

Issue 9 | February 2012

# INNSMOUTH

MAGAZINE

FICTION BY |

**Fritz Bogott**

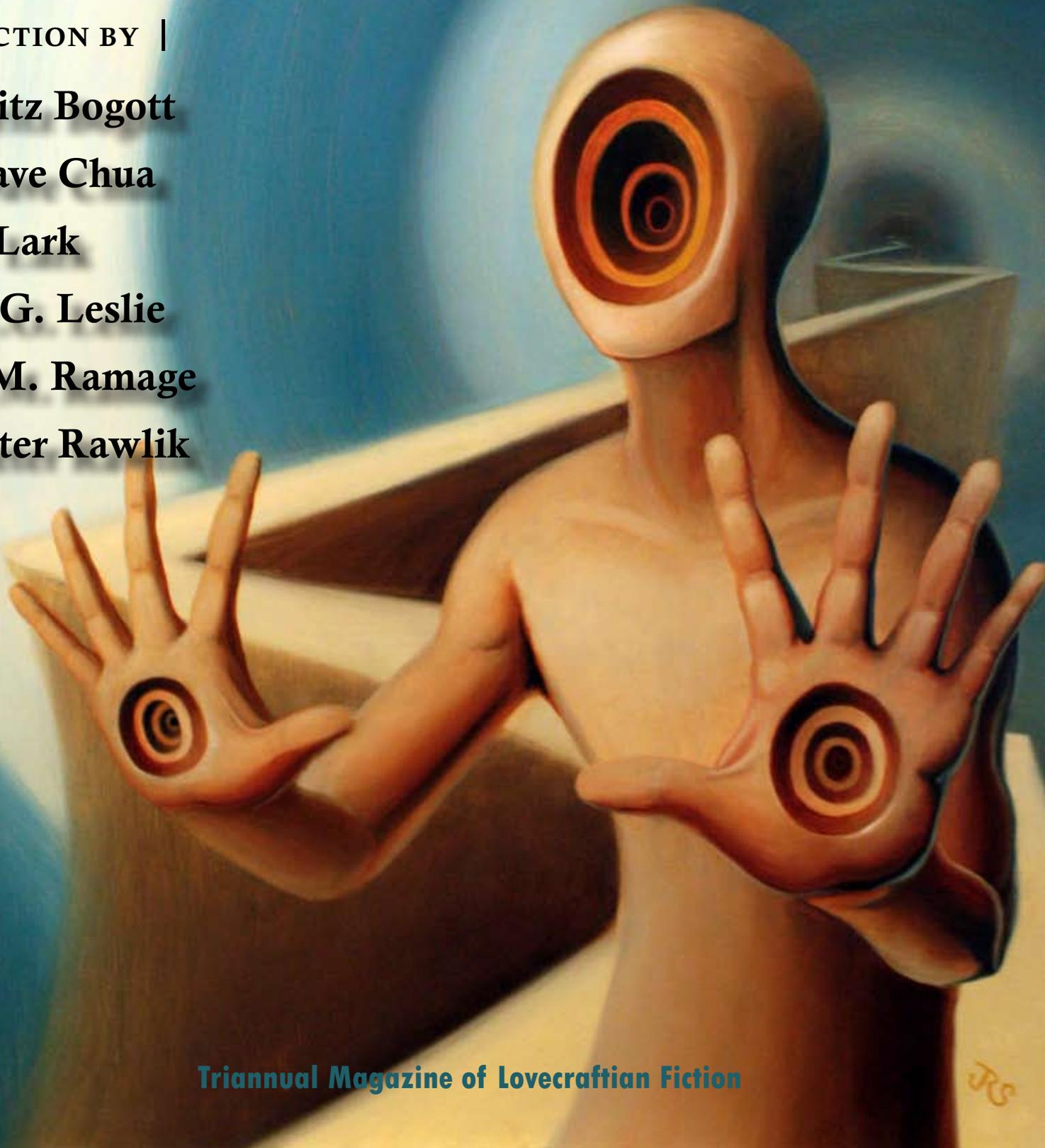
**Dave Chua**

**L Lark**

**C.G. Leslie**

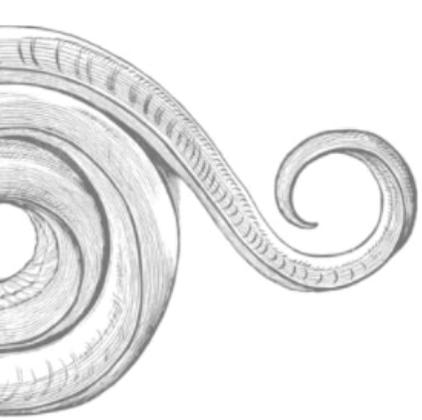
**J.M. Ramage**

**Peter Rawlik**



Triannual Magazine of Lovecraftian Fiction

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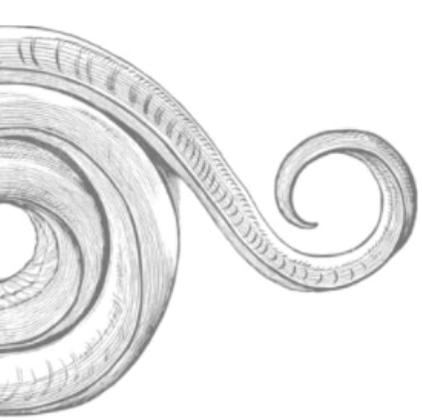
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**Cover art:** J. Slattum

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## EDITORIAL

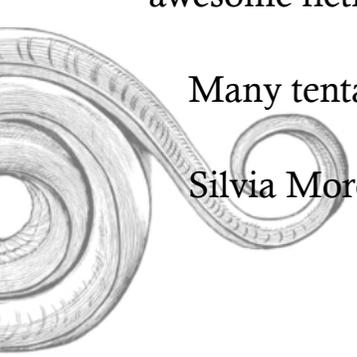
Welcome to another issue of *Innsmouth Magazine*, which, I'm glad to remind you, can now be purchased via Amazon or Smashwords for your e-reader. It's also our fundraiser month, so if you can spare a dollar, now's the time to do so!

With that self-publicity out of the way, let's focus on the stories. We've got six of them, this time. There's a bit of classic Lovecraft with "The Grey Cairns", which is set in a shadowy, 19th-century Scotland. "The Wouri Horror" functions almost as its complete opposite, taking place in near-future Africa with a dash of sci-fi. "Five Houses on the Shore" also takes place in Africa, though it's a very different Africa from the one envisioned by "Wouri". "The Divers" moves the action to Singapore, where pearl divers discover the secrets hiding beneath the waves. "Full Moon" uses an abandoned observatory near Slovakia as a creepy backdrop for some even-creepier happenings. Finally, "A Man of Letters" provides us with the ultimate fiction review.

Last but not least, cover artwork for this issue comes courtesy of Portland artist J. Slattum, who specialises in surreal imagery.

*Innsmouth Magazine* hits the Internet three times a year — in February, June and October. However, you can always browse through our archives and re-read some awesome fiction until we return in the summer.

Many tentacles,



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



What strange, pagan places these are. Johnson took measurements with a compass and chain, and I assisted him, but my eyes were constantly drawn to the structures, which seem to hold some kind of magnetic attraction.

## THE GREY CAIRNS

By C. G. Leslie

**Monday, 3rd August 1846**

Dearest Elizabeth,

I think of you always. I felt it important to record my thoughts if only to explain in my own mind the perils we seem destined to suffer on this quest. Of course, Dr. Johnson makes the same promises he brought to our house: promises of treasure, of the pagan gold, of riches which will finally allow me to give you the life you truly deserve. At the moment, that treasure seems a lifetime away, still buried in the ancient cairns of the Scottish highlands, but, each day, we get closer.

We have travelled for days, although it feels more like weeks, through this God-forsaken country. Our journey, which started well enough in a fine carriage in Edinburgh, has since been reduced to, first, an old cart and now, a pair of roughshod Highland ponies. These animals look almost as miserable as the land we are traveling through. A land of brown, wind-blasted heaths and seemingly-constant rain that serves to further slow our journey through these deserted bogs. On occasion, we have taken shelter in the vast forests that skirt the edge of the bogs, but even here, travel is made difficult by way of fallen limbs and the twisted trunks of the ancient Pine trees. These forests contain the further threat of wild animals, wolves and such, dangerous animals best avoided, according to our guide.

We have met few people in these wild lands, but those we have seen have been of the most pathetic and surly demeanour. Perhaps we will find a friendlier type as we venture further north. Our guide informs us that tomorrow, we will cross the last of the Highland mountains and reach the vast plains of Caithness. The name translates as the "Land of the Cat" and is our ultimate destination on this quest. It is in that place that our treasure awaits, the home of the cairns.

**Tuesday, 4th August 1846**

Johnson worries me today. He has asked me to stay close to him and the guide, a surly Highlander called "Mackenzie", at all times. It does not appear to be the wild beasts of this land that concern him, rather, the increasingly wild appearance of the human inhabitants.

Earlier we passed what could generously be described as a settlement, but really was nothing more than



a collection of stone and earthen walls with rough thatched roofs that seemed to be scattered in a random fashion, built without particular plan or purpose.

These dwellings are known as “black houses”, deriving that colour from the peaty sods that are used to construct them. The occupants also seem to have acquired a similarly black-stained appearance, tainted with the grime of the place. Presumably, the peat from the fires has permanently stained their rough skin. Indeed, often, only the whites of their eyes showed any life as we passed. Often, they would line the tracks that ran past the dwellings as if begging, but they made no sound or gesture, just stared. Mothers appeared to be ancient crones, who pushed their bedraggled children behind them as we passed, glaring at us with vacant expressions from low doorways.

Only one ventured to speak, an even-older woman, with wispy white hair covering her dark, deeply-fissured face. She conversed with Mackenzie, who told her of the purpose of our journey. What followed was an angry exchange, a grumbled collection of words in the Gaelic language, and then she spat at Mackenzie, who pushed her away, leaving her sprawling on the ground. The others gasped and rushed to help her. For a moment, I thought we would be attacked, but the old woman shouted out again and then laughed; the others only continued to stare. Our guide would not initially reveal the meaning of the old woman’s words, but when pressed, he told us that it was a curse, something along the lines of: “Only dark will the travellers see, if golden light they seek.” It was after this that Johnson issued his warning and I started to worry just how much these local folks might be at odds with our search.

As we travelled on, I quizzed Mackenzie on the matter. He insisted that the locals are deluded into believing the Cairns are the home to some pagan elder gods and can act as portals to underworld cities where these gods live. Dr. Johnson was quick to dismiss this nonsense, insisting that this was merely a ploy to keep the treasure secret and hidden for themselves.

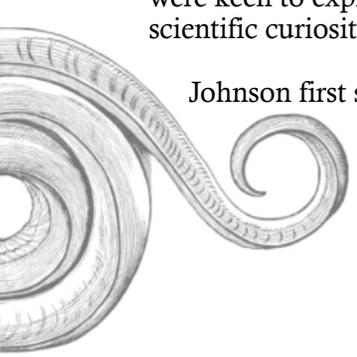
Huddled on the back of this grey pony, with further rain falling from the darkening skies, I can only hope he is right, but this place has an ominous air. The more time we spend here, the more unwelcome I feel.

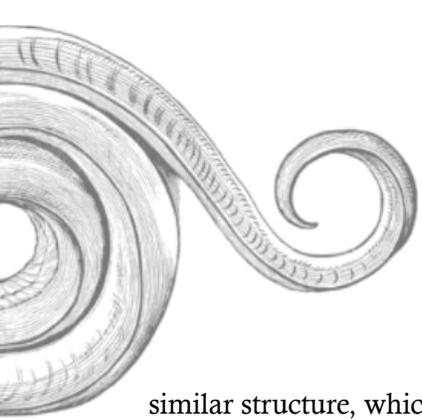
### **Wednesday, 5th August 1846**

Today, we reached the first of the cairns. What strange, pagan places these are. Johnson took measurements with a compass and chain, and I assisted him, but my eyes were constantly drawn to the structures, which seem to hold some kind of magnetic attraction. Really, they are nothing more than a roughly circular collection of sizable boulders stacked into a vague dome shape. Grey and foreboding, the stones are covered in lichens and moss so that they have taken on the same hue as the surrounding landscape, dull-grey-and-green.

To the West of the mound is a projecting tunnel-like structure which Johnson declared was the entrance. We were keen to explore the inner chamber, our months of planning aimed at achieving this goal, partly fuelled by scientific curiosity but also by the thought of what riches may lie within.

Johnson first set upon this quest after some fellow explorers unearthed a golden treasure trove from within a





similar structure, which was the resting place of some great and noble chieftain, and his goods. That was from a much smaller, Lowland cairn. These Caithness Cairns are among the largest known, yet remain unexplored. Their inaccessibility provides some protection, but Johnson was determined to get here first and, after I had been told of the potential rewards, so was I.

Unfortunately, the entrance to this cairn was thoroughly blocked. It appeared the tunnel has collapsed and it would take a team of men many days to excavate it. Johnson vowed to return here at a later date, but was happy to move on, knowing even-larger cairns await. The lure of exploring these other structures, the fabled Grey Cairns of East Caithness, gave us hope. We feel much closer now. We have not travelled all this way to be defeated by rock and earth. Johnson declared we should move on. Tomorrow, we head for the Grey Cairns.

#### **Thursday, 6th August, 1846**

Today, we saw the grey swell of the North Sea through the occasional gaps in the mist. Surely, that means we have travelled as far north as this land will allow us.

We have travelled into a barren, wasted place. The wind howls across the treeless landscape, pushing the rain horizontally before it. It bites and stings as it hammers and chisels at our exposed faces, freezing the skin where it lands.

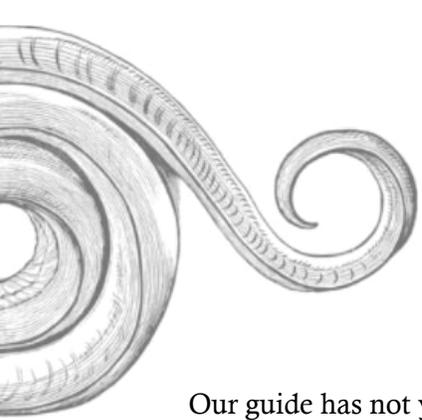
#### **Friday, 7th August, 1846**

We reached the Grey Cairns today, but have yet to explore them. On setting up camp, we discovered that someone has been trying to sabotage our efforts. Much of our equipment is damaged and neither I nor Johnson can explain this. We have kept a constant watch on our things. Only ourselves and Mackenzie have been near them. Our money is untouched, but many of our vital supplies and delicate pieces of equipment are damaged beyond repair. It is our food which is of most concern, Much of it appears to be rotten today, yet it was fresh yesterday.

Johnson flew into a rage when he saw his precious surveying instruments destroyed. He demanded that Mackenzie travel to the nearest settlement and obtain new supplies of food. We will have to manage without the equipment, although it may jeopardise our rigorous scientific examinations. We are to wait here and make a start on the excavation with the few tools we have left. I must admit I will be happy to get this over with. I am becoming increasingly unsettled; things in this place just do not seem right. I cannot rationalise this fear, but this primeval landscape seems to provoke primeval feelings within me. It is clear we are not welcome in this place.



#### **Saturday, 8th August 1846**



Our guide has not yet returned and we now fear he may never be back. The rogue is probably glad to be away. Johnson insisted on continuing the excavation today, but this morning, an even-stranger occurrence took place.

Our camp is in a slight hollow separated from the cairns by a small stream. The cairns, being on a slight rise, allow a view of the entire surrounding area.

It was with some surprise, then, that on arrival at the cairns, I happened to glance back at our meagre camp, only to see an old woman bent over the campfire. A rough, brown plaid covered her head and shoulders, but she appeared to be barefoot.

I called across to the camp, attracting Johnson's attention, but gaining no acknowledgement from the old woman. We both rushed back across the stream. It was only a short distance, but on arrival, we found the camp empty. Tents, ponies and supplies were untouched, but the remains of our campfire were covered in some sort of dark liquid which, on closer inspection, appeared to be blood. Whether human or animal, one could not tell. The old woman had vanished.

This land is so flat and barren that we can see for miles in all directions and yet, there was no trace of our uninvited guest. Only the congealing blood confirmed that we had indeed witnessed this strange event.

### **Sunday, 9th August 1846**

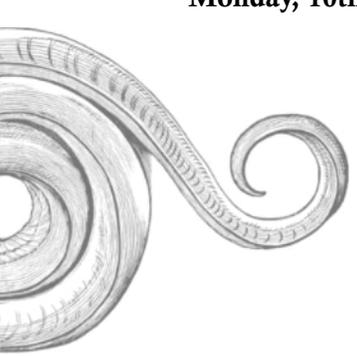
The guide is surely not coming back, of that I am certain, although Johnson maintains hope. Whether by accident or design, his disappearance is unsettling, not least because we still require someone to show us the way out of this place and our remaining food supplies are almost finished.

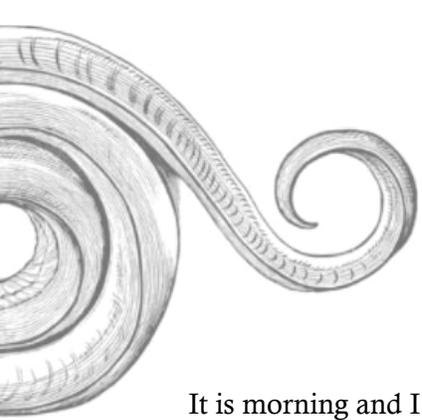
I have tried to persuade Johnson that we should abandon this venture, but he will have none of it. He thinks we will gain access to this new cairn quickly. It appears to be intact. Only the slabs protecting the entrance need to be removed.



We have been working throughout the day with mallet and chisel, loosening the entrance slabs. I feel sure that we will break through in the morning. We cannot work through the night, as our supply of fuel for the lanterns has been lost. We face an unsettling night in the dark of this seemingly haunted place.

### **Monday, 10th August 1846**





It is morning and I have not slept. Throughout the night, our camp was once again invaded by unknown intruders. I first awoke to the sounds of our supplies being thrown against the tent, but when I rushed outside, the only person there was Johnson. He had heard the same sounds. No trace of an intruder could be found. This pattern was repeated throughout the evening and sleep was out of the question. We resorted to sharing a tent, glad of each other's company in the ominous darkness, separated from the invisible intruders only by a thin piece of burlap.

I hope today is our last in this hellish place. If we can just release the final stone and gain the treasure, we can happily leave it to the devils who built it.



Johnson and I are both still in shock, but I felt I had to record the events of this afternoon as a written testimony, should anything happen to us and should we not return. After our sleepless night, we rushed through our sparse rations, in order to get to the cairn quickly and on with our task.

Yesterday, we had loosened all the stones, leaving just a single giant slab of coarse, grey rock barring the doorway to the entrance. We both pulled and heaved at this monstrous rock until, eventually, it fell forward and landed with an enormous crash at our feet. A great rushing sound accompanied this as air entered the chamber, but we were both left stunned by what was behind the giant slab. There, within the previously sealed entrance, sat the detached head of Mackenzie, our guide, staring back at us.

Whoever murdered Mackenzie must also have another access to the chamber and this surely means they will also have taken any valuables within. I fear our lives are in grave danger. Has this whole venture been worthless?

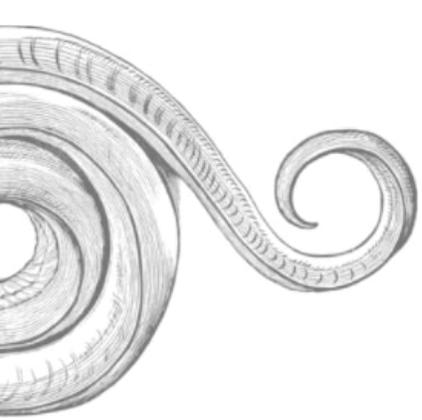
I argued with Johnson that we must leave this place immediately, but he will not give up without first examining the interior of the chamber. I cannot leave him. We must stay together for both our safety and sanity. We will, therefore, proceed with the examination of the chamber at once, and then we can leave this place with all haste.



A remarkable thing: All may not be lost; the treasure is real and apparently intact. Johnson, having first removed the pallid visage of our guide, was able to crawl into the chamber's passageway. Inside, he found three gold coins, a gold brooch and a quite-magnificent golden plaque, engraved with a most peculiar carving. The image was of some beast that resembled part-sea creature and part-winged reptile. It certainly looked like nothing of this earth.

We remain puzzled, however, as Johnson is convinced there can be no other entrance to the chamber. So, how did Mackenzie's murderer gain access? Unfortunately, the light faded before we could reach the inner chamber. We must hold out for one more night.





**Tuesday, 11th August 1846**

I am alone. This, I am sure, will be my final journal entry. Johnson, still perplexed over the cairn, returned hours ago to seek access to the inner chamber. He has not returned. I have searched the area around the cairn and called down the dark tunnel, but there is no trace of him. Neither sight nor sound. I am a coward, I know. I should crawl into the cairn to search, but I cannot. I dare not. Instead, I have packed up the few belongings we have left. It is now 12:30pm. If he does not return by 2:00pm, then I must leave. I must seek a path to the nearest settlement before darkness reaches this land again.

**Monday, 24th August 1846**

The memories of that desolate place have left me shaken and haunted, but I am now safe. I have gained rough passage on a fishing boat sailing from the harbour of Wick. Of my journey from the cairns to that town I can remember little and explain even less. I am only glad to be on my way home, alive. I have, of course, informed the authorities of Johnson's disappearance and Mackenzie's murder, and left a forwarding address for any news.

**Tuesday, 25th August 1846**

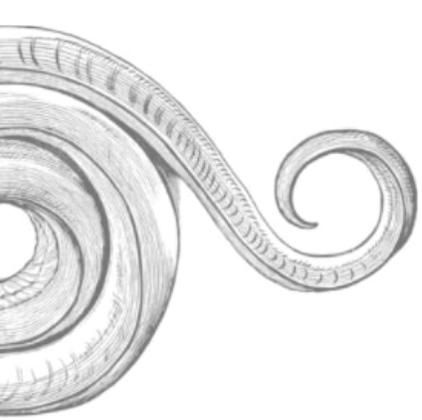
It appears that dreadful place has not finished with me, yet. Since leaving dry land, I have been haunted by strange sights and sounds. Once, when shaving, I saw in the mirror the face of the old crone who cursed us on our journey. I could clearly see her ravaged features and I now suspect it was her we saw at the camp, although how or why she was there, I cannot rationally explain. Since that first glimpse, I have seen her reflected throughout the ship, always just over my shoulder, always as if about to reach out and grab me.

Following more terrible nightmares and visions, I could take no more and have thrown our "treasure" overboard. I cannot rationalise my fears, but am sure that our adventure crossed some unknown boundary into a place where men should not venture. I wish to be rid of any trace of that journey.

It will only be a few more days till I see you, my dear. My heart yearns for your comforting touch. I pray you will forgive my demeanour and hope that you will understand from my writings the trials and difficulties I have faced and, seemingly, am fated to face again in my dreams.



Dear Mrs. Collins,



Please find enclosed the journal of your sadly departed husband. As promised when we met, I have conducted a thorough search of the fishing vessel and have interviewed all of the crew.

The only new information that has come to light is that from three crewmen who remember seeing your husband on the evening he went missing. He was apparently involved in an argument with another man who matched the description of the missing Dr. Johnson. None of the crew can remember seeing this man on board before or after the sighting, and no subsequent trace can be found of him anywhere.

Finally, we have made a thorough search of the area your husband described in his journal, but I am afraid the description was inaccurate. On arrival at the designated cairn entrance, we found it to be sealed. All appearances suggest that it has been like this for a significant time. There is no indication of any recent attempt to open the entrance or any evidence of foul play. We have, as yet, been unable to contact Mr. Hamish Mackenzie or Dr. Johnson to continue our investigations.

I can assure you that every effort will be made to progress this investigation. My colleagues in Wick are making a thorough examination of all the surrounding towns and their occupants in an attempt to seek further information, but so far, none has been forthcoming.

In the meantime, deepest sympathies.

Yours,

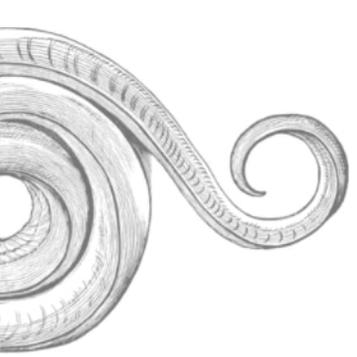
Sgt. T.R. Mackay

P.S. Your husband's belongings have been dispatched by courier. It may be some comfort to know that these include some significant gold pieces matching the description of those described in the journal.

**THE END**

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**Colin Leslie** lives and works in the Scottish Highlands, but, despite these beautiful surroundings, his true love is the horror genre. Colin runs a horror blog called "The Black Abyss" ([blackabyss.co.uk](http://blackabyss.co.uk)), where he reviews and interviews the good and the bad, the old and the new, in the horror literary world. All that reading has recently rekindled a writing passion and "The Grey Cairns" is his third published short story.





The screaming had been replaced by controlled bursts of gunfire and low, trumpeting howls. We pressed ourselves against the wall and prepared to rush the sliding doors.

## THE WOURI HORROR

By Fritz Bogott

THEY LOOK LIKE fat grey worms. Étienne's couriers hand-carry them through Douala International Airport to Cape Town, Bangkok, Kiev, Mexico City — anywhere with a surgical reamer and a sterile suite — and into your temporal cortex they go. A little skull-putty and a band-aid, and you're off to the pub for a celebratory pint. None for me, thanks. I respect Étienne's genius, but I prefer to hold onto my memories.



"*Merde*," I said, when I finally got the phone to my ear.

"I need you," Étienne said.

"I'm not your type," I said. Stéphane rolled over and grunted in his sleep.

"The power's gone out," Étienne said. "Can you fix it?"

"How fast do you need it?" I asked.

"The fermenters are already cooling," he said. "We'll lose this batch. We need to be online by this time tomorrow or my insurance will send troops."

"I'll need fifteen million francs for expenses," I said.

"I sent Géraldine with twenty," he said. "She's waiting outside." Géraldine has been Étienne's driver, bodyguard and bagwoman for almost five years. He sweats visibly whenever she enters the room, but, as far as I know, he's never laid a finger on her.

"Tell her I'll be out in five," I said.

I dressed in the dark, picking out my sixth-best suit (a pale-blue Hugo Boss) by touch alone. Stéphane snored softly and didn't stir, even when I opened the door.



"Good morning," I said, as I slid into Étienne's armoured BMW.





“Morning, my ass,” Géraldine said. “It’s dark night.” She passed me two Adderall in a paper cup.

I swallowed the tablets. “The lab, please,” I said.

I should do all my errands at 4:00am. It’s as quiet and unobstructed as traveling in space.

The gates of the lab compound opened without Géraldine even having to honk. Eric, the lab director, met us outside. “This can’t be happening,” he said. “It should be impossible.”

“Show us,” I said.

He led us around the side of the main building.

“We have reserve generators,” he said, “but they only run lights, security and fire-suppression. Generators large enough to power production would be larger than the lab itself.”

He pointed out a large transformer. “That’s the entry point for the city grid,” he said. “And this,” he added, leading us around the corner and showing us another equally-large transformer, “connects us to Ratel’s grid.”

I laughed. “Ratel has his own grid, these days? I suppose he grows his own *ndoleh* now, as well?”

Eric shrugged. “Ratel hates to buy anything he could sell. He has his own police, hospitals, air force ... why not his own grid?”

“You’re getting old,” Géraldine told me. “Even Eric knows the news before you.”

I winced and straightened my necktie. “Perhaps Ratel is simply selling you city power with a false moustache? Both sources appear to fail together, so perhaps they are the same?”

“Pfft,” Eric said. “Ratel’s power has never failed before, even in the floods. And you know what the city power is like.”

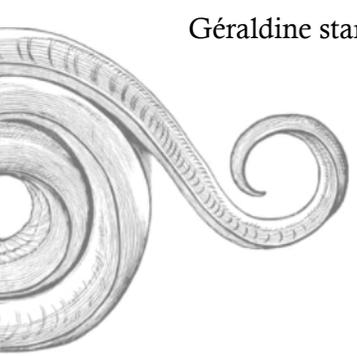
“We’ll go talk to Fakhani,” I said.

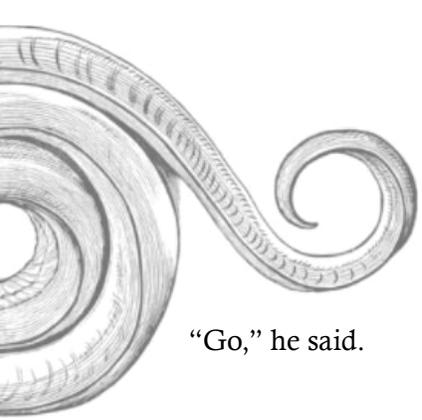
“That bureaucrat?” Eric said. “You’ll get faster service dealing with Ratel’s people. Fakhani will have you buying tea for half the city before he tells you it can’t be done.”

“City first, then Ratel,” I said. “Or would you prefer to handle Ratel yourself?”

Eric paled. “I can’t leave the lab,” he said. “Let me know when you have a solution.”

Géraldine stared at Eric’s crotch with a disappointed expression on her face.





“Go,” he said.



Fakhani eyed the stack of bills on the table and tugged at the collar of his dressing gown.

“Tell your wife we regret waking her,” I said. We could hear dishes clinking in the next room.

“I’m afraid I can’t do anything to help you,” he said. “But please join me for a cup of tea.”

In the next room, someone slammed metal against metal.

“I’m aware you put away your lineman’s boots quite some time ago,” I said.

Géraldine snorted.

“But perhaps,” I said, “there is an engineer in charge of that particular sector?”

Fakhani looked at the money then walked to his desk. He brought back a wrinkled map and spread it out.

“M. Mbape’s laboratory is here,” he said, “in Mehenni’s sector. The distribution transformer is here.” He jabbed a finger.

“Would it be possible,” I asked, “for you to telephone M. Mehenni and ask him to have one of his men meet us at the transformer station?”

A veiled woman entered the room carrying a tea tray.

“Madame Fakhani,” I said. “Please forgive us for waking you at this hour.”

She dropped the tray a full hand-span down onto the map and stalked from the room. Fakhani watched spilled tea run onto the carpet. “I will phone Mehenni,” he said.



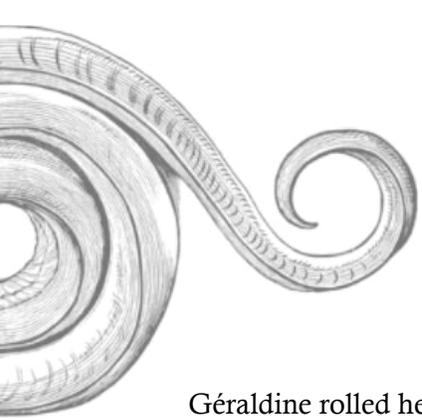
“I’m afraid I can’t do anything to help you,” Yeye said. “This entire substation is drawing 15% too much current. Worst case, the upgrade may take a week.”

“And best case?” I asked.

“Two days,” he said. “Transformers don’t grow on a vine.”

“What if the substation were suddenly to draw substantially less power?” I asked.

“The laboratory is going out of business?” he said, shocked. “I’m sorry to hear that.”



Géraldine rolled her eyes. “Perhaps,” she said, “some customers could experience longer outages than others.”

“Monsieur Mbape’s laboratory might be lucky in that regard,” I said, “and find itself one of the first to be restored.”

“I suppose that is a theoretical possibility,” Yeye said. He tore his eyes away from Géraldine’s breasts and looked at his shoes.

“My regards to your family,” I said, and tucked an envelope into the pocket of his coveralls.



“Ratel’s?” Géraldine asked.

“I suppose so,” I said. “Who knows how long it will take Yeye to disconnect the other customers and get the substation back online?”

“Have you met him?” she asked.

“You’re asking whether the whitebait has met the Great White Shark?” I said. “I consider it lucky that I have only met his foot soldiers’ shoeshine men. Why? Have you met him?”

She was silent.

The walls of Ratel’s compound are like those of ten thousand others, except his are strikingly free of graffiti. We removed our jackets and walked slowly to the gate, with our hands held up in plain view. A tiny window opened in the guard’s door. “Good morning,” I said into the dark.

“It’s bloody night,” a voice answered. “What do you want?”

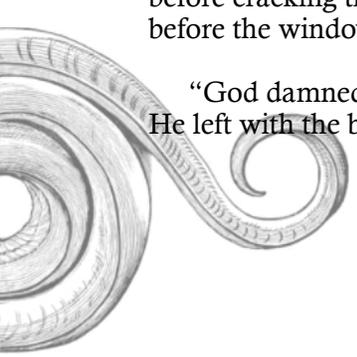
“We’re working for Étienne Mbape,” I said. “His people buy electricity from your employer. Perhaps you could refer us to someone with expertise in that portion of your employer’s portfolio?”

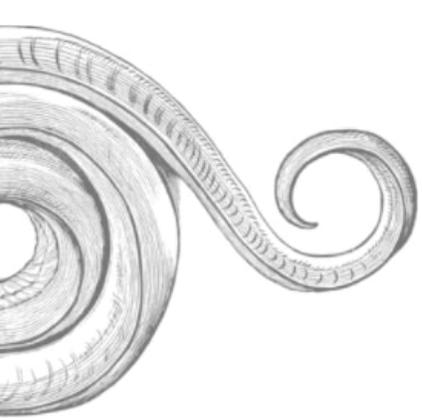
“Fuck off,” the voice said, and the window banged shut.

“For your trouble,” I said, and set another envelope on the ground just outside the door. We stepped back to the car and waited.

Ratel should give a seminar on human resources management. The guard held out for a full five minutes before cracking the door, snatching the envelope and firmly re-closing the door. It was another five minutes before the window opened again.

“God damned electricity,” the voice said. “That’s Durand’s department. You missed him by about an hour. He left with the boss and a bunch of his boys.”





“Any idea of their destination?” I asked.

“The power went out,” he said, “and Durand left with a bunch of bruises and two cars of babysitters. I thank God I don’t know more.”

“Where’s Ratel’s power station?” I asked.

The window banged shut and a stray dog began to howl.



“You have tiny testicles,” Géraldine told me, “beady eyes, narrow shoulders, and a limp cock. Stéphane should leave you for someone better-hung.”

“Stop sulking,” I said. “This can’t be the worst thing you’ve ever had to do for Étienne.”

“Étienne, pfft,” she said. “I blame you.”

We were inching the BMW along behind Sébastien — Eric-the-engineer’s tea boy — who was running along the street with one finger in the air, following Ratel’s power line like a dog after a scent.

“He’s got good eyes,” I said. “You think you could follow those cables?”

“If that were you out there,” she said, “I’d run you down.”

“How would you prefer to find Ratel and Durand?” I asked. “Or were you planning to power the lab with your personal magnetism?”

“I’m going to park the car,” she said, “walk to Congo and go back to being a mercenary. It’s been years since I’ve eaten a human heart.”

“It’s not as if Étienne has you making tea,” I said. “Or pulling his dick.”

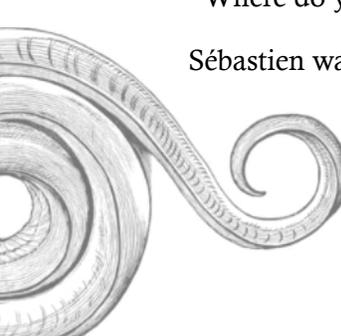
“No,” she said. He’s got you for that.” She pounded the steering wheel with her fist.

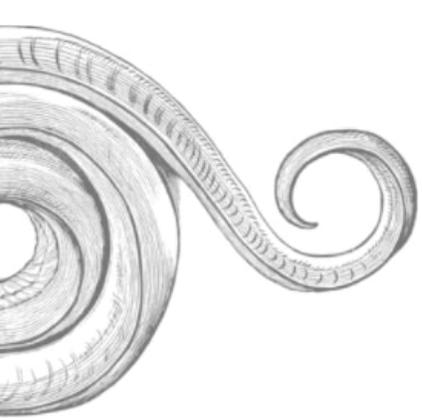


We were approaching the port.

“Where do you hide a power station down here?” I asked, but Géraldine was still sulking.

Sébastien was bent over with his hands on his knees. I rolled down the window. “You okay?” I asked.





“I’m ready for the Olympics,” he said.

“Where does the cable go from here?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I lost it,” he said. “You’re on your own. Buy me a donut.”

I handed him a couple of bills. “See you back at the lab?”

“I’m going to eat for a few hours,” he said. “After that, sure.” He walked off.

“When do I get a donut?” Géraldine asked.

I was thinking.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Don’t be juvenile,” I said.

She climbed out of the car and leaned against the door with her arms folded.

“We’re fucked,” I said. “We’ll just have to hope Yeye gets the power back on.”

A horn blared. Géraldine jumped out of the way as a tinted-out Land Cruiser screamed past. She watched it for a second then slid back into the car. “Quitter,” she said.



We found the Land Cruiser, abandoned with three others outside an enormous corrugated-steel warehouse echoing with the sound of screams and tearing metal. Géraldine seemed oblivious. Her attention was entirely focused on a tray of *koki* balanced on the head of a hurrying girl. She leapt from the car and waved a handful of bills at the girl. The girl shook her head, then nodded, then took the money, handed Géraldine the entire tray, and sprinted off.

I was out of the car, rigid with impatience. “How can you eat?” I said. “We have work.”

“Patience,” she said. She peeled banana leaf from a *koki* and took a giant bite. “Want one?” she asked through the food.

I took one and ate, glaring.

“Napoleon,” she said, still muffled by bean cake, “never pass up a chance to eat, drink or piss.”





I swallowed. “Got any more Adderall?”

“Here she is,” she said.

The *koki* girl was back, lugging a Cameroon Airlines duffle bag. Géraldine grinned and handed the girl another fistful of bills. The girl picked up her tray and jogged off.

“Now, I’m horny,” Géraldine said. She unzipped the bag and pulled out a greasy machine pistol.

“I hate you,” I said. We stepped toward the warehouse.

The screaming had been replaced by controlled bursts of gunfire and low, trumpeting howls. We pressed ourselves against the wall and prepared to rush the sliding doors. A Renault Sherpa squealed to a stop and nearly pinned us with its bumper. A giant jumped out in silver-piped Alexander McQueen. He lowered the Sherpa’s gate and led out a snorting hippopotamus with a spiked collar and a braided-metal leash. The hippo dragged him into the warehouse and we followed, wary.

The warehouse was an enormous covered dock, its centre roiling seawater, steel plate, grey scales, and grasping claws. Ratel’s men were taking shots as though they knew what they were firing at. A crocodile’s head on an impossibly sinuous neck broke the surface. The hippo bellowed and dragged its handler into the water. Géraldine’s eyes were saucers, her gun arm limp. The hippo charged. The croc-thing made a sound like a gravel crusher. The gunmen held their fire. The croc’s head dove for the hippo. The hippo twisted in place and sank its teeth into the thing’s neck. Géraldine thumbed something on the pistol and took careful aim. The croc howled loud as a train horn. Géraldine pulled the trigger. The hippo pulled the thing’s head below the surface. The water churned. Géraldine lowered her gun. A long steel curve bobbed to the surface, and a still-grey flipper, big as a car. The surface of the water stilled.

The hippo swam to the water’s edge. One of Ratel’s men found the controls of a sling-lift, swung it out over the hippo and began lowering it.

A tiny man in a black golf shirt walked over to us. “Thank you for your help,” he said.

I looked at Géraldine.

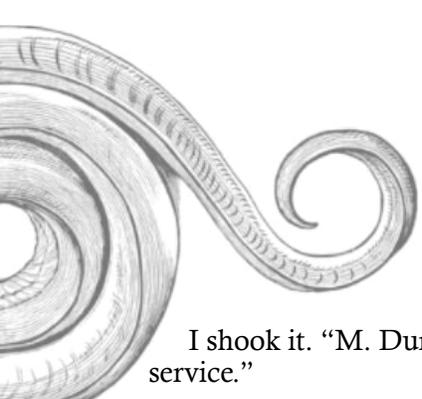
She laughed. “Change your shorts. This isn’t Ratel.”

The man joined in the laughter. “You thought I...? But no, my employer is not one to waste time savouring his victories. I am sure he is on his way to breakfast by now. I am Durand.” He extended his hand.



The warehouse was  
an enormous covered  
dock, its centre roiling  
seawater, steel plate,  
grey scales, and grasping  
claws.





I shook it. “M. Durand?” I said. “Étienne Mbape sent us here to inquire about the interruption in electrical service.”

Durand waved a hand at the scaly corpse in the water. “As you have seen, our power station was experiencing unwanted sexual advances.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m not aware of any power station here.”

One of Ratel’s gorillas, who had been tugging at one of the monster’s flippers with a boat hook, let out a whoop. The monster’s corpse rolled, the water filled with bubbles, and the hull of a submarine rose to the surface.



Géraldine had driven off with the half-drowned McQueen giant, leaving me to find my own ride home. Durand had found me a Hazmat suit and he was leading me through the submarine’s forward hatch. “It is Russian, as you can see,” he said. “Its home port was Vostok Station, in Antarctica. I’m told my employer won it in a game of dice.”

His flashlight’s beam played around the narrow passageway.

“Its electrical plant has been operating steadily for the three years I have been involved. The only modifications have been to carry power off the boat and into the city.”

My breathing was laboured inside the mask and I felt a chill. “Don’t we need a Geiger counter?” I asked. “Or dosimeter badges?”

“Pardon me?” Durand asked. His mask turned toward me for a moment. “Oh, I see. Yes, that is a reasonable question. But this is not a fission craft.”

“Diesel?” I asked. “Surely, your boss could trade this thing for a bigger diesel generator.”

We passed through a hatch.

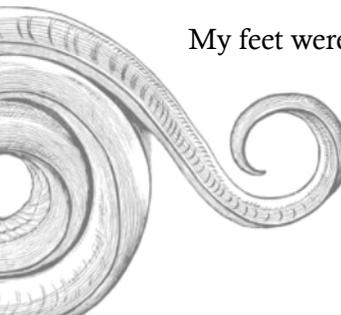
“Nor is it diesel,” Durand said. “It is powered by a Stirling engine. Are you familiar with the principle?”

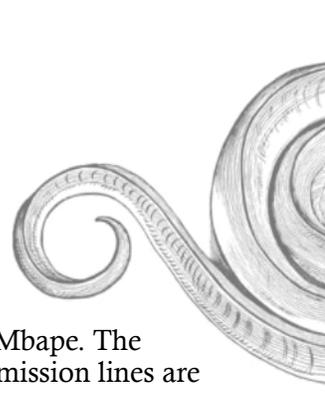
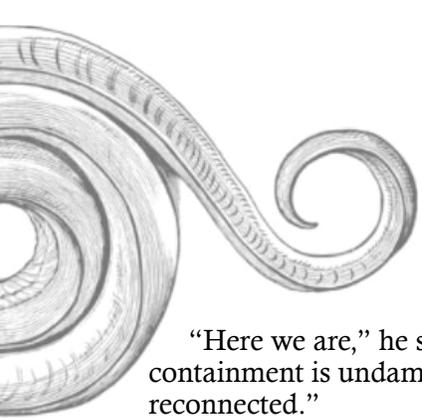
“Certainly,” I said. “But what does it use as a heat source if not diesel?”

“You have reached the heart of the matter,” he said. He strained against the wheel on a bulkhead door. I added my strength and the wheel slowly turned.

“Ocean water provides the heat,” he said. The door groaned open and thick fog rolled out over our boots. “The temperature differential is provided by a source of cold.”

My feet were numb. “That’s backwards,” I said. “It defies physics.”





“Here we are,” he said, gesturing at a huge, frosted bank safe. “You may report this to M. Mbape. The containment is undamaged. Power should resume within an hour or two, as soon as the transmission lines are reconnected.”

“Containment?” I asked, through chattering teeth. “What is it that’s being contained?”

He looked at me with a peculiar expression. I took a step backwards and tripped over a pipe.

He spun the dial on the safe. I tried to regain my footing, but my limbs were numb.

“As you see,” he said.

I willed my eyelids closed, but they, too, betrayed me. From within the safe, the great, icy thing stared deep into my soul.



Too many lights! What is Stéphane doing here?

“You’re safe, now,” he says.

I try to tell him about the ice, the eyes. I can’t stop shivering.

He squeezes my hand. “It’s going to be okay,” he says.

Étienne is here. The drill stops shrieking. “It really is,” he says.

And he threads the fat, grey worm into my mind.

**THE END**

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**Fritz Bogott** (fritzbogott.com, @fritzbogott) was born in Berkeley, California, and grew up reading novels and writing code in Austin, Minnesota, the birthplace of Spam. After studying math, German and Chinese at a weirdly long list of American and Taiwanese colleges and universities, he worked as an engineer in Scotland, Ethiopia, Singapore, and Chile, and helped start the company GovDelivery. He is the author of the CC-licensed novels *Boggle and Sneak* (Paper copies in bookstores, electronic copies at <http://fritzbogott.com/boggleandsneak>) and *Pismo* (Electronic copies at <http://fritzbogott.com/pismo>). His stories have been published in *Kek-W Quarterly*, *Startling Adventures*, *Weaponizer*, *Jack Move*, and *Dr. Hurley’s Snake-Oil Cure*. He builds giant, flaming things in Northfield, Minnesota with his wife and daughters.



It was a rock of some kind, partially transparent but with white scratches scarring the surface, turning it partly opaque. Its shape was hard to define, a little like a flower with five main petals, yet other shards stuck out at strange angles.

## FULL MOON

By J.M. Ramage

ROMAN ELZER LOOKED up at Karolinka Observatory, unimpressed. It was, like so many buildings of the Communist era, a dull, concrete structure, box-shaped save for the iron-and-glass dome for the telescope. It sat on the side of a mountain, right on the border with Slovakia, surrounded by dark firs. Elizabeth Manning was waiting by the door, her black-velvet dress and glittering, moonstone jewelry seeming anachronistic, as if a grand dame of the First Republic had stepped out into the grimness of the late 60s.

“Roman!” she called down to him. Then she said in English, “Glad you could come.”

“Hmn,” said Elzer. “Where is Simon?”

His abrupt tone didn’t affect her smile. “He’s inside. He won’t bother us.”

That, thought Roman, depended on your point of view. Simon’s very existence was a “bother” and had been, even before Roman had persuaded Elizabeth that she deserved someone better than some “mediocre Czech scientist”.

Elizabeth led him into a wide hall with reliefs on either side, one a map of the solar system and the other showing the constellations. All in the same grey, concrete-like stone and, all around, the air clung damp and chilly to Elzer’s skin. There was a smell of damp, too, as well as something sharp and metallic that he couldn’t place. The smell of a building long abandoned.

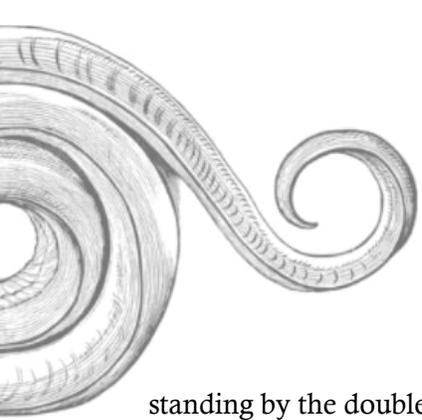
Stacked against the walls were numerous boxes, each neatly marked with letters and numbers, in the Cyrillic alphabet rather than the Roman one used by the native Czechs, which struck Elzer as odd. None of the Communist facilities he’d looked at for the National Technological Museum in Prague used Russian exclusively.

“So, where do you want me to start?” he asked.

Elizabeth frowned, but soon recovered her smile. “Right down to business?”

“What would you prefer?” It came out sharper than he had intended and Elzer shrank back, busying himself with the nearest boxes. Inside were reams of yellowed paper, typewritten in Russian. He remembered enough from school to pick up that they were reports and diagrams of some sort of satellite or probe.

“The main laboratory’s through here,” Elizabeth said, sounding crestfallen. Perhaps she thought he’d fall at her feet when he saw her again, beg her to leave Simon and come back to him. He turned to finding her



standing by the double doors on the opposite side of the hall. He followed and they went into a Spartan, clinical corridor lined with doors bearing square windows of safety glass. Elizabeth opened one at the far end and revealed a set of stairs, which took them to the next story and another featureless corridor that smelled of linoleum and cigarette smoke. A series of clatters came from an open door a few meters on.

“Simon?” Elizabeth called. “What are you doing?”

“Can’t find my bloody keys,” returned a man’s voice, muffled as though he were holding something between his teeth. “Ah.” There was a jangle of keys and Simon strode out, cigarette limp at the corner of his mouth and his long, pale face twisted into a sneer. He walked past them, shouldering Elzer out of the way, and made for the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Elizabeth asked.

“Away,” Simon snapped. He paused on the landing and glared up at them. “You and your little Czech mate have fun.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get supplies,” he said, with another glare at Elzer. Whatever this meant, Elizabeth seemed to understand and nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Elzer when Simon was gone. “He wasn’t all that keen on bringing you in, but I told him you’re sensitive; I think you’re the best man for the job.”

“For once,” Elzer replied under his breath then added quickly, “What is it you want me to see? I’ll get some photographs and email them to the museum.”

“You might want to hold off,” she said. “Once you’ve seen the stuff we found.”

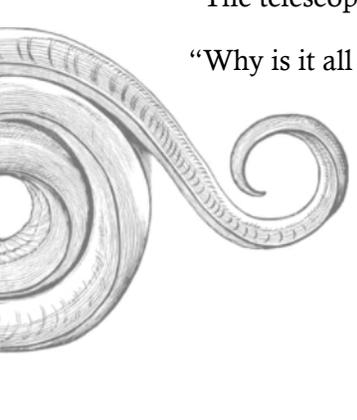
Elzer raised an eyebrow. “It’s just a lunar observatory, you said. What stuff?”

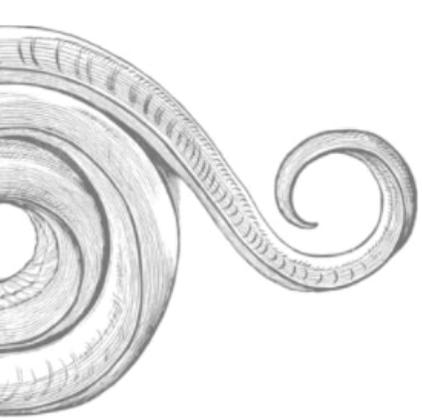
Elizabeth bit her lip thoughtfully. “Wait and see, but if I thought the museum could have helped, I’d’ve contacted them direct. I thought you ... you might understand. You always were more sensitive to new ideas — at least, you were at uni.”

She took his hand and led him to a room at the end of the hall, much larger than the ones they’d passed so far. It reminded Elzer of the classrooms at his school where he’d studied physics: full of benches, charts, periodic tables, and a blackboard at one end covered in smudged Cyrillic.

“The telescope’s directly above us,” said Elizabeth, looking up.

“Why is it all in Russian?” Elzer asked.





“Seems to have belonged to the Soviet Space Program,” said Elizabeth. “I tried to ask the government man who arranged to return the land to my family, but he said he didn’t know anything, just that the Nazis commandeered the land during the War, then the Russians built this in ‘69. One old lady in the village said they stayed away from the observatory, didn’t like the noises coming out of it at night, but that was probably just the telescope. But the others wouldn’t say anything. You know what these people are like ....”

“Yes,” said Elzer, “we Czechs are only one step away from the Dark Ages.”

He flashed her an icy smile. Her attitude was no worse than many of the British and American expats in the country, who refused to speak anything but English and regarded the Czechs as some sort of infestation, ruining an otherwise-profitable little bit of real estate, but somehow, Elzer always considered hers worse, given that her grandparents had been Czech, something he imagined she would never have admitted before she learned they had property due to them through the repatriation schemes.

“It’s what they were doing here ....,” she went on. “I thought that was what would interest you.” She opened one of many the boxes lying on the benches, and brought out some typewritten notes and a metal box. Elzer edged closer, but stopped as he caught a whiff of her perfume, the same one he used to buy her.

“According to the notes,” Elizabeth said, as she flipped the lid, “this came from Luna 16, one of the sample probes the Soviets sent to the Moon, in 1970.”

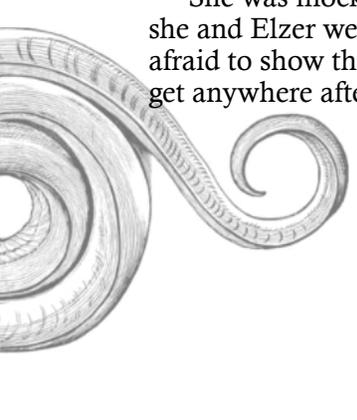
She turned the box towards him and he saw it was a rock of some kind, partially transparent but with white scratches scarring the surface, turning it partly opaque. Its shape was hard to define, a little like a flower with five main petals, yet other shards stuck out at strange angles and so, turned a few inches one way or another, it seemed to change form completely. As Elzer held it, it caught the sunlight and glints of colour played across the surface, while at its heart, a little rainbow of refracted light twisted and danced around as the object moved. He found himself staring right into it, so absorbed that when Elizabeth laid her hand on his shoulder, he nearly threw it into the air in fright.

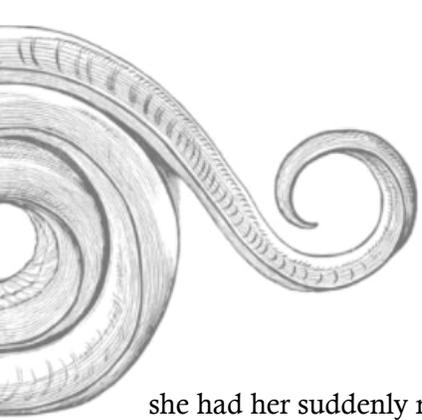
“Simon saw it first. I think it freaked him out,” she whispered. She leaned right into his shoulder, breathing on the exposed skin of his neck. “I think it’s because it’s from so far away, and so old. Medical doctors deal with the human lifespan. We deal with eternity.”

Elzer swallowed and pulled out of her grasp. “Well, it’s strange, quartz perhaps, and odd there’s no mention of Luna 16 having brought back anything other than soil, but it is just a moon rock and there are tons of the things on Earth. The Americans brought so much back ....”

She shrugged. “If you think so.”

She was mocking him, but he tried hard not to show her it bothered him. Even before she met Simon, whilst she and Elzer were both at university in Prague, she had been proud of her superior abilities and intellect, never afraid to show them off. He’d always wondered if she was slumming when she was with him. Then he failed to get anywhere after his PhD, except the Technological Museum, where he was little more than a librarian, and





she had her suddenly rich Czech family and her already-rich American father, and her top level research job at MIT.

“I’ll have a look through it,” he said. “Maybe take a few boxes back with me to Prague, but I doubt you’ll get much money for this stuff.”

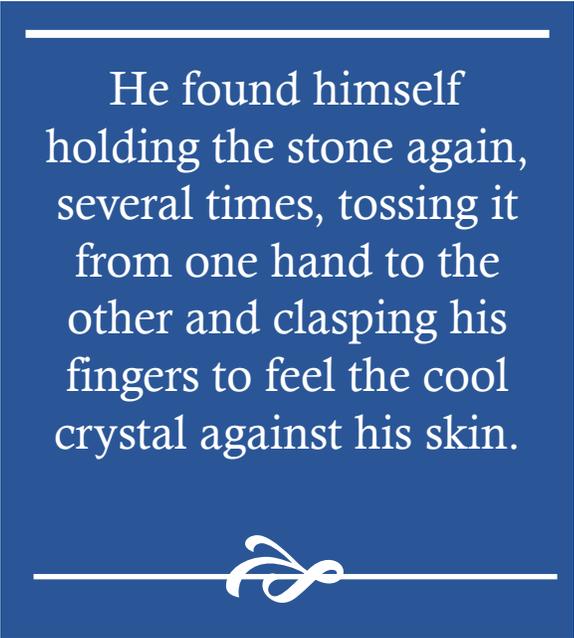
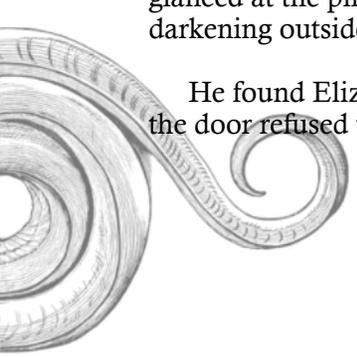
“Oh, we’re not interested in money.” She sauntered over to the door, swaying her hips so that her velvet skirt rippled like liquid as it caught the light. “I’m going to see if Simon’s back. I’ll be outside if you need anything.”

Elzer pulled a chair over to the bench and settled down to look through the boxes. He photographed the strange, clear stone and leafed through the documents that accompanied it, though his Russian wasn’t good enough to get more than a general gist of their content. There were diagrams of some sort of apparatus attached to the stone, tables showing resonances they’d achieved when exposing it to different energy sources.

He found himself holding the stone again, several times, tossing it from one hand to the other and clasping his fingers to feel the cool crystal against his skin. The window in the lab looked out over the slope of the mountain, so that only the tips of the firs were visible, framing the pastel-blue sky. The Moon was already out, like a chalk drawing, nearly full, and Elzer tried to imagine the distance. He had bandied around terms like ‘a quarter of a million miles’ at university, but as he held the stone, he tried to envisage it and then to imagine the silence, the airless, deathly still surface of Earth’s satellite. A cold shiver rippled down his spine. The darkness and the silence had always drawn him to lunar studies and, every time he’d watched the grainy footage of the American missions there, had kept him fascinated. Sometimes, he wished the astronauts would just switch off their radios and record the natural sounds, or lack of same, of the Moon. He had always said that was what he would do, back in the days when he was still a student and still certain he could do anything he wanted. Perhaps that was this ‘sensitivity’ Elizabeth spoke about.

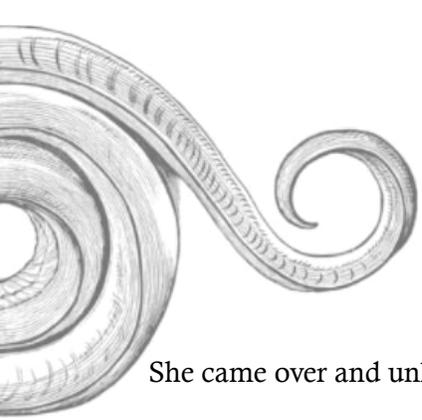
He leafed through a few more Russian reports, but tiredness was already creeping up on him. The strain of translating a language he was only been vaguely competent at did not help, but the last few documents he’d found were odd, and seemed to refer to some experiments carried out in the early 70s on the moon rock, again with diagrams of some sort of machinery connected to the stone, only, in these documents, he found, again and again, the phrase “человеческий субъект”, which Elzer was sure meant “human subject”. He stared at the pages for a long while, hoping to glean some further meaning but to no avail. With a sigh, he sat back and glanced at the pile of notes still waiting for his attention. He’d hoped to be done in a few hours, but the sky was darkening outside, the Moon growing more solid and white as pearl.

He found Elizabeth upstairs in the telescope room, stooped over the eyepiece, but when he tried the handle, the door refused to open. Elzer frowned. Why would she be working in a locked room? But she had heard him.



He found himself holding the stone again, several times, tossing it from one hand to the other and clasping his fingers to feel the cool crystal against his skin.





She came over and unlocked the door.

“What’s up?”

“What are you doing?” Elzer asked.

“Nothing, just mucking about. What’s wrong? Have you found something?”

“No, I just wondered ... It’s late and I’m tired and you said ....”

“Of course, your room. This way.” She pushed past and locked the door before he had a chance even to look into the room, then led him downstairs and out of the observatory into the clear, frosty evening. A short way behind the observatory was a small, detached house, much older than the rest of the complex, perhaps 1920s.

“The Germans used the villa as an office, though we don’t know what for, and we think the Russians’ chief scientist lived here,” she said. “So, the electricity’s connected and there’s gas heating. We’re staying here until we get the place sorted out.”

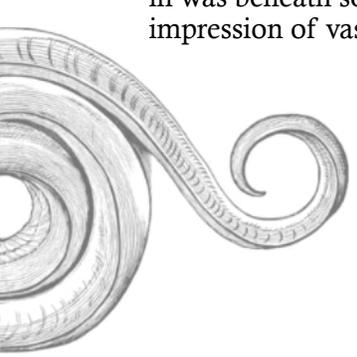
“What, exactly, are you going to do with it?” Elzer asked, looking back at the path. Over the tops of the trees, he could just make out the dome of the observatory reflecting back the gleaming Moon.

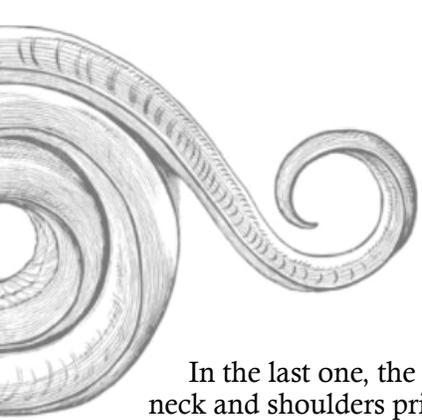
“Sell it, I suppose,” sighed Elizabeth. “It’s a shame it’s in the Czech Republic. I’ve always wanted my own observatory. But hardly convenient.”

She showed him to a neat, clean little bedroom. There were a few creaks on the parquet as she left, then the place fell into a sleepy silence, broken only by the whisper of the trees rocking in the gentle wind outside. Elzer dumped his bags and barely had the energy to change into his pyjamas before he collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep.

Perhaps it was exhaustion, the stress of meeting Elizabeth again, the knowledge that he was running at her beck and call like a lovesick teenager, but he slept fitfully. When he did manage to drift off, he sank into dreams that left him with a sickening coldness in his chest when he woke up. No matter how many times he interrupted the dreams, moreover, he always slipped back into the same scenario. He couldn’t tell where he was, because it was almost completely dark save a few glints of colour and reflections, as if he were in a room made of black glass. He could hear nothing, but it was no ordinary silence, the sound of an empty room; this was a complete absence of sound, as if any noise that tried to intrude would be sucked away by whatever force lay beyond the impenetrable dark and the glass.

In one dream, he ventured towards his own reflection and tried to look out. He caught a glimpse of lights in the distance, a hint of something below him, the massive sprawl of a city, but when he looked up, the effect continued, the snatches of refracted light carrying on to dizzying heights, as though whatever chamber he was in was beneath some far higher dome or covering. And the room, whenever he tried to look around, gave the impression of vastness, so large he knew he would never be able to reach the far side.





In the last one, the worst one, he realised he was not in this city of black glass alone. The hairs along his neck and shoulders prickled. Though he still heard nothing, he knew there was someone or *something* there with him. When he looked at the shadows, he thought he saw them shift, as though they were not shadows at all, but groups of *something*, and he knew they were watching him. He went to the glass again to look out, but felt the presence, closer than ever. He turned and, just before he awoke, he glimpsed a face, its form seeming to change every time it moved, though vaguely florid somehow, exploding out from a central point. It looked directly at him and let out a shriek that seemed to carry with it all the emptiness and desolation of a being alone in that vast darkness.

Dawn was creeping above the firs when Elzer sat up after this last dream and caught his breath, so he decided not to attempt sleep again.



He was aware of Elizabeth watching him at breakfast, though she said nothing and there was no sign of Simon. Elzer wondered if he should ask if something had happened, though decided against it, in case it seemed he was picking at cracks in their marriage.

“So what do you think?” Elizabeth asked him. “Anything useful?”

“I don’t know,” Elzer lied. His mind was already set on those reports, on setting up his laptop, finding a decent online Russian dictionary and seeing exactly what they were about.

“What about the rock?”

Elzer glanced up and found her staring at him, her eyes wide and excited. He shrugged and she went on.

“The crystal? Well, it’s fabulous, isn’t it? Did you read the reports?”

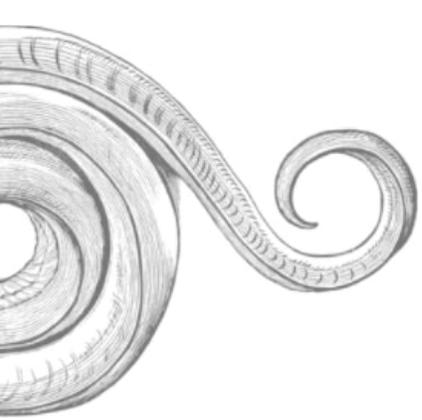
“Did you?”

She smiled. “A little. My Russian’s not so good, but Simon’s is passable. He translated a few passages for me.”

*Of course Simon speaks Russian, Elzer thought. Simon can do everything.*

“I was intending to do that myself today,” he said, “though, if Simon’s already translated it, it would seem to be a waste of time.”

“I’ll fetch his papers,” said Elizabeth. She darted off before Elzer had a chance to argue. He ate his breakfast in silence, headachy from lack of sleep and still unable to shake off the full chill of his dream, as well as the nagging feeling that had been with him ever since he’d agreed to come to Karolinka, that there was something inherently wrong about the job.



Elizabeth returned with a wad of handwritten papers. Simon's was a spidery hand, but easy to read, and Elzer skimmed until he found his passages on 'human subjects'. He allowed himself a little moment of pride that he had been correct, though it soon fizzled out when he saw that Simon had translated the whole thing.

*"Human Subject One was exposed to the electrically stimulated crystal for one hour, however, no notable effect was recorded. Subject One did report strange dreams the following night, but did not recall their nature.*

*"Human subject Two, similar results ...,"* and so it went on. After six subjects failed to produce more than a vague feeling of having had a bad dream, but were unable to recall the details, the scientist in charge apparently changed tack and opened up the brainpans of three of the subjects, inserting electrodes directly into the cerebrum. Subjects One and Two died. Subject Three was never mentioned again.

When he finished reading, Elzer glanced up and saw Elizabeth still studying him.

"Well?" she said. "What do you think?"

"I think you had a bunch of mad scientists living here," Elzer replied. "Did it say what they were trying to achieve? I mean, why connect a rock to someone's head?"

She smiled like a schoolgirl with a secret and came to sit next to him. "That's what I wanted to know. But I think that was the main purpose of this observatory — at least, towards the end of its life. Like I said, I did a little research and most people don't know anything, but I had heard rumours ... Well, did you ever wonder why, when they were so far ahead of the U.S. in every other part of the Space Race, that the first manned mission to the moon came from America? The Russians should've been there years before — they'd done all the groundwork — but they just stopped."

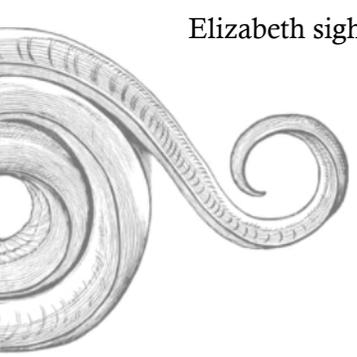
She glanced around, as if checking for eavesdroppers, then went to one of the drawers in the kitchen dresser, pulling out a plastic folder. "We found these in the laboratory. According to the markings, they're from the Luna 3 probe, transmitted back to Earth during its flyby of the lunar surface in 1959. But see here, this little crater with a kind of triangular structure ... I've been a lunar astronomer since I was 15 and this was what caught my eye. It's a crater called 'Ukert', in a region called 'Sinus Medii', right on the equator."

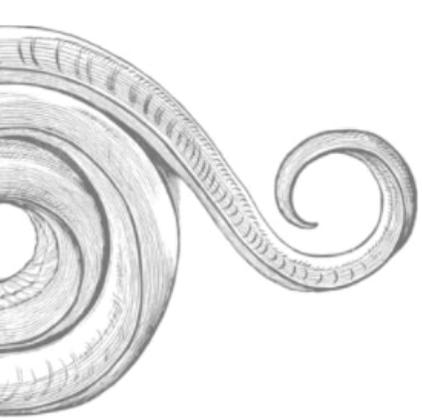
Elzer shrugged and gave the grainy pictures a cursory glance. "So?"

"So, Sinus Medii is on the near side of the Moon. Luna 3, according to its mission statement and any official reports that came out, only photographed the far side. It was the first probe to take pictures of the far side, in fact, famous for it. So, what was it doing sending back pictures of this area?"

"Perhaps it got lost, it happens."

Elizabeth sighed. "Then look at this."





She showed him the next photograph. The image was again grainy, black-and-white, but the cratered surface of the Moon was still recognisable. She pointed with the edge of her fingernail at something near the edge of the frame, where a hazy, black line marked the encroaching lunar night.

“See this? It’s geometric, almost like a structure, or the supports for one.”

Elzer laughed. “Aliens? This is what you want me to look at?”

“Well what do you think it is?”

“A flaw in the photograph?”

She slipped the photo aside and showed him the next image, where the darkness had progressed a little farther across the Moon, and there again was the little crisscross pattern.

“The notes accompanying the photographs said this building was set up, in Czechoslovakia, far away from the main focus of attention in Moscow, to look into the possibility that there had been something, possibly even a civilisation, on Earth’s moon. Whatever it was, they thought it looked as if it had been destroyed, bombarded, perhaps, by meteor activity. But it scared them enough to abandon a manned mission. And then Luna 16 brought back this crystal. According to the chief scientist here, the crystal was examined in Moscow first of all, but then he talks about officials in the space program having dreams, something about shadows and old cities made of black glass.”

Elzer straightened slightly.

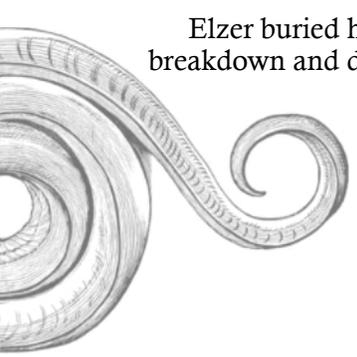
“One man even claimed to have dreamed about a temple on Earth, a lunar temple, and what he was describing was evidently Stonehenge in England, but he talked about sacrifices to dark, shapeless gods and how the primitives cut open the skull of their victim to expose his brain and ‘let the shadows in.’ All in the light of the full moon.”

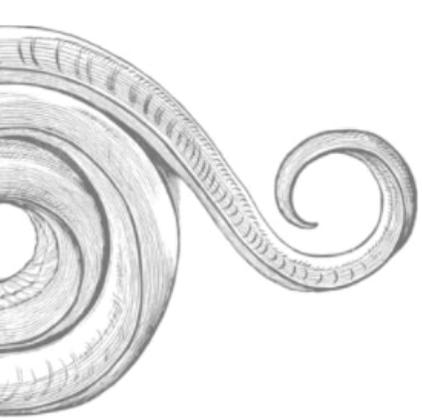
Elzer frowned at her, trying to find some hint of a practical joke or mockery in her eyes, but she seemed in deadly earnest.

“And you think the Russians tried this themselves?”

“They were trying to expose people to some sort of emanation from this crystal,” she said. “Now, you know as well as I do that quartz is a natural resonator, and it’s possible ... Have you ever heard of the stone-tape theory?”

Elzer buried his face in his hands. This was why this felt wrong. Because she was having a nervous breakdown and dragging him down with her.





“It’s a line of thinking in parapsychology ....”

“Parapsychology?” he asked, looking up. “So, are they ghost aliens, then?”

“Listen to me. According to some researchers, certain types of stone, particularly those with a high quartz content like granite, can act as a recording medium. If a sufficient amount of energy is beamed at them, it can leave an imprint and, under the right circumstances, that recording can be played back. It’s one theory as to how a ghost can manifest itself, yes, but it’s also used in theoretical computing, the amount of data a quartz crystal can store ....”

“Yes, yes, I know, and what you’re saying is the Russians thought there was something stored on these crystals?”

“An imprint of something, yes, that’s what I think. Something older than anything we’ve ever experienced. They were working off the theory that it takes a human mind to act as the interface. Storing the data is all very well, but you can’t just hand someone a hard drive and expect them to read what’s on it.”

“It’s just a rock. And so what if people have dreams when it’s nearby? Maybe it’s ... I don’t know.”

“You were working with it all afternoon,” she said. “What did you see?”

“I saw a rock.”

“But when you went to sleep, what did you see?”

“Elizabeth ....”

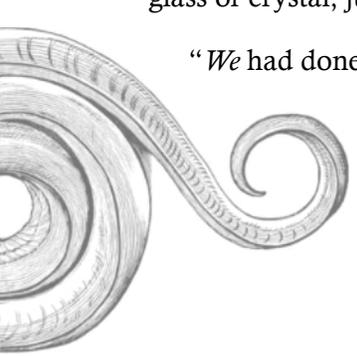
She leaned forward and grabbed his hand, squeezing his fingers so tightly they hurt. “Tell me!”

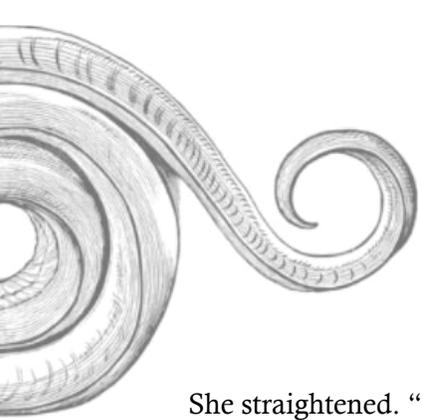
“Elizabeth, this isn’t like you,” he said. “Maybe you’ve been working too hard, at MIT ....”

She let him go and cursed under her breath, then picked up her laptop bag from the chair in the corner, bringing out another folder. “You see these?” she asked, spreading pictures, clearer this time but still of the lunar surface, across the table. “These are from Lunar Orbiter 3 in 1967, of the same area, Sinus Medii. Look at this — this is an enlargement, but you see here, on the horizon?”

She pointed at a tiny blob, white against the black sky. “You see it just there, a little shard of stone or something sticking up out of the surface? How could something like that survive under constant bombardment from meteors? And here, in the analyses we had done, you can see the different light intensities inside it. It’s glass or crystal, just like our rock.”

“*We* had done?” Elzer said. “You already knew about this stuff?”





She straightened. “I’ve been a moonwatcher for years, Roman. I’ve seen things I can’t explain. Lights ... A friend of mine at MIT contacted me to ask about these pictures, see if I had seen anything when I was doing my observations, and then I heard about this place. It didn’t take much to fake the paperwork, tell them I’d had a Czech great-grandmother who owned the land, get a few forged documents together”

“Elizabeth ....”

“Do you not realise what this means? There’s something out there, something that might have been dead for millions of years, but which equally could be out there, still, watching us. What did you see, Roman? You sat with the crystal all night’ you must’ve seen something.”

“I had a strange dream. That isn’t evidence of any aliens in — “

“What did you see?”

Elzer considered her for a long time before he answered. “I had a dream, sort of like you said. A city, perhaps, but it was too dark to see. Just silent and huge. And there was something there. I don’t know; it was very vague. I couldn’t focus on them, even when one came up to me.”

“You saw them?”

“No, that’s what I’m saying. I *sort of* saw one, but it was as if I couldn’t really look at it.”

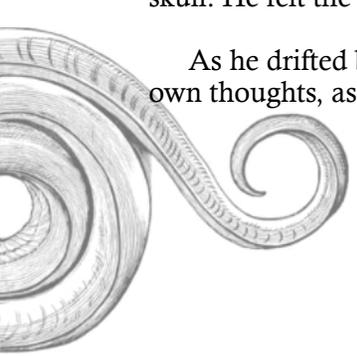
She beamed at him. “My God. I knew it. I knew you would be open to them. You always were sensitive, even if you wouldn’t admit it, Roman.”

“What are you talking about?”

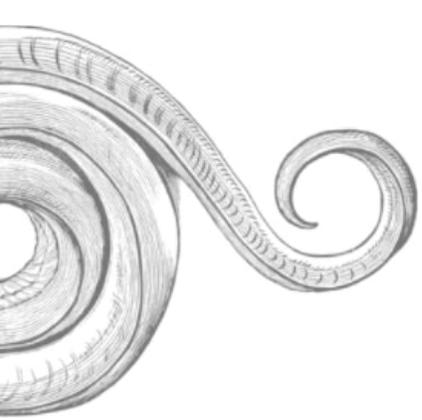
He saw her smile twitch slightly and her gaze shifted to something behind him, but before he could look, a sharp, hot pain flared in his neck and his body seemed to turn liquid. He toppled forward as he tried to stand and collapsed at her feet. He then saw Simon, syringe still in his gloved hands, coming round to join her. Then he couldn’t hold onto consciousness any longer.



He dreamed again, this time of an open sky and the full moon directly above him, its pockmarked surface like a skull, gazing down at him. There were stones all around, broad and tall and rough-hewn, looming black against the moonlight. Torches burned between them and figures flitted in and out of the shadows, chanting, each wearing robes that seemed maggot-white in the torchlight and masks of strange, contorted faces. He was bound and saw one of the figures approach with a silver scythe in hand, saw him bring it down hard towards his skull. He felt the agony of the blow across his crown and screamed.



As he drifted back to wakefulness, however, he realised the pain was gone. He could feel nothing, just his own thoughts, as if that was all that remained of him.



“Roman?” Elizabeth’s voice, soft and nearby.

He opened his eyes and saw her leaning over him, smiling, with the laboratory window and the pale, full moon behind her. He tried to speak, but nothing happened. Besides his eyes, which he found he could move slightly to shift his line of sight, his body was inert. He could hear Simon then, too, moving about in the background but beyond his field of vision.

“It’s all right,” Elizabeth whispered. “You’ll be fine. You’re what we’ve needed.”

She withdrew to one of the benches, where they had set up a machine, one Elzer recognised from the Russian reports, and there was the crystal, sitting on a little tripod and attached with several wires. Beside it was a silver kidney bowl, flecked with blood, and just the hint of some hair and a little snatch of scalp sticking up over the rim.

“It won’t hurt,” Elizabeth told him. “Simon’s given you something. Don’t worry. Just relax. We’re monitoring your brain patterns. With any luck, you’ll finally get us the answers we’ve been looking for.”

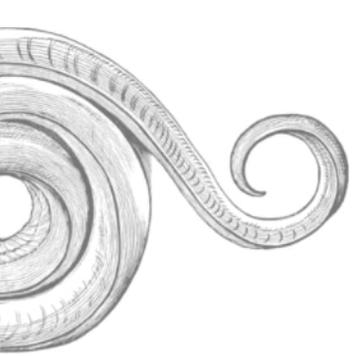
At first, he felt nothing, only heard the gentle hum of the device, but then there came the prickling feeling that someone was nearby, though he could see Simon and Elizabeth standing by the bench, five feet away. The things closed in around him, unseen, just shadows in the corners of his eyes, and he found himself staring at the bright, full moon, its preternatural silence pressing against his ears, the stillness of its landscape seeming to close in around him, filling his mind’s eye, as Elizabeth and Simon and the lab and the machine all sank away into nothing.

Last of all, he saw its face swim into view, composed of shadow and awkward, unnatural angles, never still, always shifting. And then it screamed.

## THE END

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**J.M. Ramage** was born in Dunfermline, Scotland. She studied stage management and worked as a tour guide in London, England, then returned home to study law and history. She worked with BBC Scotland and, for several years, with Scottish Television before moving to Prague, Czech Republic, in 2011. When she isn’t writing, she leads nighttime tours around Prague’s mysterious and haunted locations.





My mother dissuaded me from listening to the stories Pawul told. She said the men who sought us never brought good fortune and did not understand the ways of the sea.

## THE DIVERS

By Dave Chua

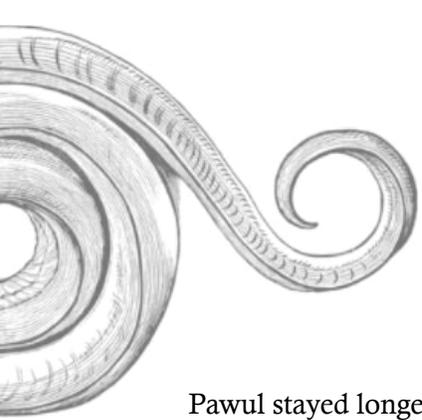
WHEN WE SAW the grey ship, the excitement rippled through all of us. It made a sound that filled up the sky and water, scaring the gulls and scattering them. On the boat, my mother looked up from her cooking and nodded to me in defeated surrender. Being careful not to gloat, I walked carefully past her to the back of the boat and carefully dug out the wooden box. I opened it and stared at the pearls. Three small ones, each no bigger than my little finger. At least they would fetch a price.

As the ship neared, the man with hair like the sun stepped out, smiling. He always smiled. Our chief, Khun, is the first to greet him. When the white man, whom we call “Pawul”, first arrived, we were wary. We had never seen a man like him, before, and he approached us with strange music playing from his boat. His crew was comprised of Chinamen who wore odd pieces of clothing like Pawul did.

Pawul knew enough of our language to communicate and offered us food that smelt like nothing we had ever known. Bread that tore apart in your hands, and fruit so red and sweet you only wanted more. He also showed us his gun. The sound it made was deafening; now every boy in the tribe wanted one. Knives and spears were too slow, and some of the boys said they had seen Pawul shoot and kill a shark, using his pistol. The creature had flopped around madly, slapping the water until it just turned over and died.

Khun trusted Pawul from the start. We had seen the ships of other countries come. No longer just the wooden junks of China, nor the sampans of Malaya. The ones coming from the far winds of the West were made of material like we had never seen. Khun had learnt Teochew from trading with the Chinese. Pawul knew some of the language and had crew that understood the tongue. When they both spoke, it was like having chickens next to you, cackling away. I did not understand any of what they said, but always laughed at their exaggerated actions as they tried to make themselves understood.

On his second trip, after about five moons where we were doubtful that he would return, Pawul brought Khun a special gift. He said it was a map of the world. It was brown and weathered, but still with fine lines and the shape of lands far away. The chief hung it proudly in his stilthouse and we would go to steal glances at it. Pawul had pointed out the country from which he came in the upper left. When we studied the map, we were surprised at how vast the world was and how much of it was sea. As we traced the outlines, we wondered what mysteries they contained. I thought one day I would be able to sail on it with my mother, to see the countless marvels of the world that Pawul spoke about to Khun. At first, I wanted to tell my mother about them, but she shook her head, shutting her ears.



Pawul stayed longer this time, as we had more to barter with him and he enjoyed Khun's hospitality. We learnt that, before he became a trader, Pawul had worked on a great ship that dropped long ropes across the ocean that connected two huge pieces of land on the map, so people could talk to each other. He had made enough of that thing he called "money", but still wanted to travel and see the world. Pawul would point at certain countries on the map and talk about the wonders they had. We made him repeat the words of countries until we knew them. Egypt, with its pyramids. America, where new rules and great engines were being made.

But exchanging stories was not why he came. Pawul was here for pearls and gradually, the boys fished less as we surrendered our bodies to the deep waters, plunging deeper into the sea, scouring for oysters to rob.

We tied heavy stones to our legs to bring us down, where the water felt like mud, where sound became muffled as though you had stuffed dirt in your ears, and you could feel your head become so heavy it could just float down with the stone.

I do not know why my luck was so bad. Many of the oysters I opened were empty or ruined. I threw them back into the sea, but a certain sadness came over me when I realised I had killed them each time by opening them. Yet, I continued to dive; the memory of the map, with the ridges of the countries, like coral, called to me, and the coins he gave were the key to the world.

The other boys started to dive deeper and deeper for the oysters, waiting until the last moment before heading up. The water was thick and cold beneath, and the currents were unforgiving. Sandul was ripped away by one and his family could not find his body. My oldest friend, Rama, no longer spent days catching the tailfins of young sharks and riding along with them. Swimming alongside rays and diving into schools of barracuda were no longer important.

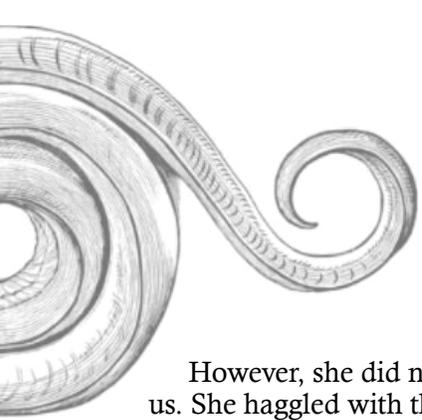


Pawul spoke much with the chieftain and the other adults. He shared with them drink, as though this were the most natural thing in the world. He said that once, he dropped a rope into the ocean and they kept dropping it, as though the ocean had no bottom. But there was more to the story, as we asked Adi about it later on. How could the line keep on dropping? Was it like string and made from hair? How had the whiteskin and his men had so much of it?

Rama was rewarded a visit to Pawul's boat. He told me of what he had seen within, carving shapes out of space. He said Pawul's cabin contained treasures from every land: wooden naga where every scale was an intricate piece of art; those things called "books", which were covered with the language of faraway countries; containers that held flowers; and, most impressively, an assortment of guns.

My mother dissuaded me from listening to the stories Pawul told. She said the men who sought us never brought good fortune and did not understand the ways of the sea.

Eventually, my mother was outraged by my constant disobedience and told me that if I were to go listen to Pawul's tales, I would expect to feast on them. She told me not to expect to have dinner if I did.



However, she did not stop me from diving for pearls, even though her fishing skills were good enough for us. She haggled with the traders that came to sell herbs, spices and clothes, and they would curse her for every transaction, saying how they would have to sell their own boats to earn any money from her.

I did not know what she expected of me. Even the traders and the puppetmasters told of cities growing, of men leaving their villages to make a living there. But that was my mother; some of the other boatmen said that when she heard of my father's disappearance into a raging night sea, she had covered her ears, told them all to go away and cooked his favourite meal, rich with spice and coconut milk, hoping the odour would bring him back.

Only months later could she come to terms that he was not returning, and she poured his favourite wine into the sea, and no longer looked out to the horizon for him.



A week after he had departed to visit another tribe, the puppetmaster Wakhun performed a show that featured Pawul. It wasn't immediately obvious, but we could tell it was him. The shadow his puppet threw was tall and thin, and he had a big, crescent smile. In the performance, Pawul's shadow took pearls from everyone, even mighty Rama and Bumi, and stuffed them into his mouth.

My mother told me not to continue with the pearl harvesting — the water spirits must be respected — and I pretended to obey.

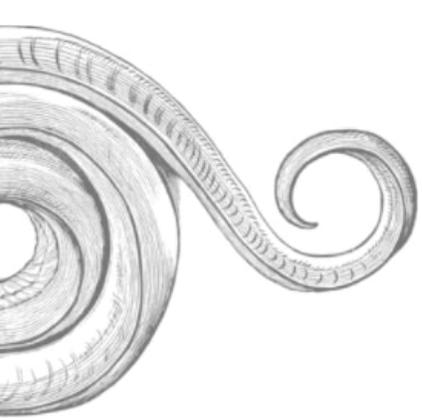
Inevitably, my mother argued with Khun about him. She said the tribe was forgetting its ways and the spirits were getting angry. Be warned, she told him. There would not be a good outcome. Khun did not dare reply.

Three nights later, when the moon was full and shed yellow light on the world, I could feel the sea whispering to me. My mother had heard it, too. I woke her up and we desperately paddled to shore. We could see the trees rattling and shaking, and the ground cracking. She screamed at the other boats, but she could barely be heard above the raging waves. Some heard her, but others did not. Khun was one of those who paddled hardest to shore.

She pulled and dragged me as far onto the land as she could. Her nails tore into my skin as she pulled and she hit me whenever I slowed. She told me to hurry. She said that this was the water god, who was angry. Rain started to come down. With each step, our feet sank deeper into the mud.

By the thin moonlight, we saw the waves sucked in so far that fish were stranded on the beach, wondering where the water had gone.

Then the water began to rise — higher than trees, almost touching the sky, picking up boats in a great claw and slamming onto the shore. My mother told me to keep quiet, as though afraid the mad sea god would hear us and send the waters to our hiding place.



When it came down, it was like the sky had ripped open and water pounded the shore, greedily destroying everything, rising so fast it tore through the land. The sound was so loud, as trees beneath us cracked and broke, that my ears rang.

After the devastation, with the palm trees broken like sticks, the bodies taken, there was hardly anything left of us. My mother hugged me close, unwilling to let me go, denying whatever spirit that wanted to claim us away.

I thought I could hear screams, the familiar voices of my playmates imploring me to come save them. I knew it was a trick of the water ghosts, calling to me to join them.

Eventually, I was so tired from the climb and exertion that I slept. When I woke up, the sun was on my face, my hands still clutched around mother. Birds sang as though nothing had happened. We carefully made our way back down into the water, though the ground was like brown porridge. As we descended, we saw corpses, but she told me not to look, as crabs and giant lizards fed upon the rotting flesh.

There were only six boats out of twenty after the great wave. One of the boats was rammed against the trees. We found half of Dend's body on one beach; the other half was gone. A shark thrashed about in a field of flowers; jellyfish flailed their tentacles from the broken branches of a naked tree. Odd-looking stones with strange markings carved into them were also strewn about. It hurt to look at them, like my mind was being stabbed with a knife.

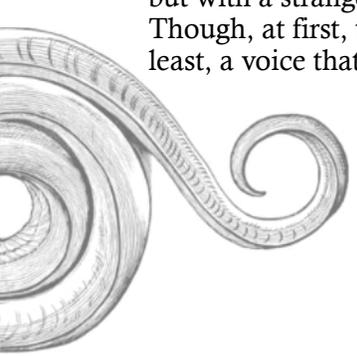
For days and nights, as I scrounged for whatever food we could find, the crying wouldn't stop. Women wailed to the sky. Most of the men had been at sea, fishing or catching pearls, when the great wave descended. My mother continued to hide herself; her warning came too late and I heard at least one voice blaming her for the disaster. But most knew why the great wave had come.

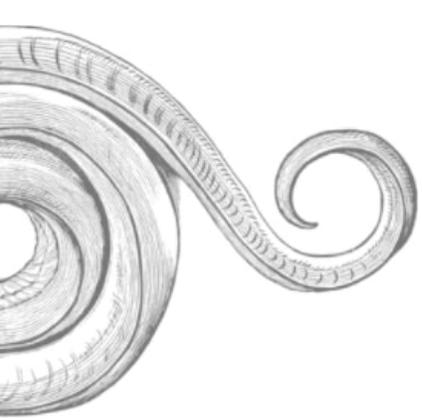
As another week passed, we returned to the water. We dived, for there was nothing else we could do. We could not shed our sorrow. Our tribe had been halved; we were sure the other sea tribes would be like us.

Rama mourned and cursed, and his diving became desperate. I followed his boat, while my mother settled what had to be done with the dead and the drowned.

It was during one of our dives that we saw it: a shell as big as one of our stilt houses. I thought we had been in the water too long, and that our eyes and heads were now deceiving us. It was striped with red and brown. We thought it might be alive, at first. Rama swam toward it. He was too fast for me. I had to retreat back to the surface to take in another breath. Then I dived down again, my head pointed directly at the depths.

Rama was now there and he appeared to be conversing with an oddly-shaped creature: almost human, but with a strangely formed head. Its eyes were unblinking and ancient, and it knew us. It murmured words. Though, at first, they made no sense, as I approached, they became clearer. It was an almost human voice, or at least, a voice that knew our tongue.





Rama was calling it a god, a spirit. He wanted the bodies of his parents back. The creature appeared to understand and went back into its great shell. I grabbed Rama's hand and started to pull him up. How could he have stayed down there so long? He did not resist; his limbs were weak, like a dead crab's. I tried not to go too fast, even though water was threatening to shove down my throat and into my lungs.

When I dragged him onto the boat, Rama was mumbling. His eyes stared past me. His body shivered. I slapped him a few times, but he continued to babble in a language I could not comprehend. It was like the sound you hear when you dive deep — the muttering of the waves. I did not dare go back into the water. Even though the waters were blue and clear now, I could not catch sight of the shell. It had disappeared.

I rejoined my mother, but I did not dare tell her of what I had seen. Rama rested in a cave and I lit a fire to warm his still-cold body. That night, while mother slept, I sneaked away. She was too tired from the day's work to wake. I found Rama, his eyes pale. He was sitting in a lotus position and his body shook from side to side. He was mumbling again. I gave him some of the food my mother had prepared and he suddenly turned to me, his voice a whisper.

"The fishman warned me. We are not to listen, anymore, to the white men. We have a destiny," Rama said.

I was taken aback, wondering if Rama were bluffing or deluded, but his eyes had sheer conviction, and Rama could not lie even to a baby.

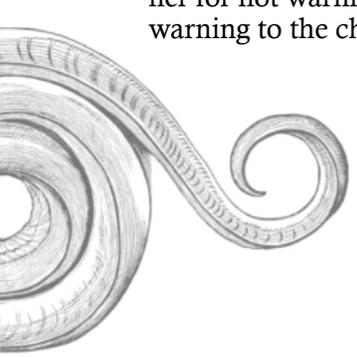
"You should just finish the food," I told him.

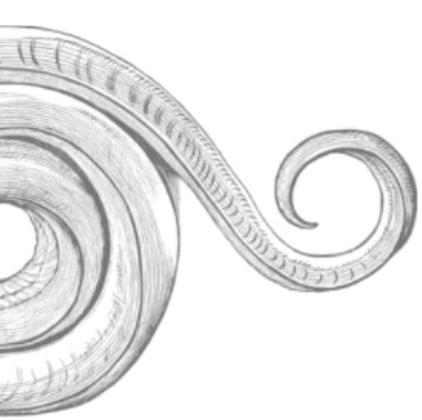
"We need to bring the boys. In three days," he said.

I nodded my head. I needed to obey and the determination in Rama's eyes was frightening.

For the next two days, I had to hide my intentions from mother; she was suspicious but still distraught. She had to help with the grieving, and others who had lost their relatives and children came to her. One scolded her for not warning them earlier, but she was merely a woman of the tribe. She refused to tell them about her warning to the chief. He was still in a daze and could only give feeble commands.

Rama was calling it a god, a spirit. He wanted the bodies of his parents back. The creature appeared to understand and went back into its great shell.





We brought the children as we were told. There were only seven of us; most of the others had disappeared, swept away. Only three had parents. Some of the other children refused to go with us and Rama threatened them, saying that, if they spoke about this, we would cut off their heads and feed them to the sharks and stingrays. With the pure madness in his eyes, they dared not refuse.

The night of the meeting came. We rowed our boats to the meeting point. From above, we could see the blue-green lights below, which Rama said were the fishmen waiting for us. We tied rocks to our legs and dropped into the water. It was colder than I could imagine. Rama's eyes lit up on seeing the fishmen again, as though he were seeing one of the *apsaras*.

There were four of them beneath, whispering to each other in their odd fish-tongue. They seemed pleased to see us and one of them placed a caul over our faces that allowed us to breathe underwater, though it was hard to trust the thin, jelly-like material. It was like putting a jellyfish on our mouths and noses. But soon, we could breathe, even though it was like being choked at the same time.

The largest fishman was twice the size of the others. It was a she, from her voluminous breasts, and she placed her slimy hands on our heads, congratulating us on our arrival. She wore huge plates of armour that looked like the shells of overgrown crayfish, on which were inscribed words and writing in a language that resembled that of the stones we had seen. The water in front of us was radiant with colours and we saw within it bizarre, new creatures that we had never seen before. Above us, a shark glided, throwing its moonshadow upon us.

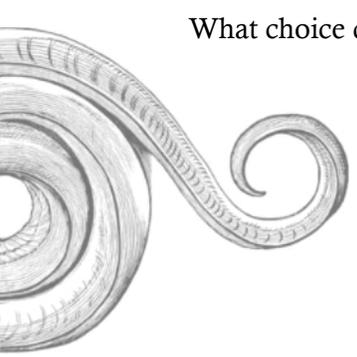
They took the pearls from us as if they were stone, because to them they were common and small as pebbles. Images swirled and formed in the white stone, and we shook in fear. The skin of the fishmen changed colour excitedly as the images became clearer.

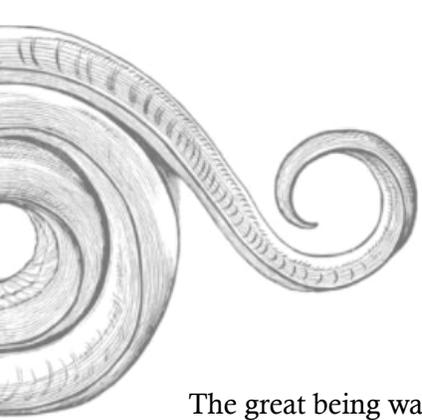
The images of the stone were unclear, but soon, we knew we were staring into the eye of one so wise, whose knowledge was so great it could not compare with our pithy truths. The hunger that the creature had was deep and it was patient. That was what it wanted to teach us; we saw the ruin that Pawul's men would bring upon us with their ship and gold. The sea would be eradicated, our villages would be destroyed, we would be merely greater slaves to their poisons. We would toil inside their ships, rowing, feeding a metallic monster that growled and spat at us. The whiteskins would bring an age of devastation. But even they would not survive the last flood that would come, where the fishmen would rule the drowned world.

The great being placed a promise in our minds. We could be one of the fishmen, rather than slaves of the whiteskins.

We were each given a choice. We exchanged looks and remembered those amongst us dead. We remembered how Pawul had run one of the men through with his sword as we would spear a fish.

What choice did we have? We had been deceived by Pawul's gifts and mock-kindness. We assented.





The great being was pleased with our choice. The fishermen cut our palms and poured a liquid upon our skin that felt like ointment. It formed a cloud in the water. I drew back my hand, but the fishermen had strong arms and their scaly hands upon my arm gripped it like the closed claws of a crab. I shivered and did not feel changed, but the fishermen said it would take years. We would outlive our fathers and other men. Then the ritual was over and my head felt heavy.

We drifted up, kicking to the sun. It touched and burned our skin. We kicked, we jumped, but the nature of joy had been taken from us. There was no sense of elation, only duty, and inside, a need to stare into that great eye again and to serve the creature that owned it.

The tide cradled us in. I thought we would not have the energy to swim to shore, but the sea handled us like a caress and placed us upon the calm sand. Once we reached shore, we parted ways, going back to our families, unwilling to speak of the ceremony.

When I returned from the sea to the cave, my mother was waiting.

“Where have you been?” she asked. She was hacking away at a coconut. We did not dare eat any fish; it was too likely to have devoured the bodies of the dead.

“I was helping Rama ... He thought he saw his parents,” I replied.

“Do not lie to me,” she said. She waved the *parang* at me. The coconut water spilled on the still-muddy soil. She dug her knife into its flesh.

“Where have you been?” She saw the mark on my hand and grabbed it.

“What is this?” she said. With the huge knife, it almost seemed as though she was ready to cut off my arm.

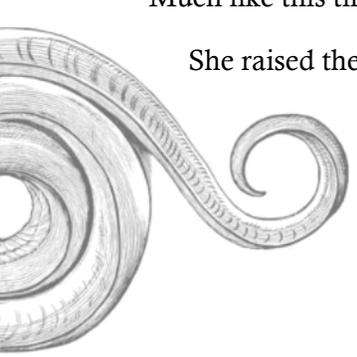
“I cut myself on a rock,” I said.

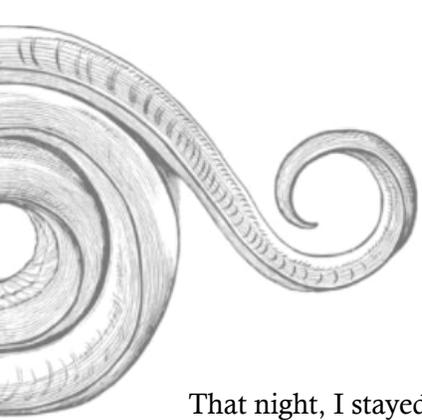
“Do you think I do not know what a wound from a rock would look like? It is nothing like that,” she said. A fever was rushing to her eyes. Whenever I lied, she would go into this rage. “Do you know what is done to those boys who lie?”

So, I started to tell her everything. I was too old and too strong to fear her slaps, but I did not want to lose her trust. I told her about Rama, and the fishermen, and the sounds and songs of the sea, the visions that they showed us. She shook her head as I spoke. The anger did not decrease. At the end of it, she did not speak for a while. I crouched, ashamed.

“Go! Go! You do not know what you have become!” she shouted. “The fishermen spoke to our people before. Much like this time, after a great wave. They took my brothers. You do not know what they will make of you!”

She raised the knife and I ran.





That night, I stayed in the cave. I caught a crab and tore it apart in my bare hands; its claws nicked me several times and I bled deep, thick blood. I was still human. The wound on my palm ached terribly. If I closed my eyes and focused, I could once again hear the humming, the singing, the dark song of the sea. I hummed along with it, as it gave me comfort. I tried to change to a lullaby my mother used to sing to me, but the notes sounded wrong.

Rama came to find me. He said that he had heard the humming and it could only be me. He was now the boy of old, but stronger, energised, as if he had found his fate, his reason for being. He lifted rocks around the cave and waved a stick as though it were an elegant sword. We dived into the sea, whose surface was still wild and shaking. Fish came to us easily now, offering their bodies.

As we tossed and twisted, we heard a sound not of the waters, nothing like the slow popping and crisp bubbling of new coral, nor the breath of fishes and their waving fins.

“The first sacrifices are coming,” Rama told me. He lifted his head to the surface and pointed out to the horizon; I could see the outline of a boat and the chugging sound that it made, like coughing metal. Rama’s smile was a sneer.

Rama sped towards it, his body straight as a spear. I thought he would smash himself against the rocks, but he emerged, still making large strokes, going through the water like a shark intent upon its prey.

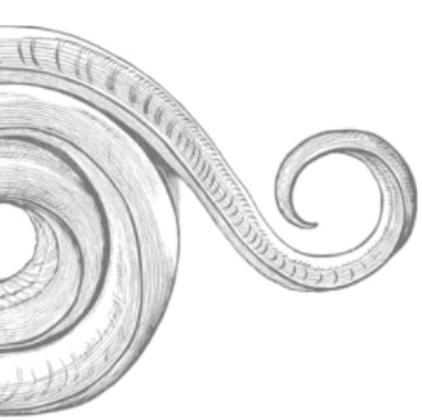
He shouted and the other children came to join him. I could see them running towards the waters, jumping in. There was nothing to fear, anymore, in the water and the waves. We were now able to hold our breaths for far longer than we ever could before, waiting for the approach of the boat. There were only four men. I assumed most of his men had died.

Rama took a conch shell and blew on it, and the fishermen came near the surface. They were intent, knowing that the enemy had returned. We watched Pawul come out. He looked fearful and his clothes were ragged.

Pawul disembarked with one of his men and went to Khun, but the chief had nothing to offer. There was much shouting and Pawul waved his pistol madly around. The fishermen observed. I could not tell if they were amused or bewildered. Their expressions were unfathomable. Did they have no joy? No laughter? What would happen when I became one of them?

Pawul grew impatient. He was demanding more pearls, fish, or even sea cucumbers. He ordered his men to take out their guns. I was armed only with a spear. The moon lurked upon the water, its face shining.

The fishermen emerged. They skimmed upon the water like stones you throw. They leapt out, with bone knives and barbed spears. Pawul and his men were taken by surprise and Khun cowered in a corner of his hut, begging for his life. They sliced the necks of Pawul’s men. Pawul screamed; there was recognition on his face. He fired his gun and took two of the fishermen down. The blood they leaked from their scales was pale and milky.



But there were too many of them. And we, too, joined in the massacre with our almost-blunt knives and stones. He was surrounded and we slashed at him slowly. The fishermen did not pay attention to his calls for mercy. Their spears cut long strokes on his flesh, letting the blood leak upon the water. He screamed until almost dawn. When the fishermen left his corpse, with skin flayed away, upon the beach, the morning tide took it greedily. By the evening, the crabs had ripped away the flesh.

The fishermen departed and did not even leave a trail of bubbles beneath the sea.

When I went back to land, my mother was not there. The hut we had made had collapsed. She had left a bowl of nuts and fruit. My heart felt like it would burst from sorrow.

I rowed away from the tribe. There were too few left and Khun had been driven mad by the incident. He stayed on land, refusing to ever go into the water. The remainder would merge with the other sea tribes and spread the way of the fishermen to them. I did not wave goodbye to Rama, nor to any of the other Changed; I took the boat and departed, knowing we would meet again when we became fishermen.

As I rowed away from the island, I saw a figure that I knew had to be my mother. She started to sing and my heart cried out. I struggled with the boat; I could not row and steer. Eventually, I managed to turn the boat near to the shore. I wailed out to her, for the nights were too quiet and I needed her voice. I knew that the gift the fishermen had given would gradually change me, but it was a slow transformation that would take years. My skin had become scallier and my eyes had started to protrude, but the change was slow.

I called out to her for five days and nights. Finally, she could not ignore my wails and came down to the beach. Her face was haggard and worn, her hair disheveled, as though she has woken from a great headache.

“Son, what have you done? Do you know what you will become?” she said.

The choice had been made. I could not answer back. The words stuck in my throat. In front of me was an oilcloth, with the pearls and shells and sea cucumber that I had no one to sell to.

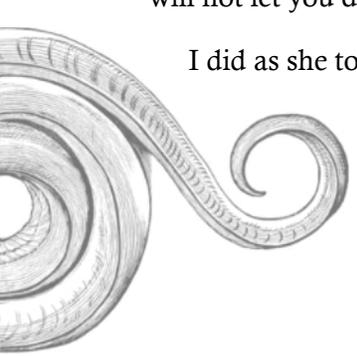
“I am still me, Mother,” was the only reply I could muster. “I still row with my lean arms, but the boat may as well be of wood. I still breathe air.”

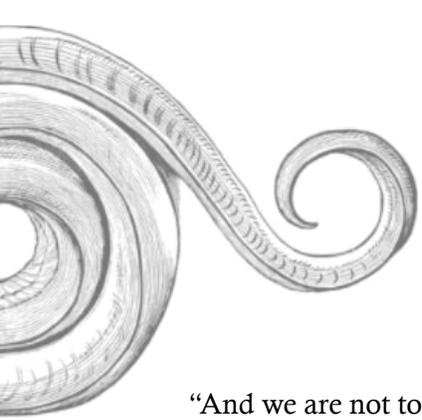
Her feet trudged through the sand. Her hands were stained with coconut milk. She walked into the waters and carefully came over to me. Specks of sand splotched her face.

She leapt onto the boat, like a water spirit from a story. She turned to me, but did not look me in the face.

“Row. My years are not many left, and I do not know if the water or the new men or you will take me, but I will not let you die. I saw your rowing; your father would be displeased,” she said.

I did as she told me.





“And we are not to speak of what happened again,” she said. Her eyes were upon the water, as the sunlight flickered upon it. She let out the sail and the boat started to move, pulled by the wind. Soon, we were out upon the sea, leaving our broken tribe behind. I did not tell her about the whispers I heard from the depths, the promises and the prayers uttered to me as I slept, or how my eyes could now peer deep beneath the waves to see the silver streaks of fish that cut through the water.

That night, after she had made a meal out of a crab, she stood over me with a knife in her hand. I pretended to sleep.

The dagger, dull as it was, shone upon my face, but I did not feel its fall. She sighed and threw it into the water, then went to her side of her boat and cradled herself to sleep, moaning. I watched her and hid my face as I shed salt tears.

**THE END**

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**Dave Chua** is a writer based in Singapore. He has written a novel, *Gone Case*, and won 2nd prize for ChiZine’s short story contest in 2009 for his short story, “Last Days”.



Written as a reluctant journal, *A Man of Letters* provides sufficient evidence to suggest Page was slowly descending into what can only be described as a type of clinical depression.

## A MAN OF LETTERS

By Peter Rawlik

*Dedicated to Cailin Kiernan, who inspired it.*

***A Man of Letters* by Marcus Theodore Page**

Arkham: Witch Hill Press, 20\*\* . \$49.95, Hardcover, 400 Pages.

**Reviewed by E.P. Fyte**

It should be obvious to regular readers of my reviews that I am not a fan of the fiction written by Marcus Page. I found his novel, *Dark of Night*, pretentious and derivative of the worst parts of Robert Blake and Ward Phillips. I called Page's *A Mourning Shadow*, "A solemn letter from a love-stricken teen with an Oedipal complex." His short story collection, *Whispering Shades*, was a juvenile exercise in literary hero worship and imitation that, despite its immaturity, likely garnished the kind of toxic attention of which he so obviously was in pursuit. In my mind, Marcus Page had been set on the shelf with Chalmers, Denbrough, Undercliffe, and others who have afflicted the public with their overly dramatic and self-indulgent prose.

So, it came as some surprise when editor Kate Lynn sent me *A Man of Letters*, Page's posthumously published account of his last days at Carter House. When I asked why she would send a copy of the manuscript to me, Lynn bluntly informed me that the cover letter to the manuscript conveyed Page's request that I be the first and only critic to review his final literary work. Written as a reluctant journal, *A Man of Letters* provides sufficient evidence to suggest Page was slowly descending into what can only be described as a type of clinical depression. Exacerbated by a diagnosed neurological disorder, the associated medication, alcohol abuse, creative process issues and financial concerns, it is clear the isolation of the Carter House and the events that occurred, or were at least presented by Page to have occurred, were responsible for his being crushed under a fallen bookcase. Lynn's introduction states that Page's death was ruled an accident, but I have my doubts. That the manuscript was posted on the day of his death makes me think that Page had come to realise that his end in some manner or other was inevitable.

Technically, authorship of *A Man of Letters* should be shared by both Page and the scholar Jo Shea. Shea spent a considerable time at the estate, while writing her biography of Randolph Carter, and apparently amassed a history of the Carter House, including a record of odd events associated with the property, spanning nearly four centuries. Page incorporated a significant number of these events into his journal, counter-playing them against his own odd experiences while staying at the estate. That *A Man of Letters* may be classified as



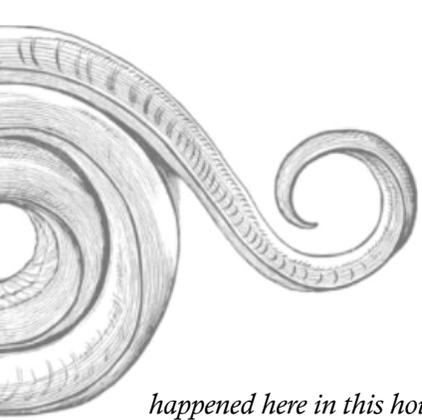
fiction, non-fiction, memoir, or history may be meaningful to critics and scholars, many of whom will attempt to pigeonhole it as a Carterian weird tale or a Snellian paranormal apologetic, but in my humble opinion, Page has created a new classic for fans of the weird to marvel at.

Much of this book is about writing and the act of writing; it is also about the limits of the first-person narrative as it relates to the truth. Page reminds us that “tales in the first-person narrative are told from memory and, therefore by definition, are unreliable.” Such is the relationship between the reader and the narrative in *A Man of Letters*. It is plain that Page, given his mental state, is far from a reliable narrator. Moreover, Page, through his actions, makes us doubt him and all his statements: He refuses to discuss certain past events; he drinks heavily; and he abuses his medication. Most telling, he claims to be unable to produce any fiction while staying at Carter House, but when his partner, the artist Clive Bayer, confronts him with a new story, “Hollow Words”, written in Page’s own hand, Page insists that he has no memory of writing it.

It is in a state of complete distrust of Page that readers are presented with a series of events which may be interpreted as evidence of preternatural forces at work in the house or, more importantly, the estate as a whole. The first of these is an attempt by Page and Bayer to walk from the house to a nearby store, which is just a mile away. That the two men are unable to accomplish this task, a task Page was previously able to accomplish alone, results in a passage reminiscent of Blake’s *The Labyrinth of Naught* or Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Such tales, in which a simple, mundane task is made fantastic by the apparent intervention of some malignant force that prevents its completion, have become a common literary trope, but Page’s reliance on it here can be excused by the significant discussion that occurs between Page and Bayer, acknowledging the existence of these other works, which may actually have influenced how they interpreted what was happening. Interestingly, when Page offers a plausible explanation for this implausible event, the reader, has by this point, learned that the author’s point of view is simply not to be trusted and is, therefore, ironically forced to side with Bayer and accept that something preternatural has occurred. The reader has been gently tricked into suspending disbelief.

Mirroring several themes from Koji Suzuki’s Ring Trilogy, the conflict, between Bayer’s belief that something supernaturally malevolent is occurring and Page’s unwillingness to accept such a proposition, drives the majority of the narrative, and allows Page to incorporate Shea’s accounts of murder, madness, and strange phenomena associated with the estate. That Page borrows heavily from events related by Shea about famed mystic Étienne-Laurent de Marigny — who, in his papers, tells of receiving a letter from the Carter House in 1922 and then being continually plagued by letters that would turn up, unopened and unread, throughout his home in the most impossible of places for the next five years — is forgiven by the skill with which he describes how Bayer’s studio succumbs to the forces apparently at work in the house:

*The room was empty, except for me, and the bed and the art deco dresser, and the letters. They were everywhere, inches thick, like a blanket of moss on a forest floor. They were identical to the packet I had found in my room the month before and identical to the ones I had found in the desk in the study prior to that. They were not the least bit yellowed or brittle with age. The return address, the address of the Carter House, was handwritten in ink, fresh and crisp. The same was true of the delivery address: Mr. Marcus Page, General Delivery, Arkham, Massachusetts. Were it not for the fact that each one bore a postmark from Arkham, dated in the first quarter of the 20th century, they could have been written yesterday and delivered that morning. I wanted to scream, but I didn’t. I didn’t make a single sound. I had been expecting this — well, not this exactly, but something. After all that had happened to us, after all that I had read in Shea’s manuscript about the things that*



*happened here in this house, something like this, it was inevitable. I shut the door, went downstairs, and poured myself a drink and then another. It was hours before I realised I had lost Clive, that the house had taken him away from me, consumed him, and erased him from my life, as if he had never existed.*

Some will complain that this is yet another example of a writer writing about the angst of writing, but this is only a superficial analysis of the text. Indeed, Page is talking about writing, but he is talking about a form of writing that rarely exists in these days of word processors, spell checking programs and on-line encyclopedias. Page is actually putting words on a page, putting pen to paper, and the process is very different than using electronic media. Indeed, the results are different, as well. The handwritten journal page serves to preserve the raw, unedited and unexpurgated train of thought that flows from a writer, which, in formal fiction, would then be rewritten in a later draft. This manner also preserves the unexpected errors that creep and seep in, such as when Page begins to slowly succumb to a seizure and the text written during this slow failure of his faculties shows its signs. In a novel, the author would describe such events and it would be made plain to the reader what was happening through heavy-handed exposition. In the journalistic style, the breakdown in spelling and syntax invokes a range of emotions in the reader — most notably, a growing sense of frustration that echoes Page's own, until, that is, the narrative comes to an unintelligible halt, as in Page's recollection of one of his dreams:

*"Bleeding," he said, as if he had never heard the word before, as if it were from a foreign language.*

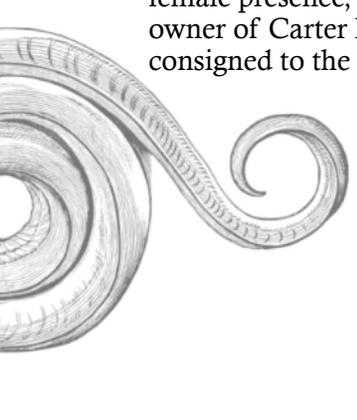
*"You're bleeding, Clive. There's blood on your arms and legs, soaking through your clothes. Your bleeding. Why are you bleeding?"*

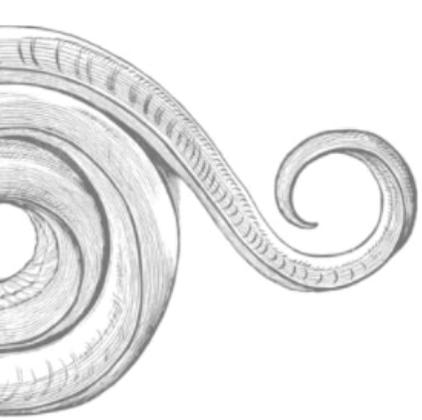
*And, knowing that this was a dream, and that this conversation was nothing more than part of that dream, I can still remember what he said to me. Letting the letters fall from his fingers, letting them fall to the floor and settle around his blood-soaked feet, Clive Bayer said, "He cut me, Mark, the Prince, the Sepia Prints cut me, and took my flesh, made me his."*

*I try to speak; I open my mouth, to ask him to explain, to tell me what he was trying to say. Thass when I feldt it, the knife inn between my shoulders, cuttin, takin mi flesh. Ntil, i cloud knot stann....*

If Marcus Page had written his fiction like this, perhaps he would have achieved some better notice amongst the literati.

In *A Man of Letters*, Marcus Page has written a masterpiece. If there are to be any negative criticisms, it is perhaps one that I have complained about before. Page's characters are often indistinguishable from one another, even when they are speaking; I have found it difficult to discern one actor from another, finding, instead, that they often meld together into a literary gestalt not unlike the characters in a David Lynch film. However, while that is an issue in his novels, it is not so much a concern in this narrative, as Page clearly acknowledges he cannot ever hope to do more than translate the other characters through memory. Consequently, while Page, Bayer, and the other characters all seem to speak with the same voice, it is because Page is speaking for them. Similarly, just as Randolph Carter's fiction was mostly devoid of any significant female presence, so is Page's final work. The only contemporaneous female figure is that of Lara Sing, the owner of Carter House, who only ever intrudes by telephone. There is, of course, Doctor Shea, but she is consigned to the past and we only know what little Page tells us of her. I suspect that Page's interactions with





any members of the female persuasion are significantly edited, not because they are unimportant or unpleasant, but rather because Page himself is incapable of finding their voice. Thankfully, the tale we are presented does not suffer for the lack of women.

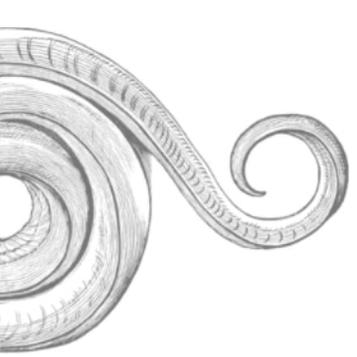
My only other complaint — and mind you this has nothing to do with Page’s writing, but rather with the systematic and even malicious manner in which I have been the subject of an abusive viral marketing campaign. It was amusing, at first, and I don’t know how they do it, but I really must protest. These things are in my mail, my office, my home, even my bed. This constant influx of letters from the Carter House, it simply must cease.

**Editor’s Note:** E.P. Fyte completed this review on March 12, 2008. Three days later, his home in Kingsport, Massachusetts was consumed by a fire, fuelled by his vast collection of books and papers. Fyte’s body was completely burnt beyond recognition and identification was based on the recovery of medical implants. On August 20, 2008 Kate Lynn left her office in Arkham for lunch and was never seen again. The following spring, Lynn’s Volkswagen Beetle was recovered by workers dredging the Manuxet River. While her body was not inside, her purse and identification were intact, surrounded and preserved by the mass of water-logged papers that had swollen to fill the interior of the vehicle. Clive Bayer is a successful commercial artist residing in Partridgeville, where he has been happily married since 1992. He has no recollection of ever meeting Marcus Page. Despite frequent inquiries to the publisher, Marcus Page’s *A Man of Letters* has yet to be released.

**THE END**

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**Peter Rawlik** is a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, and has had fiction published in *Crypt of Cthulhu*, *Talebones*, *Morpheus Tales*, *Dead But Dreaming 2*, *Horror for the Holidays*, and *Tales of the Shadowmen*, volumes 7 and 8. He has stories forthcoming in *HPL Mythos 2: Urban Cthulhu* and *Undead and Unbound*.





Abigail heard them before she saw them: the sound of wet fins beating against the soil, accompanied by a deep intestinal groan. Her horse reared back with a whine and Abigail struggled to keep her muscles from tensing.

## FIVE HOUSES ON THE SHORE

By L Lark

i.

WHEN THE FISH crawled out of the ocean to steal their cattle, the Xhosa refused to help them.

“We warned you,” they said — two young men caked in white clay, wearing white robes, like ghosts. Their Dutch was imperfect, missing vowels and interrupted by intermittent clicks. The tribe had entered into a shaky ceasefire with the settlers only recently, and they spoke little more than was necessary to trade cattle for ammunition and European medicines.

“We warned your ships not to wake them. They have slept for a very long time. They’re hungry, now.”

“What do you mean? Who are they?” Abigail asked, watching the long trails that led from the grazing pasture towards the coast. The imprints of the fishes’ bodies dwarfed those of the fur seals in the Cape and, however many there were, they were capable of overpowering five — six — cows in one raid.

“Please. Tell me anything,” Abigail said, but the Xhosa had no more words for her.

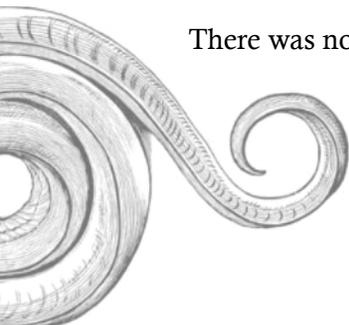
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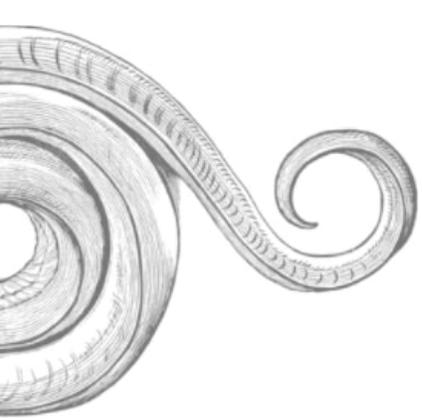
Abigail’s father had captained a whaling ship off the Cape of Good Hope. He had come to Africa as a young man, but retained a weary nostalgia for Holland all his life. When the *Leeuwin* had shattered upon the rocks at Duiker Point, its survivors claimed he had drowned humming a Dutch folk song about windmills nestled in mint-green fields.

Abigail did not know the song. Europe was little more than mythology to her. She had been born in Africa. She had shot a baboon in the stomach with a rifle. At night, she had heard the bored rumbles of predators in the bush and did not bother to close the window.

Abigail already knew that Africa was a land of monsters.

There was no need to be afraid of the fish.





The Xhosa men brought her to a sea cave half a day's hike from her settlement, but refused to enter. It was low tide and water pooled around their ankles. Fat, olive crabs scuttled away from their shadows, disappearing into the rocks.

"There," they said, pointing two fingers into the darkness. Abigail could not see the cave's end, but there was water slapping against rock in the distance. "The answer is there."

Abigail's lantern filled the cave with turquoise light and the scent of animal fat. She hesitated and turned at the cave's entrance, but the Xhosa men gestured her on, silhouetted against the sky. The cave opened into a small chamber and continued no farther. It was immediately clear why the Xhosa had chosen to show her this particular place.

Abigail had seen chalk drawings in the caves on high ground — crude scrawls in the shape of waterbuck, and ostrich, and hyena — but if these images represented real animals, Abigail did not know which.

These creatures had slender bodies like eels. They had appendages at both ends that could have been either hands or fins, and smeared rings of pale chalk for eyes. The drawings were accompanied by symbols that Abigail could not recognise. The language was neither Dutch, nor English, nor Xhosa, but the tribesmen had often mentioned a people who'd occupied this land before them.

"What are those things?" Abigail asked the men, shielding her eyes as she exited the cave. The sky over the Cape was always low and warm, trapping in the sourness of rotting seaweed and the invertebrates disintegrating on the beach.

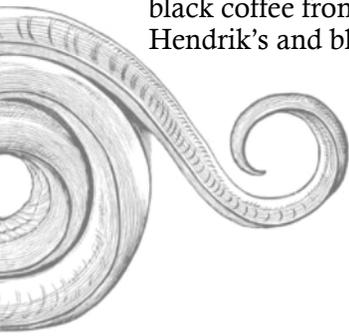
Again, the men answered her wordlessly. They turned in unison and pointed out toward the ocean, fear in their eyes.

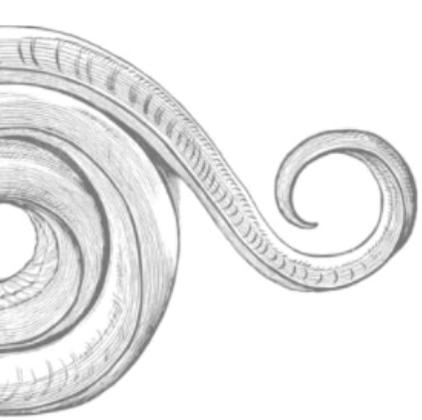
Abigail had seen chalk drawings in the caves on high ground — crude scrawls in the shape of waterbuck, and ostrich, and hyena — but if these images represented real animals, Abigail did not know which.



iii.

That evening, Abigail and her brother loaded their rifles and set out to guard the remaining cows, sharing black coffee from a tin pot. The caffeine made Abigail's eyes feel tight and dry. She drew her horse next to Hendrik's and blinked desperately into the darkness.





Hendrik was 16, and shared Abigail's blond hair and slight frame. She was his elder by only seven years, but Abigail knew half the settlement assumed he was her son. There were thick calluses on her hands. Her face was permanently pruned and red from sunlight.

"Do you really think they'll come?" Hendrik muttered. He had asked Abigail this question at least four times since the sun had fallen below the horizon. He was nervous and his horse knew it, huffing and braying, tail flicking against Abigail's shin. It itched, but she did not mention it.

"I don't know," Abigail said, and paused.

A moment later, she added, "I'm sorry," but was not sure why.

iv.

The fish did not come that evening, or the one after.

After the second week, Hendrik stopped accompanying Abigail on her nightly vigils. It was not the fish that spooked him, but a leopard that had moved into the hills above them and killed a Boer girl in broad daylight. Abigail had heard the baboon's alarm calls while the beast paced through their settlement, unseen.

Abigail was not afraid of leopards. Her rifle was loaded and strapped across her back with a sling. It had been 28 days since their cattle had been stolen, and the moon was full and brown.

The remaining cows were uneasy, hovering close to Abigail's horse. They looked weightless and buoyant in the darkness. Aside from their laboured breathing, the night was quiet.

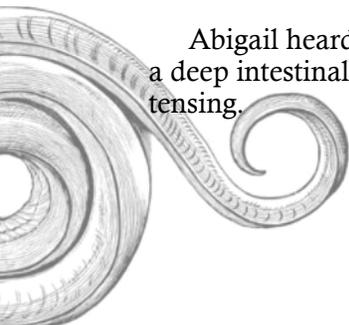
In fact, the only sound — Abigail noticed after a moment — was a steady gurgling from the west. It did not belong to the repertoire of noises Abigail normally associated with the settlement. It was deep, layered. Abigail could *feel* it in her limbs and molars.

Beside her, the cows gathered, eyes wet and trembling.

v.

The fish arrived at midnight.

Abigail heard them before she saw them: the sound of wet fins beating against the soil, accompanied by a deep intestinal groan. Her horse reared back with a whine and Abigail struggled to keep her muscles from tensing.





She readied her rifle.

She saw their silhouettes first — hunched backs dragging themselves over the hills toward the grazing ground. They were larger than she could have surmised from the cave paintings on the coast. There were five, at least, and they dwarfed the stinkwood trees that lined the route to their pasture.

Abigail's horse stumbled back. Her hand tightened around the rein, but she could feel the rush of heat in its muscles. She whispered something involuntarily, lifted her gun, and set off two shots into the sky overhead.

For a long moment, the fish stopped moving and Abigail knew they were watching her. She could hear the even voices of the Xhosa in her head: *Maintain eye contact, they would say. Make yourself seem large and unafraid. Do not run. This is Africa. If you run, you will be chased and if you are chased, you will be killed.*

It was good, then, that Abigail could not force her body into action when the fish lurched forward and resumed their trek. Even her horse remained locked in place, ribs suspended in mid-exhalation. Only the cows seemed to respond rationally, scattering into the shadows of the pasture.

Abigail aimed and fired again.

vi.

Hendrik found her the next morning. Abigail's horse was gone, but she had a strip of its rein laced between her fingers. For a moment, he'd confused her for their mother — her skin seemed too tightly stretched across her cheekbones and forehead. Her jaw was slack.

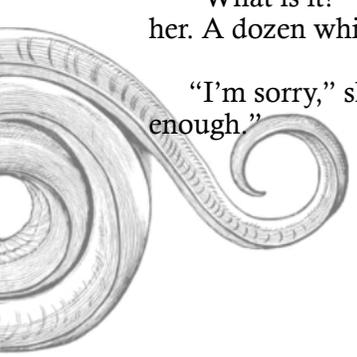
"Abigail," he said, moving her bangs out of her eyes, "what happened to you?"

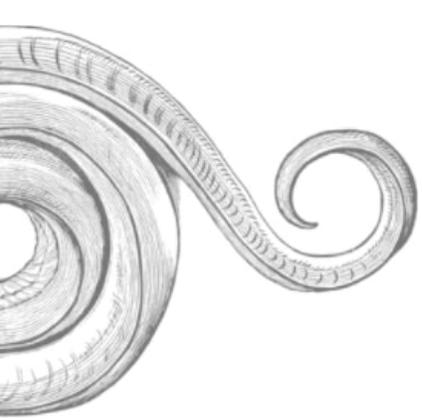
Hendrik's heart had nearly swelled with joy when he'd seen her against the northern wall of the sea cave, forehead pressed against the stone. When he'd arrived at the pasture that morning, the cattle had been missing and there had been deep gouges in the soil from where their bodies had been dragged across the fields. It was the fish, he'd realised, feeling like there were rocks tumbling in his stomach. Lions did not pull their food into the ocean.

"I'm sorry," Abigail said, saliva dripping into Hendrik's collarbone. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"What is it?" Hendrik muttered, but he could not tear his gaze away from the drawings on the wall behind her. A dozen white faces, peering curiously over Abigail's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said again, "We woke them and now they're so hungry. It will never be enough. Never be enough."





Her fingernails felt sharp and brittle against Hendrik’s neck.

“They’ll eat everything,” she continued, “*everything.*”

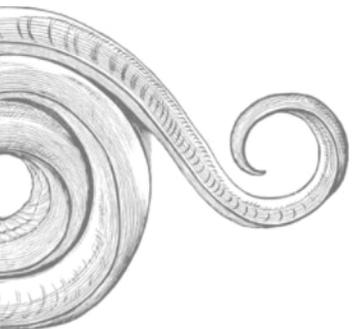
The eyes on the wall watched him, unblinking, as Abigail sank against his chest. He did not know what she meant by this. Their settlement was small, no more than five houses on the shore. There was nothing there to eat, but — Their hearts beat in odd syncopation with the ocean outside. Hendrik dipped his head into Abigail’s hair and tried not to believe in the creatures gathering at the water’s edge, hauling themselves unto the beach.

“I’m sorry,” Abigail said again and then spoke no more.

**THE END**

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**L Lark** is a writer and visual artist currently living in South Florida. She is prone to daydreaming, sunburn and walking into panes of glass. She attempts to blog at [www.l-lark.com](http://www.l-lark.com).



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