw me, she laughed.

“I have come from a world of fire,” she said to me, “And I have brought with me the insects of war. From a thousand hive worlds they have come, searching to bring us the truth from behind the shadows. The Drinker has found us again and brings us the eyes of dreaming lands.”

Her voice sounded far away, as if it had to crawl through centuries to reach her throat and then her lips. I walked across the room, hesitant, unsure if I could even help her, holding my breath as I walked. She smelled like bad dreams — like a hole in the fabric of the world. Rotten seams of reality unfurled around her and I realized that this was no madness that consumed her.

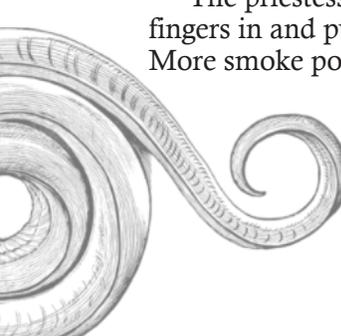
She was delusional, that was certain, but her body was sick. I could see that — in her walk, in her skin. She smelled of sickness, of someone dying. I remembered that smell well — my brothers died from the burning plague three years ago, when it first ran through the city. It’s a smell that sticks with you — drenches your memories with their foul odour.

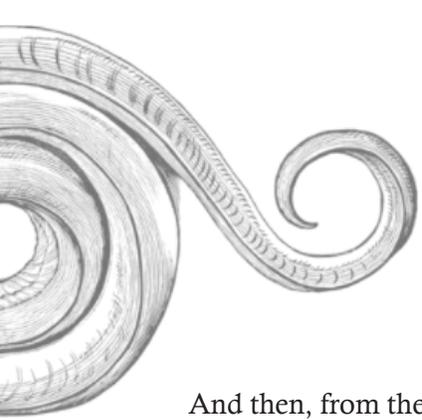
The five priestesses came forward from the back hall, where they were preparing incense, their rough-and-brown bearskin cloaks cocooned around their bodies. They did not notice the reek as they walked, breathing in regularly as they approached her. I felt a strange apprehension in the air — and saw the tendrils of black smoke whipping around the girl’s body like hungry snakes.

“Are you all right?” one of them asked. “You look ill.”

As the priestess spoke, the smoke went into the girl’s mouth, wrapping around her lungs. I could tell by the look in their eyes that they could not see the smoke, could not smell that rot of plague.

The priestesses ran forward as the girl screamed and tore at her chest. She ripped her dress to shreds, dug her fingers in and pulled her the door of her ribs apart, the flesh still clinging to the bone and flapping in the breeze. More smoke poured out of her.





And then, from the ripped cavity in her chest came a float of butterflies. They whispered in some strange language, as they swam through the air, and their wings had patterns on them that looked like unblinking eyes. I felt sick to my stomach and tried not to retch in my hand.

And I tried even harder to not breathe in, the air filled with black smoke. The smoke felt like grains of sand against my skin, rough and grating. I felt the wings of the butterflies beating against my arms, as they flew around, and I tried so hard not to stare at them.

When the smoke cleared, the butterflies were in the dome, building nests out of paper. The priestesses were on the ground. At first, I thought they were dead. I saw their chests rise and fall slowly, and knew that they were alive — but infected, somehow.

I pulled out my needle and a red thread. I grabbed a piece of the reality and I began to stitch, trying to trace the cause of this problem. My threads quivered in my hand, and then spun through me; they rose in the air and resembled the symbols on the dead girl's skin.

I walked over to the girl and looked down at her. Those raised pieces of flesh looked like writing. But they weren't burnt into the skin — they looked as if they had been pushed out from behind the flesh itself. They looked as if they had grown out from the bone upwards. The way a worm looks after it has burrowed under the skin of a dog.

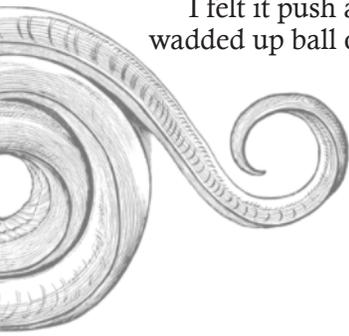
Except that these were raised into letters. Words forming into some strange language I could not fathom. This couldn't be coincidence, I thought, could not be some random growth under the skin. This had been deliberate, the shapes too obvious to be anything else but how I saw them. As language, as symbols pointing to reality.

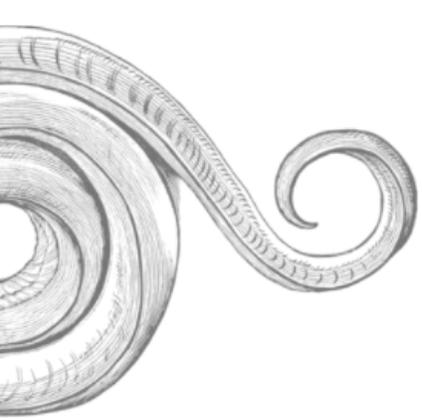
I took my needle out, a rag over my mouth. I breathed very little, since I had no desire to become infected by whatever spirits hung in the air. I knelt beside the girl's body, her eyes black mirrors looking towards the ceiling above me, the gore of her ribs and ripped lungs still fresh.

I pulled up her arm and stared at the skin in front of me. Perhaps I could sew a spell of translating hidden languages? It looked like nothing I had ever seen before. It was not Desert Tongue, nor was it Whisper Speak. I took the needle and poked the skin, digging it underneath the flesh around the letters.

I felt it push against something, something spongy and springy. Like a vegetable of some sort, or perhaps a wadded up ball of fabric. I pulled my needle out, the tip of it stained a greasy orange.

Those raised pieces of flesh looked like writing. But they weren't burnt into the skin — they looked as if they had been pushed out from behind the flesh itself.





I pulled out a small knife I have to cut thread, and used it to peel off the lettered skin. Underneath, I found what looked like a cocoon stuck onto the bone. Inside the transparent casing, I could see the beating wings of a larvae transforming in a rapid pace.

I put my knife away and cleaned off the tip of my needle. I had a feeling that I would soon be caught up in something far more dangerous than I cared for, that I was going to be wrapped up in a deadly mystery that could either destroy me or set me free.

I went over to the bodies of the priestesses and touched their hands with mine. I could feel blood pulsing through their skin and could not see any raised letters forming just yet. *It might not be too late*, I thought. *I still might be able to save them.*

I pulled my needle and blue thread from my pocket and grabbed the fabric of reality. I began to stitch and push needle into the skin of the world. I tried to remove whatever damage had been done to them, tried to suck it out of their bodies by sewing the fabric of reality. It was to no avail. The reality would not mend; their bodies would not heal. They were sick, now, and there was nothing I could do about it.

From above, I heard the beatings of wings. A storm of insects hovering about in the dome, building their thick and brittle nests above me. *I should go and get help*, I thought. *I should do something to save them.*



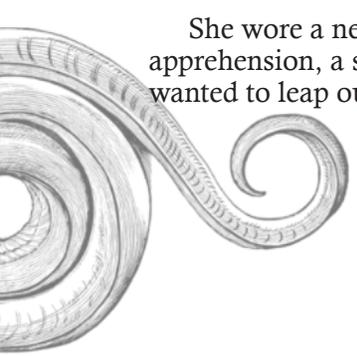
I went and reported the problem to the guards, and they sent for the bonesingers to come and weave the priestesses back to health with their songs. As the days went on, I could not forget that incident, no matter how hard I tried.

It haunted me, stamped on the wax of my memories. At night, I dreamt of black mists, of people tearing themselves apart. I dreamt of shadows wandering around the streets, large groups of men and women, with bodies covered in that strange and dark writing.

I felt somehow that these dreams were premonitions — memories of the future masquerading as my thoughts. Everywhere I went, I searched the crowd for that language rising up under their skin. When I was in the Ta'ndil Quarter, searching the market for fresh fruit, I scanned every hand I came into contact with. When I was in the Gardner's Ghetto, wandering the Mazes of Orrii, I looked at every face and tried to see if there was any sign of the plague.

I was about ready to give up when I saw one of the priestesses. She no longer wore her bearskin cloak, no longer dressed in the royal robes. She wore simple rags that barely covered her ritual tattoos of constellations, her eyes oddly orange and licking the air. She was in an alleyway, clutching a bowl of milk.

She wore a necklace sparkling with a spiral design I had never seen before. It gave me a strange feeling of apprehension, a sort of dark terror I could not place. Her fire eyes met mine and I felt a pull in my blood, as if it wanted to leap out of my body and into the air.





She smelled foul, like that plague. I checked her skin, but the letters were not raised yet. “Would you like some milk?” she asked me.

I shook my head no, unable to speak.

“Fine, then, what do you want?”

I pointed at her necklace, unable to restrain my curiosity. “What does that mean?”

She laughed. “I can show you. I can see you are drawn to the mystery, as well. Come; follow me.”

She stood and started walking towards the darker end of the alleyway. It led to the ruined section of town, an abandoned portion destroyed by a war thirty years ago. I stood and stared, unable to move any further. I wanted to follow — my blood and bone begged me to go and follow her — but my mind felt an apprehension, and caused me to stop and wait.

She turned and saw me standing there.

“Come on,” she said. “Follow me! The others will be so happy to meet you.”

Others? What others? I thought. Where did she want to drag me? “What — what happened to you? I thought...I thought you were a priestess.”

She laughed. I saw the inside of her mouth, saw the yellow stumps of gravestone teeth and the endless pit of her throat. Something fluttered inside her, deep down inside. I saw the shadows of insects, waiting.

“I still am a priestess. Come on; follow me.”

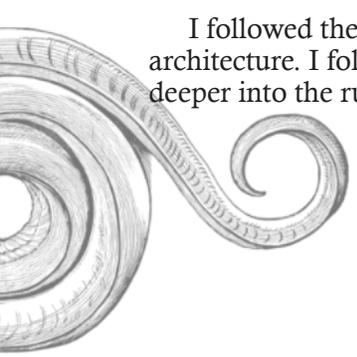
Some may say that I should have stayed put, that I should have sensed the danger in the air. These people do not understand the human condition. It is in our nature to explore the unknown, to ignore death itself, and the screaming instinct of mortality, in order to advance our species in the realm of knowledge.

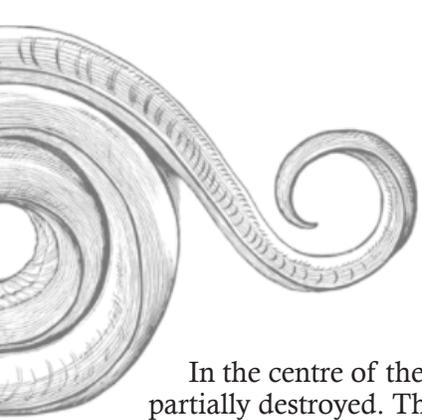
I could not help it. I was drawn to the darkness she showed me, drawn to the mystery around me. I could not sleep if I did not see the plague again, first hand, could not rest until I saw what caused all of this.

I thought my magic could save me. I thought I would be able to stitch up the holes in reality, correct the rending in our fabric world with needle and thread. I didn’t realize then that some holes are too big for thread; some holes refused to be patched up and made whole.



I followed the priestess through gardens of rust and ruin, through overflowing leaves breaking through architecture. I followed through hollowed-out shells still stained from the flames of war. We went deeper and deeper into the ruins. I saw animals scampering about, nature reclaiming what humans had stolen from her.





In the centre of the ruins was an old temple to Saxis. Her statues were defiled with graffiti, her bear head partially destroyed. The top of the temple was covered with creeping vines and the nests of birds. I saw owls sleeping in nooks, waiting for night to go and hunt.

Outside the ruined temple meandered several people, all glassy-eyed and muttering to themselves. All of them dressed in rags. Above them dangled a giant silver spiral, identical to the one the priestess wore around her neck.

In the centre of the spiral suspended an enormous green head of an insect. The head was the size of a horse and was covered in spinning, multifaceted eyes. It stank like death. From its neck dripped a strange, milky-white substance. Beneath it sat a follower who raised a ceramic bowl up and caught the substance as it dripped down.

From inside the temple, I heard a buzzing. Like a beehive. A gigantic beehive. And I could smell the smell of flowers gently covering up the scent of death. It wasn't that plague smell — it was far worse and far stronger. And on the smell came information — encoded in the scents like language.

What I smelled was a text of words. It was a poem, a song of sacrifice and religious ecstasy, and it was hard not to get drunk on the intricate texture of the smells. I held my breath for a moment, trying not to breathe in, not to become infected. I had to breathe eventually, breathe and be washed into the sea of poetic scents.

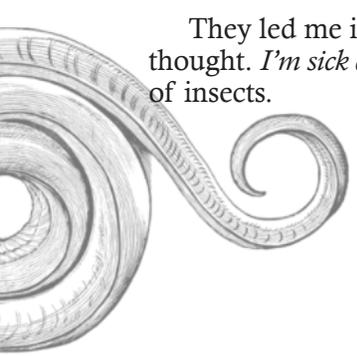
Around me, I felt tears in reality. Rips, seams torn apart and meeting at the crossroads of the temple. Giant, open patches of dream, leaking into this world. The seamstress in me wanted to sew it up, wanted to patch it with the fabric of raw earth and my own skin.

I walked over to a seam, touched the fabric of reality in my hand. Before I could pull out my needle and thread, I felt an overwhelming sense of nausea and dizziness. I could barely stand up, anymore, my head filled with the stories encased in scents, my stomach reeling and ready to empty itself across the ruined steps.

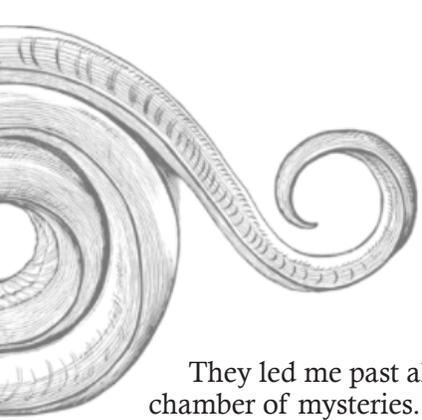
The stories in my mind told of Drak the Drinker, who ingested only the milk of the mother's neck. Or Ci the Insect Lord, who rode the wings of gods and gave birth to the swarming horde of worlds. Of Nax the Eyeless, who dreamed reality inside his ceramic skull. A new pantheon entered my memories, drowning me in the odour of the words.

How could I not believe in it? How could I not see the reality of it? Already, I had been infected, already I had been transformed into a fanatic. The plague had taken me, entered my blood and made me into believer of this odd new religion. Their gods infected me, transformed me, made me into a carrier for its mysteries and beliefs.

I bent over and dry-heaved, the priestess smiling at my humbled body.



They led me inside and disrobed me. The air was disorienting and I felt a fever in my skull. *I'm sick*, I thought. *I'm sick and I'm falling apart*. The walls shimmered around me, the ruins filled with the crawling bodies of insects.



They led me past all of these people, milling around and drinking in the words of the gods. Led me into the chamber of mysteries. A black fog dampened the air, filled with tiny eggs. I could not help myself. I breathed in deep and drank of the mist.

In the centre of the chamber, I saw the body of Nax. He was tall, eight feet tall. His ribs were open and butterflies lay nested inside him, building paper cities in his ribcage, his insides hollowed out.

His face was eyeless, his body naked on an altar. And the scent of him — the scent of him wrote the history of the world on me. It dug into my skin, dug behind my eyes and carved premonitions and ancient rituals. I felt the mysteries of the universe open up to me, my body burning from a fever.

I saw holes tearing into the reality. I could see the shores of dreams in the renderings of the universe. I took out needle and thread with shaking hands and tried to patch them, tried to fill these holes somehow and heal the universe with my sorcery.

They would not heal. I could not stitch them closed. New ones opened every moment. I wheezed and coughed, the thick black mist becoming my only source of air, my hands shaking and my head spinning from the stories that came in my body like a series of scented orgasms made of text.

Nax's mouth opened and out came words of fire.

New holes ripped in the reality around him, his words making gaping wounds in the fabric of the world. My spool was almost empty, my hands worn and twisted into claw shapes. The priestess watched. She watched and waited.

I dropped the needle. I dropped the thread. I burst into tears. There was nothing I could do. Reality was torn; the world was slipping through the cracks. The priestess held me, sang to me. Tried to comfort me in my crisis.

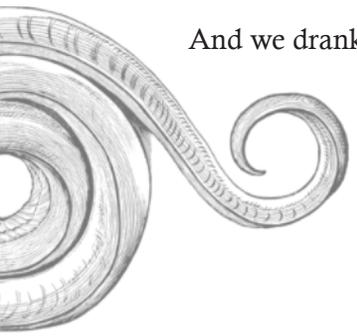


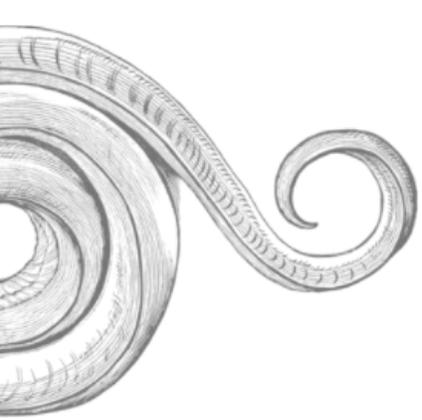
Three days later, I was completely infected by the plague. I felt possessed, the orange light of my blood glimmering under my skin. I learned to read and write the dark, pheromone language, learned to be able to let the words of the gods seep into my scents. I found out that the words that rose under the skin — the words that were starting to rise under my skin — they were holy words.

Words of the sun goddess Saratine. She, the orange beetle who flew through the sky, She who was the beginning of all things. It was she who could reveal to us the figments of our world. Like torchlight in a cave, our reality was shadows. Saratine showed us the light outside the cave, showed us ways to banish the shadows and see the truth of it all.

She infected us, gave us tattoos of scripture and dreams of flight. She impregnated us with the butterfly souls, so that, when the last hours took hold and we shed our flesh bags, we could exist in the real world.

And we drank the milk from the neck of the goddess.





I saw the way to the real world — away from the chains of meat. That is what the girl in the temple had showed us — had given us. She became real when she burst open from the inside — became spirit in flesh. That was her gift to us. This plague. This religion. This truth.

THE END

Paul Jessup. Published in a slew of magazines (in print & online) and a mess of anthologies. Has a short story collection out (*Glass Coffin Girls*) published in the UK by PS Publishing. Has a novella published by Apex Books (*Open Your Eyes*) and a graphic novel published by Chronicle Books. He was also a Recipient of KSU's Virginia Perryman Award for excellence in freshman short story writing in 2000.





So many multiples of three in this space. Three in each triangle. Three angles, one shape. Everything a multiple of one. Try dividing by zero, if you really want to look into the heart of the beast.

CURVATURE OF THE WITCH HOUSE

By Wendy N. Wagner

The crows! The caw, gaw, *gaaaw* all day and into the twilight. As if they know they can stop my work. Lousy devils, snapping their beaks every time I step outside to chase them away. Shuffling on their feet of three claws.

So many multiples of three in this space. Three in each triangle. Three angles, one shape. Everything a multiple of one. Try dividing by zero, if you really want to look into the heart of the beast. Monstrous. Sacred. Ordinary trash birds singing hymns to the Lord Himself. Or Beast Himself. Or maybe just the sea. I can no longer tell.

I plug my ears, cut a circle into two pieces and lay my ruler along the bleeding edge. Find the centre and cut again. Whiz-bang! A radius! Magical length and friend of my friend, Pi. Although, who can really call him “friend”? Who can pin him down; who can make him repeat himself? No, not Pi. Nothing good enough for Pi. Another devil, flapping his wings. Lording over the circles.

I can’t spin my mind around all these maniacal demons and constants. Maybe there are spirits. Maybe Gaw, called “God”, is really real. Maybe I am gaga. Insanity another constant at the edge of the world. Madness just mind divided by zero.

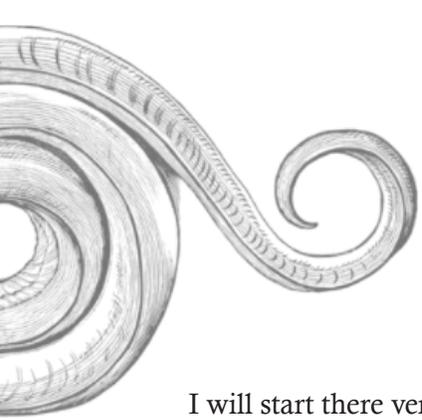
Gaw gaw gaw! The crows outside the window scream on. I lay my ruler across the paper and try to inscribe the arcs and angles as I’ve seen them in the dreams. The Beast shuffling behind them with his feet dripping. Wet. Everything’s wet in that other world. I will never satisfy my thirst, until I open the door written in these monster geometries.

The angles turn inside my brain. There was a witch once who managed it. A lonely witch in this lonely house. I miss my husband. He would scare away the birds and make me forget about God.

Do I fear Him? Do I fear His beastly slouching? I feel no terror for that man-beast-Creator, although, perhaps I should; although, I’ve forgotten the reason why, forgotten which part came first. Creator. Beast. Man-maker. Creator. Beast. Mathematician.

“Mad Mrs. Math.” That’s what the students call me behind my back. They found me once, drawing, drawing, drawing. Cutting circles and pulling them out of true. *There are arcs that can open doors*, she said. The witch said. They locked her up, but she escaped, anyway. Through the doors inside circles.

Bits of circles. Bits of time. I can almost see them line up here, in this place, in this town. There is something in the air. A smell that widens the mind. Here, there have been physicians who learned the secrets of death, students who learned the secrets of geometry. The university is the finest in the land, staffed by professors bolder and braver than academics elsewhere.



I will start there very soon. My doctoral coursework will begin in the fall, the time when my husband joins me with the truck full of our things. He said to call this week a retreat. He said to take the time alone and let my creativity unfurl. He said, *Take time for yourself*. He said, *Eat healthy*. He said, *Do math*.

He said he said he said he said he said.

But the crows call and call and spin my brain out of true, and the numbers pull away, the ruler slips, the circles fall to pieces on the floor, and nothing makes sense. I am so close to seeing it, so close to piercing the layers of dimension and understanding, where they touch in hidden angles. Touch, angle, repose, open.

Shut up, you goddamn crows, shut up shut up SHUT UP!

My hands are trembling. There are feathers everywhere, fluttering over the page. I brush them off and leave stains. Red all over my page. Goddamn those bleeding, bastard, gaga crows. Goddamn them. Covering my geometry.

And yet. There are shapes in the red. Movement that I haven't seen before. A suggestion of an arc beyond the touch of Pi. That's how she found it, of course. Witches know blood, know it as well as any Jesus-hungry Catholic. This is my body and my blood. This is the blood of caw, the blood of gaw, the blood of the Beast. Water soaks through the page beneath the red arc.

There is a smell in the house now, not just the smell of the strangled, mangled crow, but the smell of the ocean, the smell of brine and sea, and the slime of fish scales. My mouth hurts; it is so dry. My hands shake. There is not enough blood in this crow to inscribe the arc.

There is not enough blood inside this crow.

I will hold the brush as long as I can and hope my heart pumps long enough to finish the inscription. God is here with me, but I can only see him if I open the door

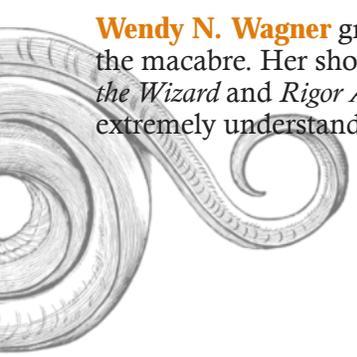
open my heart

as the world grows dark around me, I see the light of another world and, with the sound of a thousand crows on the shore of a sea beyond perspective, I see the Beast and I see God and they are one Gaw of Shining Tentacle, and the tentacle closes around me and I am for one last, grey second

Gaw.

THE END

Wendy N. Wagner grew up across the street from a cemetery, which might explain her interest in the gloomy and the macabre. Her short fiction has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Crossed Genres*, and the anthologies *The Way of the Wizard* and *Rigor Amortis*. She is an Assistant Editor of *Fantasy Magazine*. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her extremely understanding family, and blogs about words and life at <http://operabuffo.blogspot.com>.





Smitty sat with his knees drawn up and rocked in place. Every now and then, he turned to face Melody. Sometimes, Smitty smiled and sometimes, he laughed. Melody hated that laugh. It did not sound like her Smitty. It did not sound like him at all.

WE CAN WATCH THE WHITE DOVES GO

By T.J. McIntyre

The view from the top of the cliff revealed miles of unobstructed Alabama countryside. The river below stretched on and on, a glowing yellow snake lit by the waning sun. It slithered between rolling hills and square plots of farmland. Smitty imagined that if he looked hard enough, he might be able to see where the river met the Gulf of Mexico four hundred miles to the south, but it was only a matter of time before this vision dissolved into night.

Darkness approached from the east. There was a gathering cold, but the three campers did not feel it.

Not yet.

“Whatchya doing over there, bro? Get over here and pass that bottle, Smitty.”

“Haven’t you had enough? It’s still early, you know.”

John stood and wobbled. His face turned red. “Just gimme that damn bottle, shithole!”

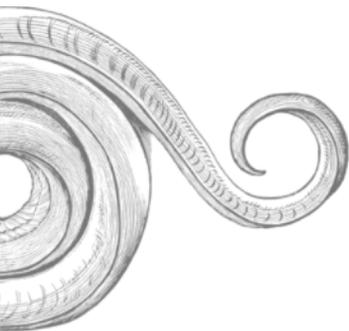
Smitty smiled over to John. He knew by the slur in his voice, and the sudden rise in temper, that his friend had had more than enough, but who was he to judge? He passed him the bottle of Green Label and smirked as John turned the bottle up. Bubbles cascaded upwards in the amber liquid.

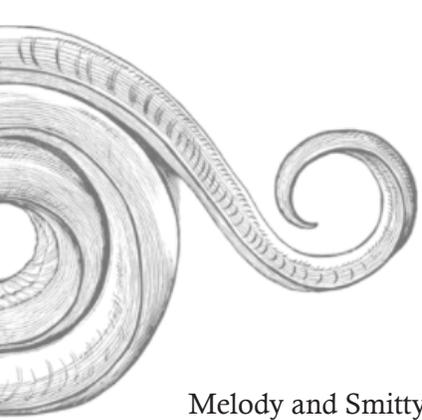
Once he put the bottle down, John’s face turned as green as the label. He retched and leaned over the cliff. There was a wet plop against the rocky floor eighty feet below.

“Eww. Nasty!” Melody shrieked.

Smitty snorted and tumbled with an off-balance gait over to John. Smitty leaned over his friend and placed a hand on John’s shoulder. “S’alright. You’ll be better in no time.”

John ignored him; he had already fallen asleep. He snored softly, his head tilted at an odd angle against a moss-covered rock.





Melody and Smitty held each other. They were wrapped tight in a blue, cigar-shaped sleeping bag in the tent. Their breath erupted from their mouths as puffs of vapour in the cold.

“Fuck! It’s cold! What are we doing out here?”

Smitty smiled at the girl. “We’re camping.”

“But it’s freaking February!”

“What’re you complaining about? I got you your shit, didn’t I? Speaking of...” He pulled out a little plastic bag out of his coat. It contained a few thin joints.

Melody smiled a moment and reached for the bag.

Then she jumped.

Smitty reacted by jumping himself.

“What was that?” Her eyes were wide open. She looked to Smitty.

Smitty let out an uneasy laugh. “Paranoid, already? We ain’t even smoked none of this shit, yet.”

“Shh. I heard something.”

Smitty frowned. He listened. He tried to distinguish the sounds outside the tent. The wind whistled against the cliffs beneath their camp. Branches struck together, stirring the hollow, wooden symphony of the forest.

Smitty listened a moment more. Then he laughed. “Haven’t you ever camped before?”

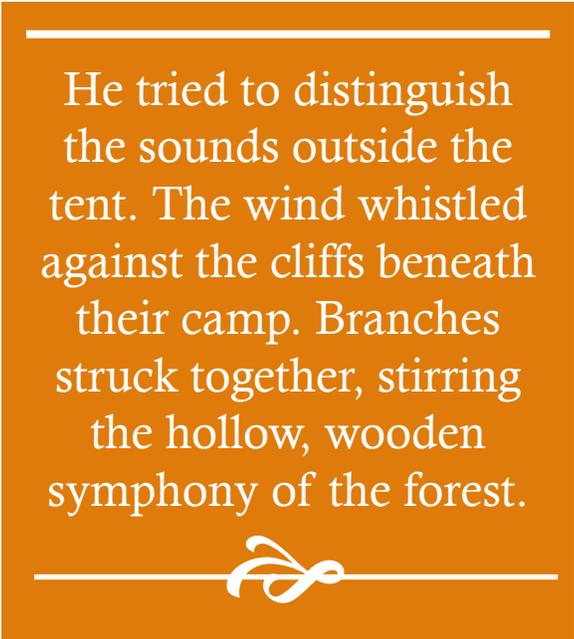
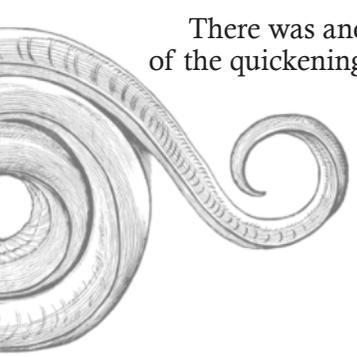
Melody looked at him like she had been hit. “No.”

“It can be kind of spooky, I guess. It used to spook me as a kid.”

“I ain’t spooked! Well, maybe I am a little. But only because I heard something!”

Smitty shook his head and sighed. He listened a little harder.

There was another sound. There was a scraping and a retching. He could just barely hear it over the sound of the quickening breeze.



He tried to distinguish the sounds outside the tent. The wind whistled against the cliffs beneath their camp. Branches struck together, stirring the hollow, wooden symphony of the forest.



“Aww. I hear it. That’s probably just John puking again.”

“It’s kind of cold out there, baby. Maybe you should ask him if he wants to come in here.”

“Damn fool will stink up the place. I don’t wanna smell puke all night.”

She tilted her face away from him.

He leaned towards her for a kiss.

Smitty felt her body harden against his.

“Oh, all right. Sheesh!”



The cold hit Smitty as soon as he stepped outside. A sharp blast of wind howled over the sheer face of the cliff and blew the toboggan off the top of his head. He cursed as his favourite Steelers hat flew down into the depths of the abyss below their camp.

“John!” he yelled over the rushing wind. He could hardly hear his own voice.

The wind blew even harder. Flecks of snow started to fall in all directions.

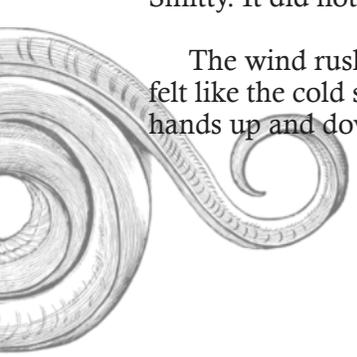
“John!”

Smitty walked towards the place where John had passed out earlier in the evening. What he saw stopped his heart cold.

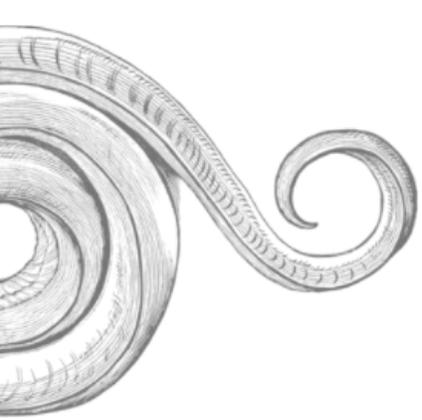


“Smitty! Baby! What’s wrong?” Melody’s eyes were large and glassy in the dim light streaming from the battery-powered lantern. Her face was wet with tears, her scarf stained by moisture. She wondered to herself how long she had been crying. She wondered how long it had been since Smitty had returned to the tent. She wondered how long it might be before he spoke and told her something sensible, something reassuring. She wondered how long it might be before he told her that everything would be okay. Even though he was not answering, she kept asking the same question: “Baby, what’s wrong?”

Smitty sat with his knees drawn up and rocked in place. Every now and then, he turned to face Melody. Sometimes, Smitty smiled and sometimes, he laughed. Melody hated that laugh. It did not sound like her Smitty. It did not sound like him at all.



The wind rushed at them and their shelter vibrated with each sudden gust. The walls flapped. To Melody, it felt like the cold seeped through the very fabric of their tent. She shivered, tucked herself into a ball, and ran her hands up and down her arms in an effort to smooth out chill bumps.



Smitty snored next to her. She pushed herself up against him in a desperate search for warmth. Her bladder hurt; she needed to relieve herself, but did not dare step outside the tent. Not until Smitty spoke. Not until he told her everything was okay. She had looked outside the tent only once and found a dizzying storm of endless white.

She started to fall asleep.

As her thoughts drifted, she grew angry about the snow. It seemed unfair that it was snowing now on a three-day weekend. Why did it never snow when there was school the next day? That way, they would at least get a day off out of it. As her thoughts danced into sleep, she wondered about John. She knew he should be inside the tent. It could not be good for him to be exposed in the cold.

Melody jumped as Smitty sat up next to her. He opened his eyes and pointed at something beyond the door of their tent.

“Our lives are ended and their dream begun. They came and we went. All of us crowd together as the water laps away the shore. We freeze unto death. They will dance on our frozen bones and rejoice.”

“What? What did you say, baby?” Melody shook him, but it was too late. He had grown silent. “What was that?” Her voice rose to a shriek. “Smitty?”

Smitty had already lain back down. He no longer snored.

Melody put her arms around her boyfriend. He no longer moved. She put her head on his chest, listened to the silence there, and cried herself into an exhausted and restless sleep.

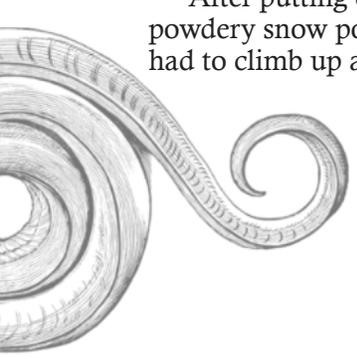
She dreamed she was at the beach under sunny skies.

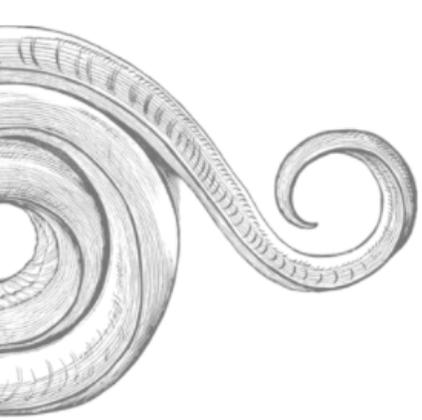


Morning rose. A muted cool glow of white lit the tent.

Melody awoke with her arms still around Smitty. He no longer offered any warmth. His body was cool and stiff to the touch. His skin felt waxy and wrong. Melody disentangled herself from him and shuddered, still feeling the ghost of his unnatural touch. She shivered and worked Smitty’s body out of his heavy coat. He didn’t need it, anymore.

After putting on the coat, she fumbled with the zipper on the door of the tent. Opening it, a wave of powdery snow poured in. A cold wind cut down the small opening that the miniature avalanche created. She had to climb up a foot or two through snow just to reach the surface.





She stood outside and looked around at the changed landscape and shivered.

Water lapped against what had been a cliff the night before but was now the shore of an endless sea. Icebergs floated in the distance.

She heard something from the tent behind her. Smitty was shaking violently.

She ducked back into the tent. “Smitty? Baby? You’re alive!” She knew it could not be true, yet the sight stirred a small flame of hope. This was quickly extinguished.

She heard cracking coming from Smitty’s body. Something moved beneath his skin. A fleshy, jointed appendage sprang up from his abdomen. Then another. Then another. The appendages trailed blood and gore.

She knew she should run, but stood there transfixed. Finally, a small face emerged. It was Smitty’s face but in miniature, as if carved by the hands of an amateur sculpture who worked with marbled meat as a medium.

The thing that looked kind of like Smitty stared at Melody with beady black stones which imitated eyes. They seemed to glow from inside. There was a ticking noise as an inner darkness in those eyes moved back and forth, like the lens of a zooming camera.

The creature that looked kind of like Smitty opened its little, misshapen mouth. There were no teeth. There were no gums. Instead of a tongue, a small blue appendage appeared. It stretched out like an endless worm and pulsed its segmented form towards Melody.

She turned and ran outside into the cold. She knocked back a small avalanche of snow behind her as she left the little hand-dug tunnel behind and hoped it might slow down the creature which had taken over her tent.

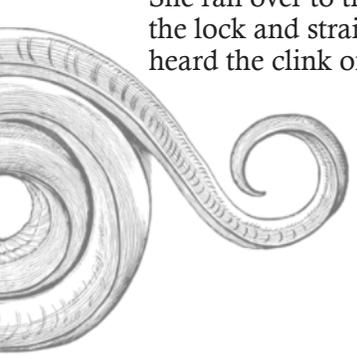
She thought about how she had held Smitty’s body throughout the previous night and grew sick. She understood that the thing had been inside of him the whole time. All that had separated her from it was a thin membrane of human skin.

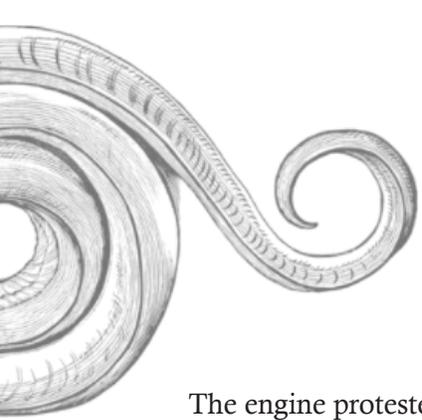
She squinted because of the blinding whiteness of snow all around her and noted the newly formed ocean in front of her. She realized she had no real options.

Then she stuck her hands in her pocket. Keys jingled.

“Ah hah!”

She ran towards the truck. Where it had stood the afternoon before was now just a large mound of snow. She ran over to the mound and swept the snow away from the side to reveal the door. She plunged the key into the lock and strained, praying that the key would not break off in the frozen metal. She sighed relief when she heard the clink of the locking mechanism. She opened the door and fell inside the cab.





The engine protested a few times, but eventually cranked. Melody reached over to the glove box and was pleasantly surprised to find a pair of thick leather gloves. She put these on and stepped back outside to wipe off as much snow from the windows as possible.

Once the windows were mostly clear, she sat back down in the cab and turned the heat and defrost up to their highest setting. She turned on the radio. Smitty's favourite Led Zeppelin disk blared from the speakers. Startled, she reached reflexively to the volume knob and turned the music down. She hit the button for the radio. She worked the digital display from station to station. All she heard was static.



Melody turned off the truck. It was still warm inside. She knew she had to conserve fuel, so she only left the engine on long enough to keep her warm.

She looked back towards their camp. She watched the shoreline that now lapped against what had once been a cliff top looking out over rolling hills and farms. She thought she might cry, but there were no tears left. Instead, she pounded on the steering wheel with her gloved hands. She released a violent torrent of curses from her mouth and screamed.

Something knocked against the window. She heard it crack. She turned her head and found herself face to face with the thing that kind of looked like Smitty. She heard another crack on the windshield and looked up to see that the thing that kind of looked like Smitty had a friend: a thing that looked kind of like John.

She screamed as the pair of creatures jumped up and down against the glass on fleshy spider legs.

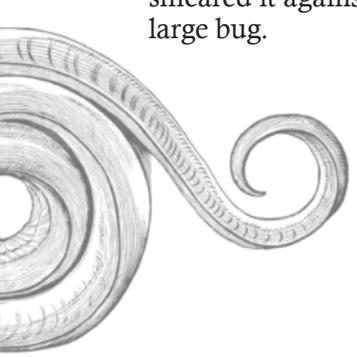
As the thing that looked kind of like John broke through the front windshield, she remembered the hunting rifle on the gun rack behind her. She reached backwards and grabbed Smitty's dad's Remington. She cocked the rifle and pointed it forward. The thing that kind of looked like John exploded into a starburst of blue and purple gore. She cocked the gun again and aimed it at the thing that kind of looked kind of like Smitty.

She pulled the trigger.

There was a click.

The gun only held one round.

She moaned as the thing that kind of looked like Smitty broke through the glass and leaped towards her. She swung the gun in front of her and hit the creature away. It fell back against the passenger side door. It leaped back to its feet and, as it bunched its legs beneath it to jump at her again, she pounded it with the butt of the rifle. She pushed down against the creature until she heard the thing that looked kind of like Smitty pop. She smeared it against the passenger seat. Spindly legs twitched in the air. It looked like a squashed bug. A very large bug.





“Got ya!” Melody began to laugh. “You can’t get me! Na-na-na-na-na-na!” She stuck her tongue out at the thing that had once looked like Smitty.



Melody tried to drive down the hill, back down the dirt road that led to the city below their camp. She did not drive far before she realized there was nowhere to go. The mountain had become an island. The ocean stretched on in all directions around her. The tops of trees stuck up above the surface of the water and danced with the surf.

She placed the truck in park. She reached into her coat and found Smitty’s plastic bag. She lit a thin joint with the truck’s lighter, put the radio back on, turned up “Houses of the Holy”, and looked out towards the newly formed shoreline. She watched icebergs float by. It began to snow again. Flakes drifted into the cab. She took in a deep breath of smoke and held it in. She looked out to the new world beyond her shattered window and exhaled.

There was movement on the icebergs. Things crawled. They had many legs and wore the faces of men.

THE END

T.J. McIntyre writes from a busy household in rural Alabama. His poems and short stories have been featured in numerous publications, including recent appearances in *Moon Milk Review*, *M-Brane SF*, *The Red Penny Papers*, and *Tales of the Talisman*. His debut poetry collection, *Isotropes: A Collection of Speculative Haibun*, was released in 2010 by Philistine Press. In addition to writing poetry and short fiction, he writes a monthly column for the *Apex Books Blog*, regularly contributes reviews for *Skull Salad Reviews*, and works as an editorial assistant for *Fantasy Magazine*.

OUR COVER ARTIST

Andrea Bonazzi is an Italian lover of all things Lovecraftian, who has created many elaborate props and sculptures inspired by Mythos creatures. He blogs regularly and contributes to *Weirdletter* on all matters of horror and the fantastic. Find him at www.in-tenebris-scriptus.blogspot.com/



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