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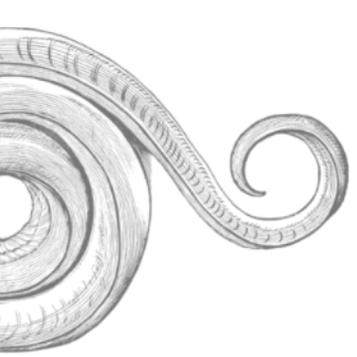
Innsmouth Free Press #10 (June 2012)

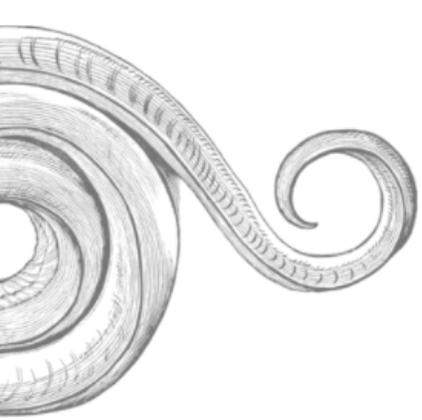
Cover art: Abigail Larson

Publisher: Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Editor-in-Chief: Paula R. Stiles

Contact and submission information available at www.innsmouthfreepress.com





EDITORIAL

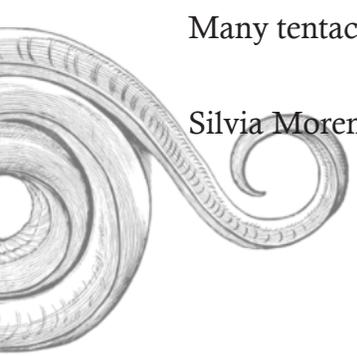
Welcome to issue 10 of *Innsmouth Magazine*, featuring cover artwork by Abigail Larson. What have we been up to during the spring? Well, we released *Innsmouth Magazine: Collected Issues 1-4* for the Kindle, with epub and other formats coming later this summer through Smashwords. We are also working on collecting issues 5-7 in e-book formats and hope to make them available in the fall.

You'll also be happy to know we are looking at offering a yearly subscription of our *Innsmouth Magazine* issues through Weightless Books. We'll keep you posted on that!

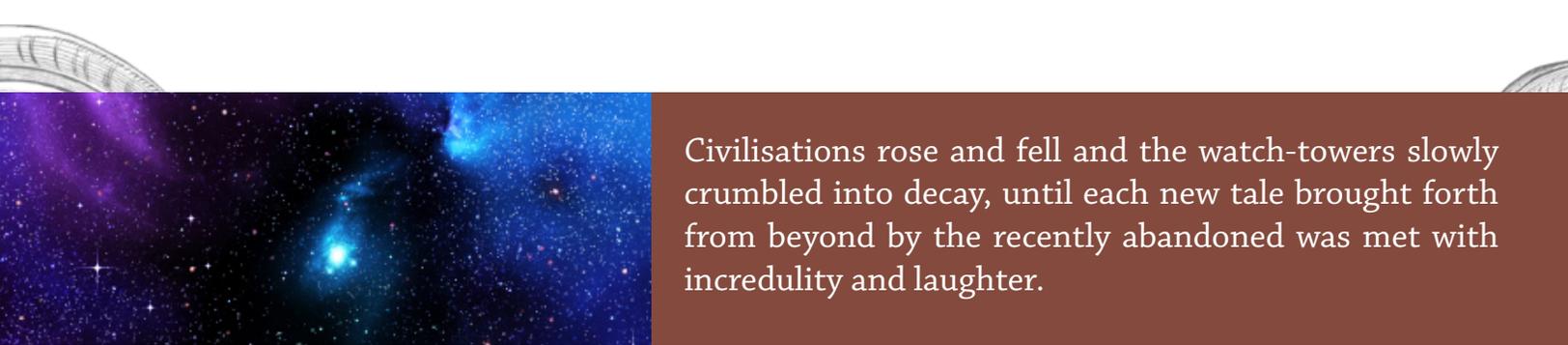
Otherwise, we are busy with the *Fungi* anthology edited by Orrin Grey and Silvia Moreno-Garcia. Keep your eyes out for those mushrooms late this year!

Back to the issue at hand, we are providing you with six shorts stories of the weird and fantastic. "The Sleeper on the Throne" is a sword-and-planet tale in the vein of Clark Ashton Smith. "A Ship With No Mast" tells the story of a shipwrecked man who is saved by an unlikely vessel. "The Lost Continent" also features characters at sea, following the epistolary narrative of a ship captain. "Notrees" moves the action to arid Texas, where two old friends are about to reunite. "The Innsmouth Ladies' Guide to Household Management" provides the reader with a glimpse at proper Innsmouth etiquette. Finally, "Market" concludes our ghoulish feast of tales with a delectable look at a different sort of menu.

Many tentacles,



Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles



Civilisations rose and fell and the watch-towers slowly crumbled into decay, until each new tale brought forth from beyond by the recently abandoned was met with incredulity and laughter.

THE SLEEPER ON THE THRONE

By Julio Toro San Martin

XULTHAL, THE FEARSOME Planet, was situated by the dim shade and senescence of a dying sun, in the time of the star-forging races known as the Atudiani Collective, masters of All-Space.

Anathema was the rocky orb to the Atudiani in the dim reaches of space and many cursed themselves bitterly when, by accident, their long ships found themselves within a light year of its noxious fumes. Then they would halt suddenly their ships and plow deep their metaphorical oars, opening their brake ports to let escape in trailing mists their anchoring exhausts. Most unfortunate was that person then, who, after mooring and after libations were spilled into the dark aether, because of tradition and rites of strange sortilages, was chosen as sacrifice to the God Lord of Xulthal, who sits and grins on his colossal throne of black gneiss. Unhappy were the eyes of those who countless times witnessed their star-pitching vessels leave and terrible the mien of they who knew themselves marooned and abandoned forever, on this, the penultimate boundary marker and farthest delimitation of the known universe.

And so, heavy with the weight of years on them did those abandoned, in sad aeons, await in hopeless hope word from the empty skies of rescue. As each generation of star-cartographers kept watch, little by little was forgotten all knowledge of space and was lost the lust of voyaging into elder gulfs. Civilisations rose and fell and the watch-towers slowly crumbled into decay, until each new tale brought forth from beyond by the recently abandoned was met with incredulity and laughter. Always, throughout this degenerative passage, the foul eidolon sat, eternal-wise, dreaming and grinning.



Great with cheers and pennants rode forth the 450 soldiers of the High Emperor, Galahir, from his decadent city by the Iglis Mountains, in the 7th cycle of the Empire of the Crushing Hand on Xulthal. With him rode the necromancer, Vesenthal, and the infamous barbarian from the mists of Calahar, Udian Andkar.

Pale shone the sun on the massive colonnades of the far city behind, when the army stopped and the necromancer turned to his toad-like master and said, "Galahir, High Emperor, your cruel yoke straddles the land as is fit for one of your station, but I fear even these scores of gimmaled men may be no match for the Dark Lord upon whose true empire we tread. Your empire is this corner of Xulthal, but his empire is the full circumference of this baleful and ribbed world. Behold: Yon far Iglis Mountains of vast, nubilous peaks are but the turrets of his walled fortress. Even should your men overpass his craggy citadel, what then? What if the Sleeper should awaken? Evil auguries warn that someday, our All-Master shall ope his Stygian eyes, when the powerful spells that keep this Old One buried wither and dissolve into a mist. Doom is prophesied for Xulthal then, when the stars are right. What if this venture is precursor to that foresaid day? Rather would I listen to



him when he communicates to us in dreams than hear one word of his spoken to us from his actual lips. Rather would I marvel at that miles-long, baffling, incomprehensible jester of grinning stone by the mountain than behold his true quickening horror. It is not too late and I counsel we return.”

Galahir threw an angry look at his bug-eyed vizier, while flicking his tongue. Removing one hand from his fat paunch, he placed it hotly atop the gilded hilt of his Friezun sword. Then, gently stroking it, he said, “For long years you have mocked at my indolence, necromancer. Now, when a deed of valour may be done, you shrink away in cowardice. Go back and sit upon my purple couches and drink from the high viands your yellow mouth often scorned to touch. I will go on. When I return in glory, be sure to know your head will be the first to roll.” Finishing, he turned towards the haughty barbarian by his side and asked sarcastically, “And you – do you also wish to stop?”

Udian Andkar’s eyes narrowed into two black marbles as he spat and said, with cold ferocity, “The sons of Calahar were born to plunder. Rue the hour you say, fat king, ‘Halt! We must return!’ Lest I turn on that hour and slit your throat.”

Pleased with the barbarian’s answer, Galahir laughed heartily.

“I fear we will witness many prodigies from here to our fate,” Vesenthal added.

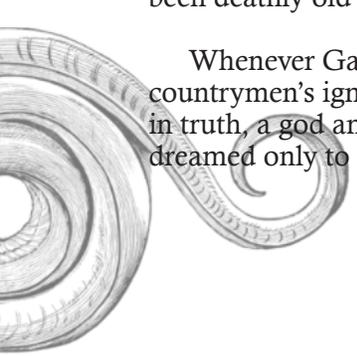
“I welcome it,” the barbarian said. Taking firm the reins of his eight-legged warbeast, he shot first into the wastes.



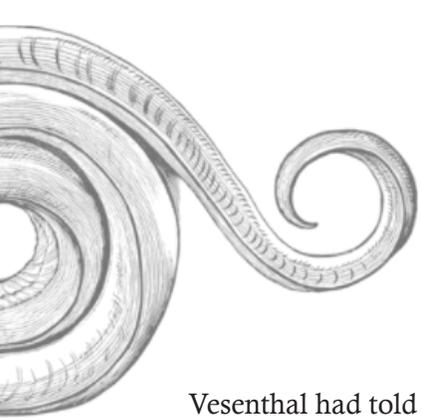
On the fifth day, with gleaming armours and hard hauberks, the company, arrased in royal blazonries, hilted blades wrought of pearl, battle axes, crested helms, pikes, and heavy maces, rode war-rigged beasts full speed onto the long-dead road that would lead them closer to the parapeted mountains. To left and right of them stretched in unfathomable distances the silent mountain ranges and ahead loomed the tall peaks that legend said housed the Old God.

Legend also said the foul idol of the stars had fallen from black worlds beyond the sane universe and, at its plunge, had cast upon itself huge mountains with its multifoliate snaky arms and built itself a subterrene kingdom, full of the outer laws from whence it had come.

The descendants of the marooned whispered this around broad campfires and dwelt on it when they travelled, canopied with golden helms, to far lands. None knew whether these myths were true or not, since these events were rumoured to have occurred in the long years before the advent of any tongue to speak of it. They could only wonder at the rude and ancient shape of dotting gneiss carved on the side of the mountain, representing it, and marvel at its unknown provenance from the perspective of eternity. Many averred it had been deathly old even when the first dwellers had come.



Whenever Galahir thought of the legends, he grimaced with disgust and laughed inwardly at his fellow countrymen’s ignorance and superstition. He knew the secret that what dreamed behind the mountains was not, in truth, a god and deserved no worship or veneration. It was, instead, an evil entity from beyond the skies that dreamed only to return thence again and resume its once-cosmic debaucheries.



Vesenthal had told him this secret, for Vesenthal was old and the last so far marooned on this planet, nearly two millennia ago. The necromancer had helped his ancestors build their mighty empire. They had esteemed his powers, but, most importantly, they had believed his stories of the outer dark, as now Galahir did.

When the High Emperor was young, he would often loaf, a flaccid toadman on soft divans, and often ruminate on the false god of the glaciated peaks. Of all the First Emperor's progenitors, he was the lowliest and basest and most industrious to vice. A noble thought had he none, but indulged he instead in all voluptuousness and every carnal sin of the flesh and mind, until, one day, total madness engulfed him. In this madness, he decided to blot out the vast image from the mountain. Slowly, he grew to hate it, since he could suffer no other power higher than himself to live.



Past molten rivers of refulgent flames the columned coursers marched and ever up volcanic rocks the broken path took them. Crooked and scattered ghoulish trees that grew sometimes on this dismal world, bleak and wild, they passed, until a great, trembling earthquake hampered them.

Mighty warbeasts fell. Stalwart men and thick, robust shields and scabbards hit the jutting ground. Some animals frightened into a frenzy rushed into rivers of raging fires and were lost, as beast and man burned and screamed in hopeless mania.

"By the great dark that at all times surrounds us!" the barbarian yelled. "Keep tight your reins and stand your ground! It is said in Calahar that ground-shakes are but the batting of an eyelash the Old One makes in his slumber! I scorn to be afraid of so small a thing! Keep to your senses!"

Bringing themselves to order again after Udian Andkar's loud command, and seeing no further auspicious prodigy emerging, the army, after Galahir's order, began once more their hellish ascent.

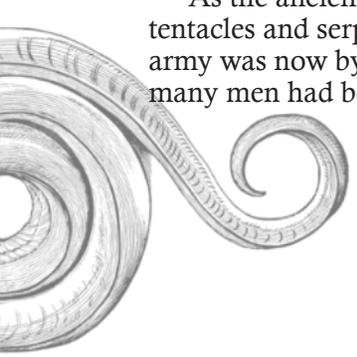
After awhile, Vesenthal turned angrily towards the barbarian and whispered, "When the time is right, kill him, as we have agreed. Then the throne of the Crushing Hand will be yours. Only then shall we return alive from this madman's quest. Few will weep for him; believe me. Do not shrink away from this great enterprise that I have placed before your feet. With you, the empire shall once more be feared and not be laughed at by our enemies."

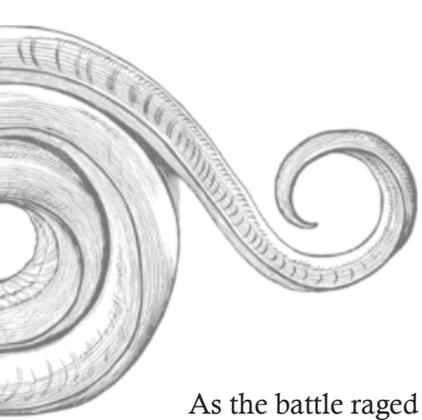
"I will kill him even if the God Lord of Xulthal stood to defend him, old one."

"Let us hope we never make it close enough to find out."



As the ancient and dying sun shone pale on the rock floors, from which fissures mawed and great heaving tentacles and serpentine appendages issued, the barbarian found himself hewing and hacking furiously. The army was now by the first low foothills of the Iglis Mountains. Already, many dangers had they passed and many men had been lost.





As the battle raged outside, Vesenthal chanted alone in a shadowed cave. His hood was off, revealing his shiny carapace and insectoid eyes and mandibles, common to those life-forms of his former planet, Socchid. His long locust arms were curved as in prayer. He chanted over a strange, obelisk-shaped metal.

He had found it, buried for millennia, in the southern deserts. When he saw it, he knew the thing for what it was: a teleportation mechanism, built by some mad, unfortunate soul out of nearly impossible-to-find materials and long-forgotten technology. He knew that only the right words and right posture could activate it. Over the years, he had said every word in every language out of the thousands known to him from the Atudiani Collective, tried every bodily position, uselessly. He had never been able to make it work. More than likely, neither had its original creator. Nothing on this planet seemed to work when it involved escape. Even all the former civilizations, as far as he knew, seemed to have mysteriously crumbled once their people had reached the rudimentary knowledge to begin to dream of charting accurately their knowable cosmos.

Now he chanted furiously and thoughtlessly to escape the battle and hopefully, this world altogether.

Looking outside the cave, he saw how the huge slimy appendages grabbed, encircled, and crushed or crashed against the strange scum flesh of Galahir's army. The creatures, the god-forsaken races, the descendants of the discards and refuse of a thousand and more far-flung planets, fought bravely and desperately to withstand this latest onslaught, they were sure, from their All-Master. Mindless saurian warbeasts, the strongest and fastest known to the Crushing Hand, rammed or tottered by the dancing tendrils, as vegetable and biological life slithered or crawled, jumped, flew, ran away, or rushed headlong into the melee. Blades slashed, shields clangoured, and weirder noises sounded from things that needed no exterior weapons to fight. Here and there, in places Vesenthal could not tell apart in the darkness, the shambling races and slugging things fled from the snakish attackers.

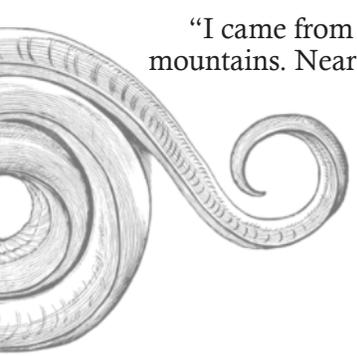
Then hell-born laughter assailed his ears as he saw the barbarian, smeared in gore, enter carrying a vast, twitching tentacle. In his other hand he carried the bloody squamous head of the toad-like emperor, Galahir. Great terror was writ on the head's face. Still, its round eyes rolled and its emerald mouth moved unwittingly in nervous ticks, gurgling gibberish commands from its mangled voice-box.

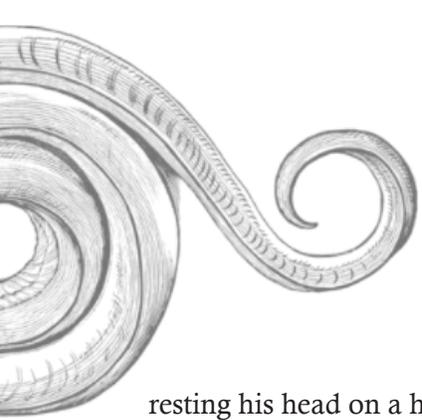
Throwing the head at Vesenthal, the barbarian yelled, "I have changed my mind, necromancer! We shall continue to the God Lord's lair! I shall rule the Crushing Hand and also be thought its greatest emperor, when I bring back news of the slumbering Old One's defeat! The woman! The woman will explain more!"

"What woman?" the necromancer shouted back, puzzled. Yet, almost as soon as he finished his question, from behind the barbarian Vesenthal saw a womanish shape begin to materialise. As she floated towards him, slithering, he was shocked to realise the mist-shaped thing developed fangs and, also, sinister and hypnotising, yellow, reptilian eyes.



"I came from sky-flung towers," the serpent woman, who was named 'Aesika', said from her abbey by the mountains. Near her, around a table, set with common food and drink in wooden utensils, sat the barbarian,





resting his head on a huge clenched fist and also near her sat the necromancer, deep in thought. “Still, I dream of those towers,” she continued, “reared by my serpent people on that young earth, on a continent now dead hundreds of millions of years ago. Now it has fractured and pieces of that once-mighty continent float slowly on deep waters around the planet – a planet now ruled by a creature called ‘Man’, a creature that did not even exist, whose ancestors had not yet crawled from the muck when my people first looked and took to the stars. I helped rear those Babelian towers in the youth of my world. I knew their first architects and now I am trapped here, as you are, while aeons have passed at home and in the universe at large. The Dark Lord of the Stars has given me the gift of immortality to merely weep like a caged, eternal bird, while he slumbers days and years away. I am tired. I want to fly. I want to leave. I ask again: Will you help me?”

Vesenthal, the addressee, looked at her hard, as if searching for signs of any trickery on her face, and then replied, “The God Lord of Xulthal is powerful. Even now, he watches us from his dark halls and knows everything we do. I do not know why he has not deigned to come against us, but I do not wish to find out and neither do I crave to feel his wrath.”

“He sleeps and dreams, insectoid, as I have also slept and dreamt at times these uncountable years. He found me while I dreamt and brought me here. I travelled through vortices of time and gates it is not proper now to speak of, to be his slave, for then he was amused by us lesser life-forms. However, I know now he has forgotten us – I am certain! For aeons, his thoughts have been elsewhere in the universe. Like specks of dust we are to this mighty being. When, in truth, is the last time in living memory that anyone has had commerce with him? Those creatures you have fought are not he but his worshippers that fell to this planet before you. He has forgotten us. Let us escape now while we can and are able to get close to him to work our magic. You may never have this chance again, necromancer. What do you say?”

He looked at her more closely now. Realising that she was telling the truth, that this might indeed be his last chance to leave the unholy planet, he answered, “Let us go, then.”



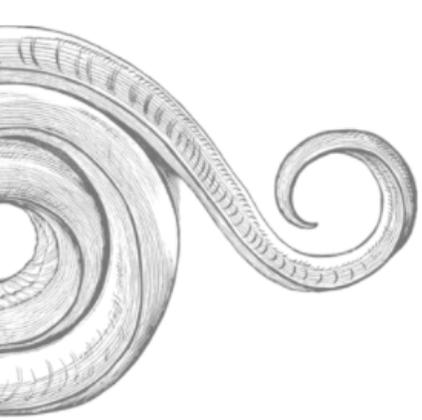
From beneath four dead and lustreless moons, the necromancer and the barbarian saw the beasts, which the reptile woman had summoned, land. The beasts would transport them over the Iglis Mountains. Only the three of them would travel – the rest of the army now being unnecessary.

The beasts landed by thrawn and black trees. Two big, ice-pale and transparent, vermes things, like maggots or inchoate nightcrawlers, they were, with long, gangly wings and two bird-like legs. From their nauseous mouths, below their prostomiums, dripped slime and came unsettling croaking noises.

Once airborne, the barbarian and the woman, both on one beast, led the way.

Peaks and valleys passed before them and still larger peaks of mountains and lesser volcanoes loomed. Wind blew threateningly.

Soon, Vesenthal thought he could touch the four moons of Xulthal. Below him and above him was only darkness and then he saw the tallest apogee of the mountains.



“Look,” Aesika said to the barbarian. “Who is that who sits and slumbers?” She then laughed. She pointed at this zenith to show how, directly below it, was carved the gargantuan form of the Lord of the Planet on its throne of black gneiss, with its many snakish arms and body stretching thousands of miles downwards.

Vesenthal shut his eyes in fear as the thing’s huge top loomed before him and then vanished as the worm-bird flew over and past the tallest peak.

“Such a large image could not have been sculpted by mortal hands,” Udian Andkar said.

The woman from behind him answered, “No, darling, only his gigantic ancient priests, who perform his secret rites under the ground, could have done such a wonder.”

Passing the highest summits, they saw now how peaks of smaller mountains awaited them, curiously placed as if in a circular pattern, like living earth walls.

Atop three of those mountain peaks, the worms circled and dropped their riders, each vast distances apart, and then flew away. The three humanoid were placed in a triangular pattern on the circle of mountains.



Not the wastes, thought Vesenthal, of this fearsome and always-savage world of Xulthal, with life flitting and death near, of mostly rocky terrain, molten and hot and – in places – demon cold, of few comforts, small oceans, raging weathers and frightful fears, and illumed by the cold light of a dim star, could strike his heart with such tremors as now he felt, atop these dark-wooded, desolate, rock-ribbed steepes.

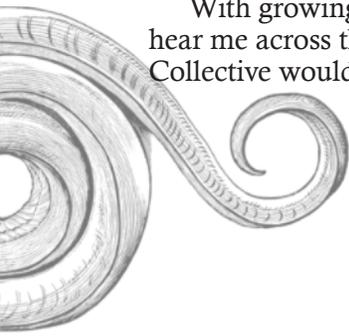
Below him, he knew not how far the abysses plummeted. Above him, the stars and moons seemed bigger and bloated.

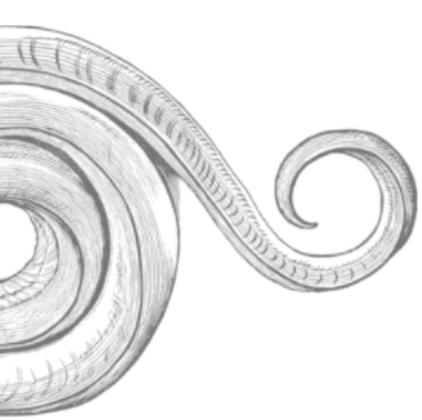
He knew that somewhere, in the far black mountains, like dots connecting a triangle, the barbarian and the woman stood atop their own blasted pinnacles.

Near him was a stool of stone, butting against the pine-bending winds that blew from the gaping chasm.

With growing trepidation, he soon listened to the sorcerous woman say, “Do not be alarmed that you can hear me across these tremendous distances. The technology of the Elder Ones was such that even the Atudiani Collective would marvel at it. Those stone markers that you see, inscribed with strange hieroglyphs of an

Soon, Vesenthal thought he could touch the four moons of Xulthal. Below him and above him was only darkness and then he saw the tallest apogee of the mountains.





antique world, are the high places from which the long-gone Elder Ones first grabbed and imprisoned the Lord of Xulthal and pulled him forcefully from the stars. Step at my word on top of them quickly to see and marvel at what happens. But do not step off them at any time, for then the spell will be broken and all shall be lost.” Then she commanded forcefully, “Step on the jut of stone now!”

Vesenthal did so, with blood beating fast, and instantly felt dizzy. The world seemed to move, the wind blew harder, strange buzzing noises assailed his ears. From the fathomless pit between the circle of mountains, a light of various colours shot out and engulfed them all. The distances seemed to – and yet, at the same time, did not – come together. He could see Udian Andkar and the female serpent where they were on their own obsidian stones. The great spiralling mountains encircled him, yet with this new distortion of vision, he could see them clearly, vast and yet near. Then, from the profundity of the abyss, he saw a great storied throne emerge, whose towering crest touched the sky, on it sitting the eidolon of horror, its zenith touching the stars.

Such a monstrous thing, the necromancer thought, as he looked up. It was higher than a mountain, was undefeatable by insects such as they were. He regretted now his foolhardy decision and wept at his certain death. Indeed, the throne and the creature on it dwarfed the tallest peak. It was a miles-long hologram.

“See that I was right!” he heard Aesika scream gloatingly. “He sleeps and pays no heed to us at all!”

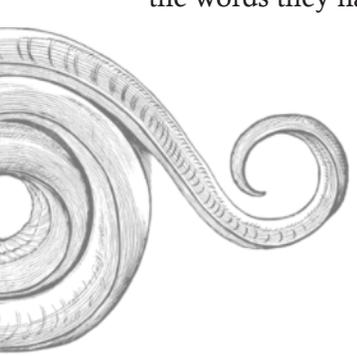
The necromancer was shaken out of his fear by these words. Slowly, hope crept back into his heart, as, with each passing moment, the figure on the throne remained idle and aloft of any mundane occurrence. It was a king of eternity and its thoughts dwelt only in those spheres.

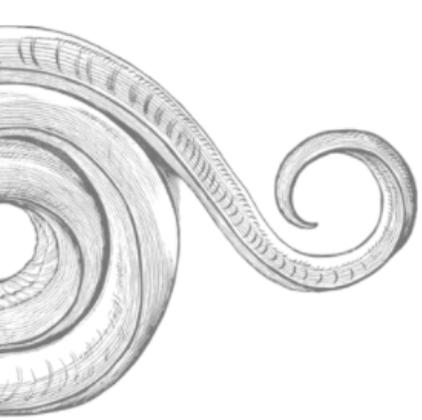
“Now, necromancer!” the abbess yelled urgently. “Place the teleportation mechanism by the Sleeper!”

Vesenthal was now wide awake to the plan they had agreed on. He did not know if it would work, but, with vital and renewed hope, he placed all doubt aside. The woman had said she had fixed the mechanism. Even though they had not tested it, out of the faintest fear its power might attract the Old One’s notice before they had a chance to use it, now with confidence in the woman, the necromancer moved to place the object in front of the Sleeper. The woman had said that what the entity’s devilish image felt likewise affected the Sleeper under the planet. They hoped that the teleportation mechanism, enhanced by the cosmic powers of the old builders of the prison, would teleport the beast far from them.

Magically, as he moved his hands closer to the abyss, they grew distortedly bigger. Even though he remained the same size, his hands and the object grew huge and became a part of the hologram, scaled so that the object looked what it would be like if it were an imp-sized thing by a throne.

Amazed, he took his hands away. They shrank to normal size. He then began to modulate his voice and say the words they had all agreed would activate the mechanism.





But nothing happened.

Except for the first movement of the Dark One on his throne.



Then, frenzied, the barbarian took his heavy sword out of its sheath, panther-quick, and heaved his arms in an arc so that its cutting edge might cleave the monster by its top. The sword grew massively large, because of a distortion of vision and matter, while it swung ever forward over the great chasm in the midst of the sentinel of mountains, becoming mysteriously part of the hologram, until the barbarian saw he carried a mammoth, miles-long blade in his hand. As it moved in less than a second towards the entity, the barbarian anticipated joy to think it could cleave a mountain. But, quick as he was in his wild lustful rage, the tentacle appendages at the sides of the Sleeping One were quicker. Before he could finish his shout, a tentacle blocked the sky above him and others thrashed before him, with lance-sharp teeth within the maws at their tips, one limb knocking the impossibly large sword out of his hands, sending it careening down the Iglis mountainside.

He looked not at the blade, though, but in awe instead at the flailing, planet-thick limbs, like constellations, which seemed to come shy of brushing against the stars above.

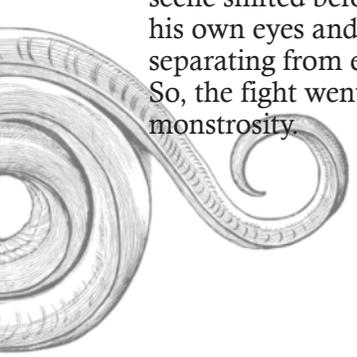
“By the lesser gods of Xulthal!” he yelled, “what have we awakened?”

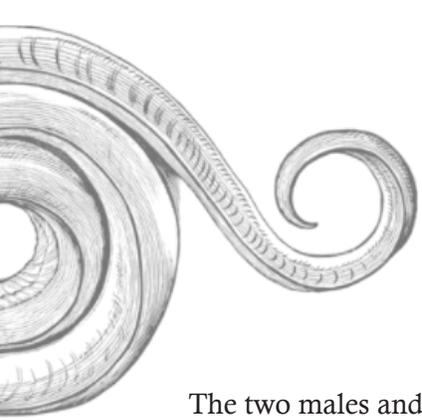


On the Old One’s holographic trunk, eyes – or what seemed eyes or something else; Vesenthal was not sure – opened like voids in the dark, while he saw the gigantic blade of the barbarian fall. The creature turned its uppermost top, which culminated in craggy peaks like a crown, towards him and motionless remained with potential energy.

His people, aeons before, had mastered words which could command matter for short periods of time. With this skill, the necromancer began to construct an insectoid, a feat which had earned him his title, since the ignorant races of Xulthal believed he, in fact, resurrected the dead. Sand, atom, bark, stone, and pebble morphed into molecule and organ, as, little by little, chitin, limb and carapace joined until a wailing, gumless wraith emerged from the blood-red dirt and stood by Vesenthal on his stone-stool. It hurled itself forward. This motion caused a gargantuan representation of it to form, which began to grapple with the other thing on the peerless throne.

Seeing this, the barbarian, after tensing his muscles while remaining on the stone, with thought-intent also threw himself against the waving tentacles. His hologram hit the thing as a tree hits a solid wall. Hologram hands grabbed tentacle and feet kicked alien flesh as he manoeuvred on the stone. With each movement, the scene shifted before him in impossible views, while his representation fought. He saw, inexplicably, both through his own eyes and through his hologram’s eyes. Mountaintops moved from north to south, coalescing then separating from each other. First, he was in front of the thing, then in back, then on top, bigger than a moon. So, the fight went on, as the serpent woman also joined in, wielding a dagger with which she tried to stab the monstrosity.





The two males and the female fought bravely until flashes of extreme energy hit them where they stood and their battling images crumbled. A power held them to the stone, paralysed, while the shadowed entity on the throne, now undisturbed, stretched its many tentacle arms into the sky and began to spin them. Helplessly, witnessing forces they did not understand, the three felt and saw as wind coalesced above the tentacles. Air as wind swept past them, drawn like a magnet, and trees and detritus were pulled towards the epicentre, while clouds also closed in and spun, and great lights tore the black sky above. The mountains rumbled and shook while a massive whirlpool or maelstrom formed above them all and the thing on the throne sat in massive splendour, connecting earth with the heavens now opened, within whose spinning was reflected an alien sky.

Then they felt in non-sounds, yet knew it was happening somehow, a great laughter from the god. With it, only now did the three come to ultimately respect the true dimensions and cosmic power of the thing. Their mouths were allowed to scream as realisation of their doom hit them.

The teleportation device suddenly became operative and flashed a beam, which the Old One drew to himself. With greater power, he directed it out towards the open hole in the sky, as other beams hit the three and they felt themselves drawn into the light. Then they saw themselves above the Old One, coursing away as the hole in the sky closed below them.



Vesenthal, between gasps of fear, wondered desperately while he was being teleported through hyperspace whether the grinning thing – for now he could recall dimly a slit that seemed to grin where its nose should have been – had, in its cosmic power, actually granted them their escape. But then he remembered from legends how even its pleasing rewards were monstrous and alien. So, he screamed more.

And screamed he still as his mind melted and was lost in the mind of a dumb sea-beast on a far planet of water.

The serpent woman, whether in reward or punishment she never knew, found herself alone in hyperspace, in which for aeons she would float, not knowing either light or rest.

And as for Udian Andkar, he, years later, proud and battle-scarred and the first High Emperor of the Atlanteans on a planet named 'Earth', sat on a throne in glory by a wide ocean, with white-and-black hair falling over his face. He wondered thoughtfully at his life and at the strange enigmatic turns it had taken. He thought also of his former companions on Xulthal and if they had been as fortunately rewarded as he. It was a reward he was granted, he was sure, not because of laws regarding punishments fitting their crimes or of rewards justly dealt, but because of incomprehensible judgements based on pure cosmic whimsy.

THE END

Julio Toro San Martin resides and grew up in Toronto, Canada, and has had short stories published online in *Innsmouth Magazine* and *The Lovecraft Ezine*, and also in the print anthologies, *Historical Lovecraft* and *Future Lovecraft*. He will have a short story published in the upcoming *Fungi* anthology.



He had no lantern and the storm had eaten the stars. There was a vague grey glow that could be mistaken for moonlight, but it was impotent as a ghost.

A SHIP WITH NO MAST

By Stephen Eldridge

THE RAIN BATTERED the oiled cloths wrapped around Gabbin's body, forcing itself through the single fold that he'd left for air. The lifeboat was small and rapidly taking on water. He had no illusions about his chances of survival – even if he were willing to disturb the relative warmth of his shelter to begin bailing, the tiny vessel had no defense against the wind and the vicious waves. This was a hungry storm and Gabbin was only a morsel.

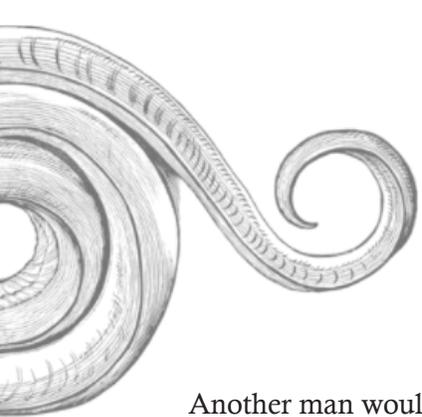
He was content to drown – he had already lived longer than a man of his nature ought – but he was unhappy that he must do it blind. Rain and wave had robbed him of any chance to see his end coming, no matter how intently he peered out from the layers of his den. He had no lantern and the storm had eaten the stars. There was a vague grey glow that could be mistaken for moonlight, but it was impotent as a ghost. Even when the wind wasn't making his eyes stream, he could hardly see the prow of his own boat.

Which was why he didn't notice the ship until it was on top of him.

At first, Gabbin didn't understand what he was seeing. Then he had a moment of irrational terror – perhaps it was all true. Perhaps the Brine Prince really did exist, roaming the sea to collect the damned souls of pirates and castaways. But Gabbin was practical by nature, and that practicality had kept him alive when superstition had gotten other men killed. He soon saw the ship for what it was: a slim hope of survival.

Shouting was useless – his voice was shredded by the wind and no one on a ship's crew would be idle enough to answer stray cries when battling a storm. As usual, his hopes lay in his own abilities. Bracing himself against the cold, he sloughed off his protective layers and reached for the bag stowed under his seat. He yanked it out, discarding the contents one by one – matches; a short-sword; even his charts, which would have brought him a profit at any port in the Northern Sea – until he reached the one thing that he cared about. He ran the rope through his hands, working out knots and kinks, and then got to his feet. Forcing himself upright despite the tumbling of his boat, he swung the grapple around and launched it up. The wind took it and it sank, useless, into the sea. Cursing his impatience, Gabbin pulled the grapple back in. The effort of fighting the water nearly ruined him, but at last his breath returned. He waited for even the briefest lull in the wind and the rocking of his boat. Gabbin hurled the grapple again and, this time, it bounced off the hull of the ship. He knew he had little time before the ship was dragged away, his own vessel capsized, or he was defeated by exhaustion. His hands shook with cold and fear, but he swung the grapple until its motion was steady. His instant came, a wisp of calm, and he threw.





Another man would have said the ship was cursed. It took Gabbin three days to recover the strength the sea had stolen from him, and in that time he noticed many strange things about the vessel that had saved him. It had no mast, for a start; neither did it have oars, nor even a rudder, so far as he could tell. It was painted a deep green, which was a mad thing to do to a ship, as no paint could survive a voyage. But then, the whole ship had the smell of ornament to it. Every bit of wood not meant to be stood on seemed to be carved into some manner of fish or serpent. It had a vast store of treasure, but Gabbin was beyond caring about anything but food and fuel. Amazingly, the ship also had a vast and varied larder full of fresh fruits, bread, meat, and even soft cheese – food totally unfit for sea travel. If he'd been less hungry, or if he hadn't resigned himself to death only hours before clawing his way aboard, he wouldn't have touched it for fear of plague or poison. But it all looked remarkably clean, so he had stuffed himself. Minutes later, he'd emptied his stomach into the ocean, though he couldn't honestly blame anyone but himself for that.

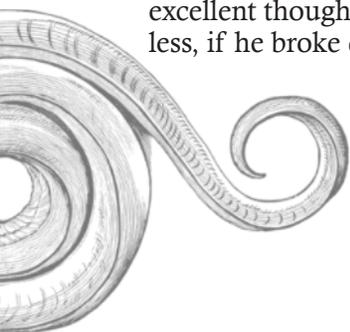
The strangest thing about this small ship floating in the middle of the Northern Sea with magnificent provisions, and a horde of gold and treasure, was that it didn't have a living soul on board. There was no sign that anyone had ever been on board – no clothes, no bowls, not even any cabins. Only the girl and she was dead.

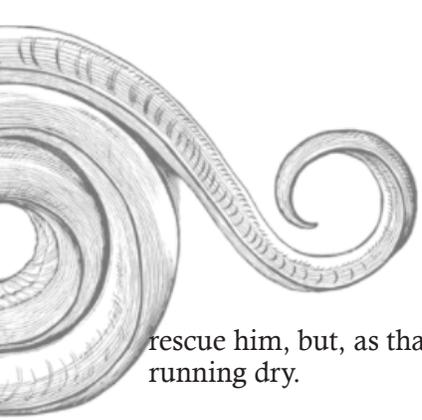
Apart from being dead, though, she was quite beautiful. In the midst of the hold, surrounded by treasure, she lay in a raised silver sarcophagus with a glass lid sealed to preserve her corpse. And preserved it was. If it hadn't been for the coffin and the fact that she hadn't moved for three days, he never would have believed she was dead. She was from one of the Sea Cities of the East, he suspected, pale of skin, but with exceptionally dark-brown hair and a slight build.

He thought she looked about twenty, but her sleep – no, death, he had to remind himself – made it hard to say. She wore a flowing white dress bedecked with silver, sapphire and aquamarine. Entwined in her hair was a thin silver crown and, by this, Gabbin took her for a princess. He had never seen a princess before. He found the experience strangely thrilling. If it weren't for the slight complication of her death, this would have closely approximated Gabbin's dearest fantasy.

The long and short of the situation was this – Gabbin had stumbled upon some sort of heathen funeral ship and now he faced a very short life filled with lavish comfort. The ship was clearly not meant to go anywhere. Presumably, it was intended to drift the seas with its precious cargo until it was dragged down into the Brine Prince's court, at which time, the dead princess would reawaken and feast for eternity with all her possessions, or some other mystical nonsense. He was still lost at sea; he was just lost on a prettier ship. Even the food, excellent though it was, would be inedible within days. This stroke of luck had bought him only a few weeks – less, if he broke down and tried to eat the rotting meat. His only hope was for a passing ship to sight him and

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rescue him, but, as that had essentially already happened once, he suspected his reserves of good fortune were running dry.

The sensible thing, it seemed, was to eat and drink his way through the larder as quickly as he could and then live off his fat when the remainder rotted. There were, Gabbin knew, worse fates that a pirate could meet on the high seas.



As the days stretched on, Gabbin was forced to re-evaluate his plan. Inexplicably, the food showed no signs of spoiling and nor did the dead princess. What's more, days of eating good food, sleeping on stolen silks, and imagining ways to spend a horde of gold had rekindled his desire to live after the storm had so nearly extinguished it. And the girl ... well, she had rekindled something, too, and he didn't want to die before it could be satisfied.

He had avoided her, at first. Gabbin had never enjoyed the killing that went along with his profession and corpses put an uncomfortable burden on his conscience. He considered himself above the nonsensical superstitions of other seamen, but he couldn't shake the feeling that, somewhere, the shades of the restless dead were gossiping about him. Every dead body stared up at him, saying, "We know you, Gabbin. You've earned a reputation. And when you join us, we'll treat you as befits a man of your stature"

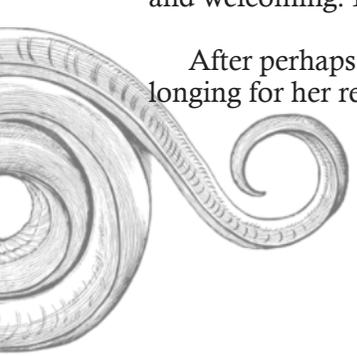
But he had begun sneaking looks. He was a man and she was the first woman he'd seen in nearly a year. There could be no harm in looking – after all, the coffin had been designed for display, hadn't it? And when another listless week passed and he began talking to her, that was simple make-believe. He knew she was dead; he knew he was speaking only to himself – but it felt good to talk. He wasn't insane; he was alone. And he was desperate for someone to help him figure out how to steer a rudderless ship to port.

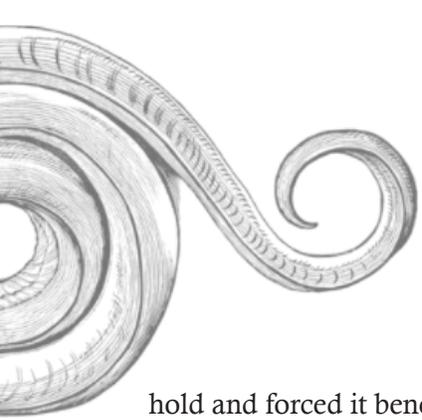
He named her 'Margarite'.

Now that the storm had passed, Gabbin was impressed by how smoothly the ship sat in the water. The pitch was so mild he might've been walking on land. For a pirate who'd spent more years on sea than most men lived, it was disconcerting. More disconcerting was the fact that the days were getting shorter. The current of the Northern Sea should be moving them slowly West, yet they were cutting a steady course North, toward the Top of the World. He related these events to Margarite with growing trepidation. Even aside from the strangeness of their course, the fact was that there were no settlements to the North. If they had any hope of being rescued, it lay in stumbling onto a shipping lane or coming closer to shore. Their current bearing led only to a freezing death on an ice floe.

Loneliness and worry gnawed at Gabbin. The vastness of the sea was oppressive. For the first time in his life, he retreated from the upper deck entirely. He spent whole days leaned against Margarite's coffin, drinking from a cask of wine and bouncing gold coins off the walls of the hold. It was getting colder, and he longed more and more for the warmth of a woman's touch. Margarite would be no help, there, of course, but she still looked soft and welcoming. It was more than Gabbin could bear to look at her through the icy glass.

After perhaps a month, his will broke. He awoke that morning having dreamt of her and the agony of longing for her refused to retreat with his sleep. He grabbed a silver knife from among the treasures littering the





hold and forced it beneath the glass lid of the casket. Gabbin's heart pounded as he pried the crystalline sheet loose, sending a nervous thrill through him that he hadn't felt since his first woman years before. As the lid gave way, the coffin made a gasping noise, as if it had taken a breath. For a petrified moment, Gabbin was certain that the corpse would crumble, rotting away at the very touch of the harsh sea air, but the moment passed and Margarite was as beautiful as ever. He pushed the glass away. It shattered on the floor and he jumped, certain someone had heard the crash. But of course the only one there to hear was Margarite and she was undisturbed. Breathing harder, Gabbin let a hand creep down into the casket and brush the curl of her hair. His fingers trembled and he pulled back. He turned away, sinking against the silver casket. He ran his hands over his face, through his growing beard, and discovered that he was weeping.

Working his fists, Gabbin pushed himself back up. He refused to bawl like a child. He refused to let himself go mad. He wanted the girl, right or wrong, and she was dead and unlikely to mind. There was no reason not to just take what he wanted and get on with the business of freezing to death at the Top of the World.

Yet, looking down at her, he felt something other than lust. He recognised it, but he pushed the thought away as impractical. He reached down and pushed her dress up. He suffered another moment of shock when he saw that the princess wasn't wearing any undergarments. The strangeness of this circumstance made him hesitate, but then the sight of her overcame him and he was pulling off his trousers. The casket was wide enough that he could climb on top of her, as if they were sharing a bed. He fought the urge to kiss her, but he pressed his face against her neck. He could almost imagine she was warm.

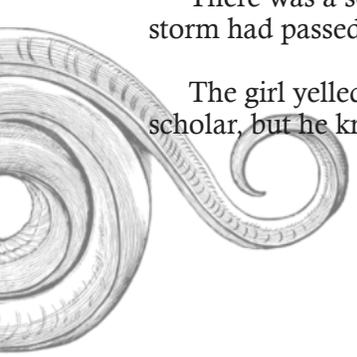
As he entered her, she began to scream.

Gabbin fell flailing off of the coffin and onto the shards of glass littering the floor. Margarite was sitting up, gasping and crying. Gabbin didn't know what to do; he didn't understand what was happening. His mind had surely cracked. Yet, Margarite was wailing in one of the Eastern tongues – could a madman imagine a foreign language? He didn't know. But he knew he didn't want to hear Margarite scream, anymore. “Quiet,” he said, his voice strangely faint after weeks of muttering to a corpse. “Quiet,” he tried again, and this time the word was a sharp bark.

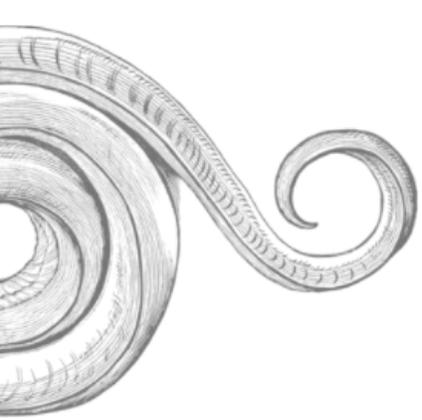
Margarite's cries settled down into low, shuddering sobs. She glared up at him, reddened eyes flashing beneath her almost-black curls. She said something else he didn't understand. Her voice was shrill and the syllables unfamiliar, but he was still pleased by the sound of another voice. Suddenly, she thrust herself out of the casket and onto the floor, slippered feet crunching on glass. She grabbed a handful of coins and hurled them at him furiously.

The shock of the cold metal against his feverish skin brought Gabbin back to his senses. “Stop it,” he spat. “Speak sense or be silent.” It was strange, he had been sharing his thoughts with Margarite for a month, but now she was a stranger.

There was a sound of rolling thunder in the distance and Gabbin noticed that, for the first time since the storm had passed, the ship was rocking.



The girl yelled something else and Gabbin was surprised to hear a word he recognised. He had never been a scholar, but he knew the word for *whore* in a dozen languages. *One-night bride*, the Easterners said, to hide their



sins behind a pretense of marriage. The girl was obviously no common tart, though, so Gabbin assumed she was insulting his mother. To drive the point home, she leapt at him and slapped him across the face. Then she sank back, pressing her palms to her eyes in a failed attempt to hold back her tears.

“I don’t understand your jabber,” Gabbin growled. “And I don’t have time for it, either.” That was a lie, of course. He had all the time in the world – or, at least, as long as it would take them both to freeze in the lonely North.

Margarite wept harder. She spoke again and, this time, the words came slowly, bitterly. *Marok* was one and it nagged at Gabbin’s memory. It had the sound of a name. He repeated it, rolling it over his tongue in the hopes of joggng its meaning loose. As he spoke, Margarite screamed in frustration and cast herself to the ground.

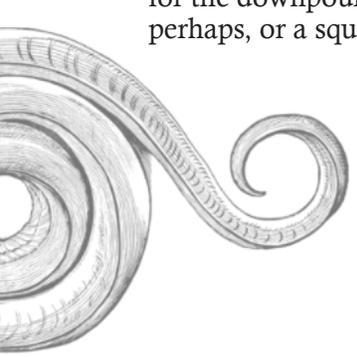
The ship was swaying harder now and it was all Gabbin could do to keep his feet. The girl was beyond reason, he could see that, but he still ached for her. Now that he’d been denied, it seemed almost as though she’d done it on purpose, luring him in only to cast him away at the moment of fulfillment. “Stop crying, you little cow,” he hissed at her. “If being fucked in your sleep is the worst thing this life has in store for you, consider yourself lucky.”

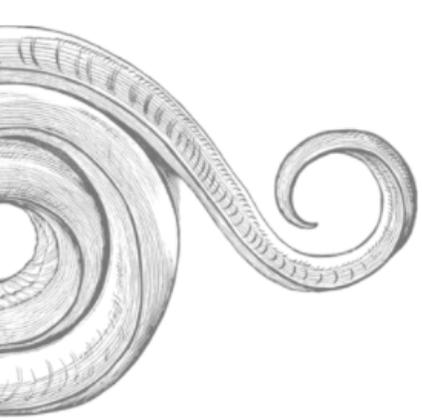
The girl hurled another handful of gold at him with an angry yell.

Enraged, Gabbin walked over to her and pushed her back against the pile of treasure. Her eyes went wide and she tried to struggle away, but he held her fast. When she saw it was hopeless, she shut her eyes tight and began to recite something that had the cadence of a prayer. There was the word again, *Marok*, and Gabbin remembered. A pagan sea god – he’d heard Eastern sailors pray to him many times. Usually just before they died. “Stop it,” he commanded. Perhaps she didn’t understand, but Gabbin took her prayer as defiance. Every time she repeated that word, his blood grew hotter. “There is no Marok!” he finally yelled, shaking her. He couldn’t have explained why the prayers made him so furious; he just knew that you couldn’t give the sea a name and make her love you with prayers and sacrifices. The sea didn’t listen. She was a cold-hearted bitch and Gabbin liked her that way.

The girl trembled. She repeated her chant breathlessly. Even crying – even praying – she was beautiful. Gabbin fought with the urge to finish what he’d started in her casket. As he held her, the ship gave an enormous lurch and knocked them both to the floor in a shower of gold. Margarite cried harder. Ignoring her, Gabbin staggered upright and ran to the stairs. If they’d hit an iceberg, they were doomed. If they’d hit land, they might just have a chance.

He burst through the doors to the deck and out into a wild, battering rain. The shock of the cold almost knocked him down, but a month of glutting himself had left him insulated against the worst of it. The world was a twilight of grey clouds and green ocean, where neither sun nor moon held sway. He could hardly see for the downpour, but there was no land in sight. Whatever they had struck had to be in the water. A whale, perhaps, or a squid.





Another shock ran through the vessel and nearly pitched Gabbin overboard. He felt his jaw crack against the railings, tasted blood, and felt teeth loosen. He pushed himself back up and saw something slick and black sinking beneath the waves. A whale, it had to be a whale.

A scream cut through the hammering of rain on wood, and he turned. Margarite had emerged from belowdecks, her white dress plastered to her body by rain, her once-perfect curls a sodden tangle. She screamed out at the storm in her strange tongue. *Marok!* she cried, gesturing wildly to herself and to Gabbin and to the sea. *One-night bride*, Gabbin thought, and realised what that meant. And now she was making excuses, blaming him for what had happened, as if the sea and storm would spare her if she could only explain herself.

Another burst of irrational anger came over him. He wanted to walk over to her, to scream at her or beat her until she begged *him* for mercy and not some false god. Gabbin was only a man, but he was real and if she had a hope of salvation from this hell of a storm, it was him.

The sea grew dark around the ship. The whale was surfacing again, trying to capsize them. Gabbin skidded across the deck toward Margarite, catching her as the vessel lurched once more. She screamed and battered him, but the cold seemed to have sapped her strength. He held her as the thing rose.

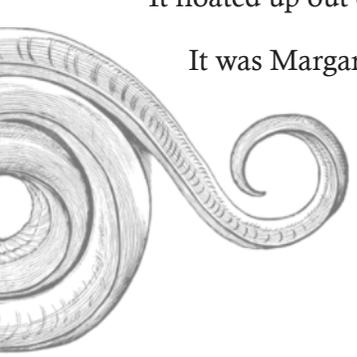
The waves parted. A great black shape loomed on the port side of the ship. Suddenly, the sky spun overhead and the sea was rushing toward them. Gabbin lost Margarite, and then lost the deck beneath him and found himself falling toward the great deep. But instead of falling into the hungry waves, he slammed into the starboard rail. Some part of his leg snapped. As he howled his pain into the wind, something soft and wet slid into him. When he realised it was Margarite, he clutched her close to him. In her terror, she clutched him back.

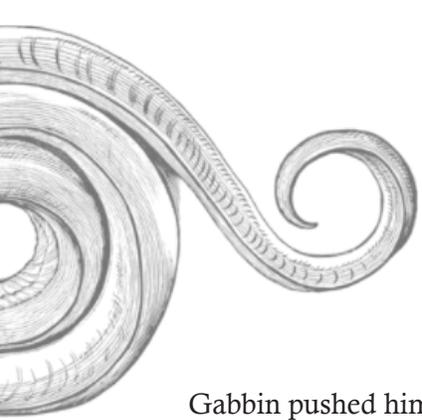
The deck lurched again as something huge and black wrapped around the stern, so heavy that the ship tilted toward it. The icy sea rushed up around the rail, swirling around their waists. Gabbin pawed at the deck, but the slick pine gave no purchase. He turned his eyes down, hoping to see Margarite looking back up at him. Instead, the cursed girl had her eyes closed, praying again. The ship shuddered and the sea rose around her. Gabbin felt a pang of horror as she released him. For a moment, he clutched her harder – she was *his* now. He had taken her; what kind of bride would she be to her sea god now? But she was dead weight, dragging him down – and try as he might, Gabbin could not win a tug of war with the sea. He let her go and she sank into the dark water. He pulled his eyes from the drowning girl and tried to stay afloat.

The ship was doomed; that much was clear. Cold had numbed his legs so that he couldn't even remember which one was broken. He needed to find something that would float; some bit of wood or a barrel, or anything that might keep him from freezing to death in the frigid water, that might hide him from the great, dark *thing* that was dragging down the ship. Still hanging onto the sinking deck, he scoured the sea for hope.

Something moved in the water. Not the horror from the deep, but rather, something small and white and red. It floated up out of the shadows, swirling toward him, and he grabbed it.

It was Margarite's dress, stained with blood.





Gabbin pushed himself away from the deck and began to swim. He knew the churning of the water would attract notice, but he was beyond caring. Darkness moved beneath him, something titanic with eel-black skin. Deep in the abyss, he glimpsed something he couldn't understand. Great whirls of water flowed into a cavernous mouth full of needle-like teeth. The current caught him and he began to spiral down.

Marok. The thought forced its way into his mind, and turned his aching muscles warm and weightless. He couldn't feel the water, anymore. The ship sinking behind him concerned him no more than the bloody dress still clutched in his numb fingers. As the abyss swallowed him, he realised that he had been wrong. The sea had a name. But it made no difference; no prayer or sacrifice would make him love you.

THE END

Stephen Eldridge is the author of several nonfiction books for children and young adults, including *Trace Evidence: Dead People Do Tell Tales* for Enslow Publishers. This is his fiction debut and he's grateful to finally be working in a medium where Lovecraftian horrors are not only allowed, but encouraged.



My left headlight flickered, loose in its bracket. Like it had something in its eye. I'd turned down a couple of dirt roads not far into whatever it was that called itself Notrees.

NOTREES

By Michael Wehunt

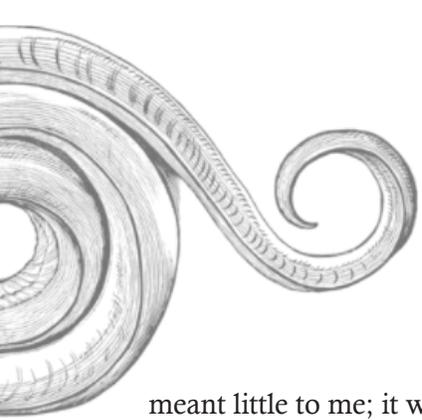
THE SUN WAS iodine from an eyedropper. It set that fast, trembling and pregnant one moment, broken on the rocks of the million-mile horizon like an egg yolk the next. Distant streaks of jaundiced clouds. I could feel the gaping sky dilate and roll in its socket to regard me. This Texan onionskin flatness was practically desert to me. The nothingness ballooned out here in the old frontier. At least, compared to what I was used to. I was a Georgia boy, born and raised, but we never trumpeted things like that with the barbed pride of a longhorn shitkicker.

The old Volvo had the shakes as I rattled it toward Ditson's trailer, spuming skeins of dust into the air. Through the half-open window came hot breaths laced with the eely tang of oil. I'd passed a reflectorised sign reading 'Notrees' back on 302 and that wasn't far at all from an honest name. There were sparse trees, but they were short and looked embarrassed to be there in all that dwarfing openness. I could see a wind farm in the distance: giant praying-mantis turbines lined up in waiting rows. They slept in the paling August heat.

My left headlight flickered, loose in its bracket. Like it had something in its eye. I'd turned down a couple of dirt roads not far into whatever it was that called itself Notrees. I fumbled with the scribbled directions in the dying light. One last rutted afterthought loomed ahead. I knocked the turn signal on just for a lonely laugh and took a right. The car hit a dip that slammed its nose into the hardpan and I slowed. Ditson's place was due any minute now.

Nineteen hours of driving with an extra four hours sprinkled in for naps and gallons of water. I'd marked a lot of ditches along the way. Yesterday, I'd tossed a change of clothes in the car and logged the first of 1100 miles of eyesores. All told, I'd gone from finding out where Ditson was holed up to killing the headlights and coasting to a stop here in this gasping dust in 34 hours.

I got out of the car, pushed the door closed slowly with my weight. Watched faraway shadows heave like tar and reassemble themselves. I sensed the earth lick its lips, a pliant furrow in the air. Just for a moment. Only a tired daze I had to wipe from my face. I leaned back at a contortionist's angle, fists pressed into the small of my back. There was a muted, spongy chain of pops and I sighed. Made myself walk around a bit to work out any kinks in my legs, then checked the Browning's magazine for the fourth or fifth time. It was a Hi-Power, but that



meant little to me; it was the only gun I'd ever held in my hand. And that had been a lifetime ago until now. I stuffed it in the back of my pants like a movie hoodlum and covered it with my shirttail. Then I walked, trying on an easy smile. *Hey, Dit, just in the neighborhood. Thought I'd catch up with an old friend.* Right.



The money was only the first thing. And it was, no doubt, the lesser thing. Ditson and I went back as far as seventh grade. He was the brilliant one, while I was the troublemaker. We'd spit water and milk through the slots in locker doors between classes. Sneak cigarettes. Quote Monty Python and make up our own *Holy Grail* bits, which were horrifically unfunny. And a lot of demon and sorcery card games. Those ate up lunch periods a lot of days for a while.

He was my best friend, despite the fact I never saw him outside of school. Hanging out or staying over was never brought up, not even during the height of the magic cards, when he was obsessed with building his necromancer character up. Come midafternoon, my brother and I'd get on the bus; Ditson would shoulder his olive-drab backpack and march off down the street. I never tried to chum up with him for a walk home; I lived a ways across town and my video games were waiting for me. Remembering 13 from out here in 38 was like a frosted window. I could wipe it clean with my shirtsleeve, but it fogged right back up. But some things just dominated a kid's childhood; like half of us back then, I was a Nintendo nut. Lunchtime was enough of those flimsy cards for me.

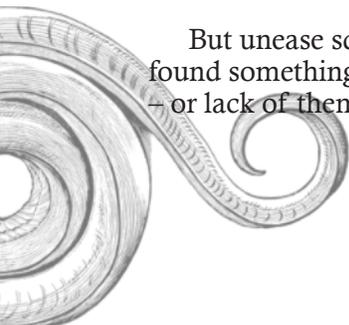
We strayed apart in high school, when girls and pot replaced video games for me. He became heavier, dumpier, while I'd beefed up my tall and lanky. Later, early twenties, we became pretty tight again. Romy kept us close, in a way. But we'd always meet up places or he'd swing by my apartment to eat mushrooms on the porch. Never his place and he'd bat aside questions about it like mosquitos.

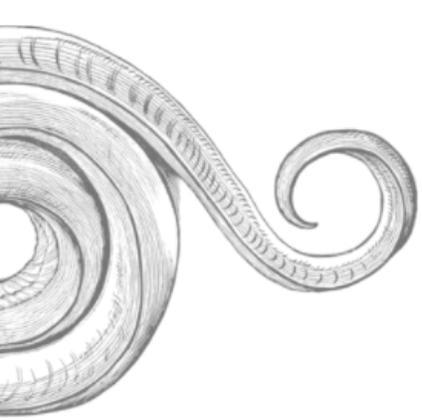
In fact, standing here looking into this thin depression in the land, shallow as an unwashed bedpan, I beheld a Casa Ditson for the first time. The trailer was a paltry saltine cracker sleeve parked in the dirt. Looked like it was made of corrugated plastic with snaps to fasten the walls together. A cloud of moths worshipped the haloed lamp by the wafer door. The only god for miles around. Propane tanks lay like mouse droppings at one end. A lump of a car huddled beneath a blue tarp. The whole setup was just flaccid. The road ran into the bedpan's thinnest lip in front of the trailer. There were maybe five blades of grass around the place. I couldn't detect any more civilisation beyond here. The blood-orange sky deepened steadily to mauve and indigo. "The end of the Worm, old buddy." I spat sour coffee taste out of my mouth before correcting myself: "Road. End of the road."



I hadn't seen Ditson in five years. I'd had a friendly ear out for him for most of those, and I'd been trying hard to sink a thumbtack – a red one – right through him on a map for just over two. He'd borrowed eight grand from me back in '06, but like I said, the money was the lesser thing. Even considering I never saw the first nickel of it, it's most assuredly the lesser thing.

But unease squirmed between my ears. Thing about Ditson was he was kind of tricky, meaning I'd always found something about him hard to wrap my thoughts around. The whole secretive thing about his relationships – or lack of them, really – places he lived, the odd things he did. He'd been swallowed up by science and lab





shit. Read voraciously and started coming to school with gashed and swollen fingers. Wouldn't say much about what he was up to. That was another reason for us sliding apart. He started having the look of a kid who was only in his element when final exam time rolled in. Except starker: He always looked feverish – a cross between eager and shaky – with hard glitter in his eyes. Muttered a lot.

But it was more the books I'd glimpse in his bag propped against the desk legs in biology class. He'd paper most of the covers over, but paper tore and I'd see weird-looking fonts and strange segments of words that made my head swim a little. Which kept me checking every time I saw the chance. The books were purple or black, like bruises, and they looked homemade. Gold or bone-white lettering. That would've been around freshman year; not long after that, I started screwing around with girls and, later on, Romy came into the picture.

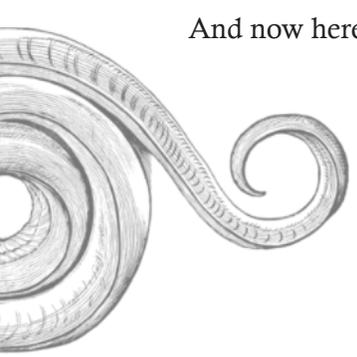
Romy was a black-lipsticked dopehead – her proud word – with firm curves hiding beneath her Venom t-shirts. A smart mouth that smiled freely. I met her through Ditson; they'd been inseparable in grade school, apparently, lived on neighbouring streets. She had stayed with her father for a few years up in New England somewhere. Then her mom had remarried well and returned with Romy to her rustic stomping grounds in our tree-choked town. She and Ditson reforged their childhood bond as though they were still in it; I half-expected to catch them climbing trees and jumping into great piles of russet leaves. But she was like that: always tucking sullen and broken creatures under her wings.

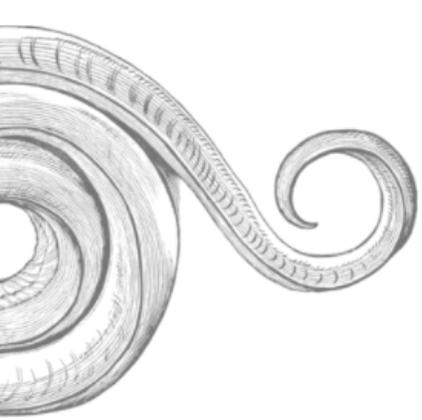
We were a steadfast trio with a lot of laughs and drugs for a time. Then Ditson just started to fade faster. His skin grew pasty and his eyes sank into his face. He got more erratic and insular. But Romy and me. I loved that girl. We were a real item; made it past that whole sweet-16 hormone fest and stayed that way until she vanished 6 years ago. About two months after I loaned Ditson all that cash. Before a year had gone by, he'd melted away, too.

It wasn't until much later, at the tail end of a stained and blurry time for me, that I started connecting the proximity of those events. And it took me finding a photo in my mail of an oily-looking book – clearly the one I'd seen in his backpack a hundred times. There was the pebbled-black cover, and spindly gold letters – murkier than I remembered – spelled out *Procès d'un Ver*. Which I found out translated to “Trial of a Worm.” I never could figure what it was, but after some confusing research, I guessed it might be a grimoire, or black magic instruction manual, which meant Ditson had a creepy hobby. That said something about his faculties. Maybe those magic cards had led to deeper interests.

As time went by, I began to suspect it was only a journal, which somehow said worse things about him. Just looking at a picture of the thing made my eyeballs hum. There were other books I might've identified from my memories of those backpack glances, given time and patience, but it was the worm one – the taste of that photo – that made me start thinking he just might have killed my wife. I was sure the cops had closed their half-page report on Romy a while before then. And eventually, as my bleak mourning of her began to harden into something sharper, I stopped looking for her and started looking for him.

And now here he was. Anything else was just procrastination and my stomach roiled with blank dread.





Night was pretty much onstage now. I touched the gun tonguing out above my belt then stepped onto Ditson's little slice of West Texas. A freshening wind tossed grit in my face as I walked. I might as well have whistled, so hard was I trying for that casual old-pal vibe. I doubted he would buy into it. As I neared the trailer's door, an opiate drone grew around me and the dooryard darkened quickly. I realised that there were no moths boiling around the harsh blare of the light by the door; instead, a swarm of plump honeybees crawled and blotted the fixture. The ribbed metal of the walls was ungodly with filth: streaks and whorls of mud or, for all I knew, shit and blood. And the stench was already upon me: urine and noisome sweetness. I paused at the door, before its opaque window slats, and wondered if Ditson had gone ahead and prevented me from getting the answers I wanted.

The thrum of the bees purred wetly against my eardrums. The sound of it was an ill thing. I mumbled, "Fuck it," pulled my gun, and turned the doorknob. It wasn't locked and I stepped up into the trailer.

"You made it." I heard the voice, but it took me a long, quavering moment to get my bearings. The stink in the trailer was ferocious. Every surface my eyes caught was a pyramid of cans: soda, microwaveable kids' pasta, processed meat globs. The air burned my eyes with a pall of grease and the rich, palpable layer of body odour. And bees. In those disjointed glances around the trailer, in all the spoiled food, I didn't see a single fly. Only bees, hundreds of them. Trundling on the fouled carpet; alighting on cans; papering the walls with their resonant wings.

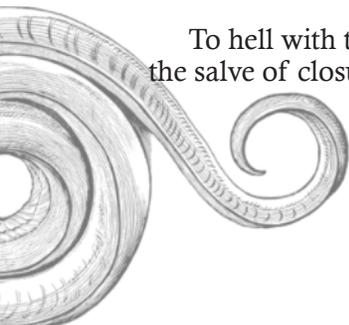
Perhaps Ditson could've brained me in that waxy pause, but when I felt ready to turn my head to the right, I saw that this was probably not the case. He was a wraith devoured by an easy chair. Naked but for sagging yellowed briefs that hung below the flared hipbones. No way he could've hit three digits on a scale. Even the loose skin of the once-chubby had wasted away to stretch across all those bones. His hair hung in clotted strands to his shoulders. A pile of years and more than a thousand miles, and all I could do was gape. A dozen or so bees ambled over his body, sluggish and aimless. He was covered with livid welts. The writhing bee above his left eye mesmerised me and erased my voice.

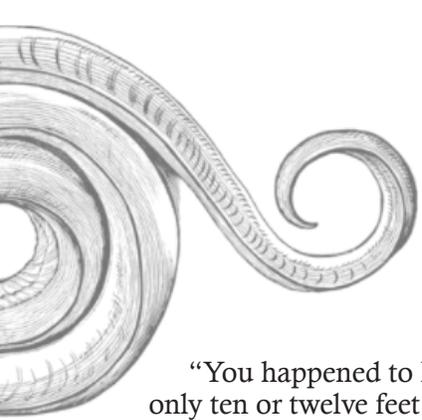
"Come on in. Take your time, man; it's been a while. Think I've been left here just for you." His voice was stuffed with phlegm and wheeze; it had trouble carrying in the thick air. He smiled and showed me receded gums and loose brown teeth.

"What the fuck's happened to you, Anthony?" I sensed the situation go slimy the very second a bee landed on the back of my neck. I slammed my palm against it; cursed its guts off my hand. "I fucking hate bees. I do."

"That's news to me, Sam. They sure have always liked you. I'm the one who can't stand them. I can't wear clothes because it's worse having them crawl up under them. They have friends, too." He gestured and I saw dark-brown wasps peppered throughout the room. Bees began to settle upon me, wriggling with calm. I tensed for the first sting.

To hell with this. I needed to do my deed and enjoy the better half of the trip, the return home with at least the salve of closure. "Look, fuck all that. You know why I'm here. My wife. What happened to Romy?"





“You happened to Romy.” This brought the gun swiveling up to level at his face. Even still by the door, I was only ten or twelve feet from his throne of offal. The Worm sat gloating. The Worm ... I shook my head hard. He watched me as though puzzled before going on. “What do you mean, ‘wife’? You two never got married. And I didn’t do anything to her, Sam. She just left. She had to get –”

“Bullshit!” The gun stabbed the air with punctuation. “What’s with the fucking Worm book? That was the book you made when we were kids, right? You sent me the picture of it?” I was slick with sweat. The air clogged my pores, the closeness and the stink of it. The bees wove into a shroud upon me. Still, they did not sting.

“Huh? That was your book. You brought it to school every day.” He laughed, but it died quickly; his face slackened as he saw I wasn’t buying it. “What, you saying you don’t remember your precious diary?”

“Don’t hand me that. I didn’t even know the name of that thing until I got that picture.”

“Holy shit. You really don’t remember.”

I didn’t say anything. It was hard enough to just breathe right then.

“You are the Worm. ‘The Worm of The Grandfathers’ – that’s what you called yourself all the damn time. You taught me how to ... build doors for Them, remember? We spent years – *years*, man – in my basement learning. *Becoming*, you said. You started changing because They were upon the world. So you could be the Eater and not the eaten, right?” He winced as the bee buried its stinger right above his eye then tumbled like a mossed pebble to his lap.

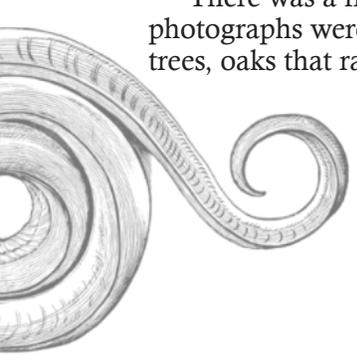
My own flowed up and encircled my neck. I was starting to realise they simply would not sting me. I opened my mouth several times before anything came out. “You ... can’t turn all this around.”

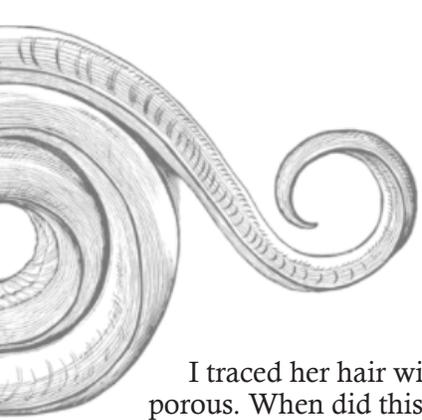
Ditson tried laughing again. This time, he fared better. “How could you forget shit like that? Come on, man, you seen your face in the last 15 years? Your fucking fingers are five, six inches long! Look on the shelf right there. You passed the book on to me. Shit got too deep in me to get it out, but I tried and Christ I’ve suffered; look at me. But then the thing with Romy in the hospital and I gave your money to her to get away from”

He said a lot of words after that, but I didn’t hear any of them. There was only the blood coursing its highways through my skull and the sleepy blanket drone of the bees nestled on me. His mouth was moving, blistered with sores in filmy light. I saw his thick tongue twitching and I emptied the clip into him, walking forward as I pulled the trigger to finish with the bore of the muzzle flashing in his eyes.

The tears and the shaking had already started before I lifted the book off the shelf. *Procès d’un Ver*. The texture of the cover was like glossy scar tissue. I peeked inside and saw my name scrawled on the first line, along with some odd symbols. It fell from my dead fingers to the carpet.

There was a framed picture a thousand years old of Romy and me with Ditson. Strange to think photographs were colour so long ago. We sat on a checkered quilt and there were trees in the background. Real trees, oaks that ranged far above the frame. Her orange hair flamed like a corona.





I traced her hair with a blood-speckled snake of an index finger. The flesh it was wrapped in was damp and porous. When did this happen? I picked up a thin sheaf of paper and did little more than scan. There were three letters, each written in Romy's leaning script, the last one dated September 17, 1996. I croaked the words:

“Anthony, thank you again for the money. I won't be writing again. I'm mending okay. I'd better keep where I am going to myself. Because you may not be as off the deep end about this doorway shit as Sam, but even in the kiddie end of the pool, it's scary shit. It got scary after high school and that was nothing. That was when it was just his godawful experiments. Before he started turning into that thing. Wish I could put the ends of the earth between me and him. But I hope that at least you will see reason. He's way past that. I'll think of you. Romy.”

I picked the book up off the floor, my living shawl stooping with me. Flipped through to the last couple of pages. My thoughts yawned back through all the fetid works and words to those childish magic game cards I carried around with me everywhere I went – the memory surged like strychnine through my veins – and I suddenly understood every last goddamned one of those squiggled symbols: “WORM, I SAMUEL L. BORWICK on this Day 1994 5th of October BECOME a VESSEL. HERE IN THIS VALLEY of DYING STARS. THOSE COMING MULTIFOLIATE.”

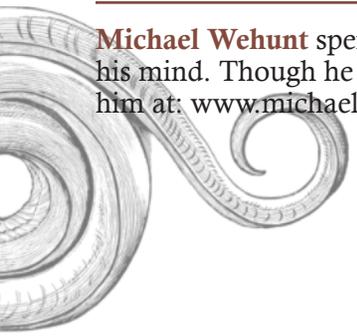
And so on. I placed it gently back on the shelf. I was remembering a great deal now. That was human skin I'd added to my original binding, but that had come years after high school, when blood was called for. And the line about dying stars was from Eliot. Ah, my whole fucking life flooded back into me, and how had I lost ten years? How had I lumbered about, thinking Romy disappeared in 2006? But I hadn't gone much of anywhere, had I? Memories stuttered like playing cards in bicycle spokes. I'd ensconced myself in a moist pocket of the world, waiting in grief – in regret? – for my Mind to be expunged. I recalled the relentless torpid drip of water. Anemic grey light that never quite reached me.

I shuffled over to a smudged mirror and saw my cracked-slate eyes and my withered dark cave of a mouth. A blighted chill climbed up my back, then an abrupt hot gush of emotion for my old allegiances. What would They think of me now?

Then the trailer rocked back on its haunches and settled forward with old-bone creaks. Cans spilled everywhere. The room tipped again and Ditson flopped to the carpet. *En masse*, the bees abandoned me. The windows dripped with black shapes outside. I felt an Eye upon me. I staggered to the door, each hair on my body fizzing with a blend of elation and terror. The last words of the Eliot poem bloomed in the dust of my recall. Something about the end coming not with a bang but with a whimper. I flung open the door with a lost noise in my throat.

The night wreathed around my soft limbs. Endless smears of sinew took me. I gazed across the cyclopean waste of Texas to the distending horizon.

THE END



Michael Wehunt spends his time in Atlanta, Georgia, avoiding wasps and bees. There is always a piano playing in his mind. Though he is a longtime aficionado of all things horror, “Notrees” is his first published story. Please visit him at: www.michaelwehunt.com.



If ice chips are to be had, the action of ice melting through the fabric of a fresh bloodstain is superior; be sure that the ice completely covers the surface of the stain.

THE INNSMOUTH LADIES' GUIDE TO HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT

By L.T. Patridge

[Circa 1855. Courtesy Archives of Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.

The identity of the author is unknown.

This is the most complete copy available. Three other copies of frontispiece are attested, one at Wellesley's Margaret Clapp Library, one privately held, and one in the archives of Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. The frontispiece is not decorated.

This pamphlet appears to have possessed about ten pages, originally; the first and final pages are blank. It is saddle-bound and duodecimo-sized, with no cover. The paper has been treated with exposure to heat to make the ink visible, most likely by a candle flame. Many of the pages are smoke-damaged.]

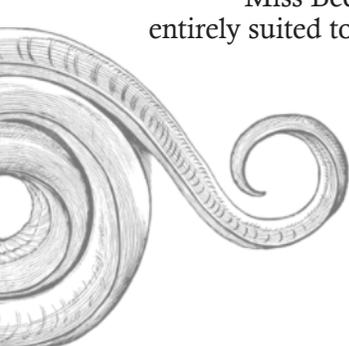
NOTES TO LADIES

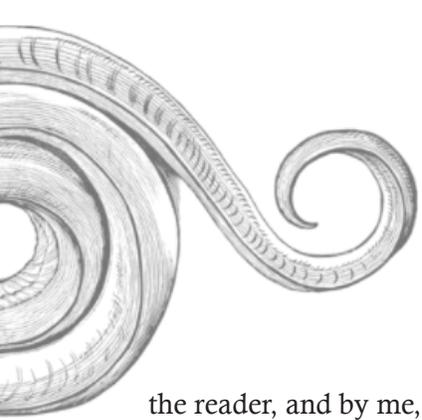
No. 6 of 20

FOREWORD

The following is designed as a supplement to any existing manual such as the excellent Miss Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, which will supply the needs of a woman of any station in most situations pertaining to laundry, cookery, &c. However, certain concerns peculiar to local households will not be addressed in any book now available. With the kind permission of Mrs. M—, and the assistance of Mrs. W— and others, I have endeavoured to compile the following for the daughters and sisters of my friends and neighbours, and I need not impress upon the recipients of this volume the importance of keeping it at hand in a *private place*, so that it is in friendly hands at all times. It may be called for at any time to assure its safety and she who misplaces a copy may answer to Mrs. M—, or to others.

Miss Beecher's advice regarding the ordering of the household and the upbringing of children is not entirely suited to our institution; however, it is not without its use. The household remains to be tended by you,





the reader, and by me, be matters what they may with our husbands, and their many and varied friends in trade and custom, and children must be fed and all matters attended in good order.

For this effort, we will not be rewarded in spirit: Do not mistake me. On this point, we are not deceived, as formerly, that drudgery is Divine and that the business of the home is the sphere of Woman. Our reward is in the future, in the flesh and breath of our sons and daughters; our daughters will not bear with what we bore, nor will our sons scrape and bow to the men who have mastered the anthills piled up at Boston, New York or Washington, for our Lord

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The Kitchen

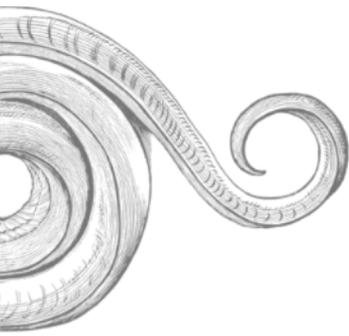
It is some blessing to a woman whose husband is from offshore that, of her several pressing and unique concerns, cookery is directly unaffected and her responsibilities are rather reduced than increased, thereby.

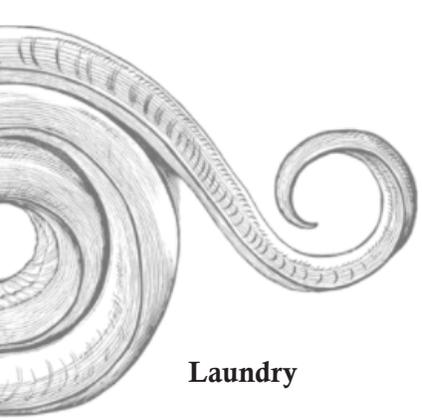
Those born and raised offshore are accustomed to eat a purely animal diet, entirely uncooked and without preparation, either taken to hand at the moment of hunger or stalked in concert with others over some hours, then eaten following the kill. For this reason, it is advisable to keep all domestic livestock and animals in pens outside of the house, as there are no domestic animals at sea, and they are little inclined to remember that domestic animals are not free to be killed and eaten at any time, and that any debris, such as feathers, will remain stuck to their scales, skin, mouth, and so forth, detracting from their natural dignity and contributing to a general uncleanliness in the home.

In their diet, they resemble the Indian and possess the rude health that an Indian in his natural state might have enjoyed. The Indian, however, has changed his diet to that of vegetable or starch food, but those from offshore cannot and will not do this, and have no use for made dishes, sweets, or bread, no more so than you and I might have for grass and leaves. Such gifts or offerings will have no effect and may, in fact, insult.

Nonetheless, those from offshore are thoroughly fond of spiritous liquors, somewhat less so of beer and wine. The effects of their intemperance need not be feared, as for them the effect of an entire bottle of brandy upon the mind and body appears to be somewhat the same as a glass of beer might be to a man's. It is likely to produce an agreeable warming effect upon the temperament of the drinker. A gift of spiritous liquor is sure to be very well-taken by anyone from offshore, a lady no less than a gentleman. If the bottle is immediately opened and drunk, it is strongly advised that one drop one's eyes therefrom, in order not to betray any impolitic expression or be overcome with illness.

Be well advised that those from offshore are, unlike ourselves, equipped to smell and taste the presence of any number of chemicals, whether they be in food or in the air. You should permit no misunderstanding whatsoever to arise in the household as to the presence of any substance of a poisonous nature near anything offered to those from offshore. Domestic amity will not recover.





Laundry

To Miss Beecher I have nothing to add on this subject except as regards bloodstains. The coldest water available is to be used for soaking as soon as may be. If ice chips are to be had, the action of ice melting through the fabric of a fresh bloodstain is superior; be sure that the ice completely covers the surface of the stain. Whether or not there is ice, abrasive scrubbing should be applied in the cold water until the stain is gone, which is most often possible if the fabric is yet damp and fresh with the blood. Bleaching powder may be employed for pure white fabrics only and, of those, not the delicate, felted or loosely knit, such as silk, velvet, fine woolens, &c.

Unfortunately, the action of saltwater against stained fabric is often fixative if the saltwater dries upon the fabric. The wearers of ritual robes should be advised of this fact, which will be of little effect on the relevant practices, but may perhaps temper expectations.

Etiquette

Courtesy and deference are the watchwords. I am informed that those from offshore practice an etiquette of great and ancient complexity, which we have not the age or physiology to comprehend; failing this, it is best to behave as to magistrate or master. Be advised that most of those from offshore may hear a living heartbeat that is close to them and such a sense is keen enough to detect that the bearer of that heart feels fear or loathing, as the heart speeds and starts on such occasions. It is imperative, therefore, that no lie be told to them, especially in regards to such feeling.

Ladies and gentlemen should bow their heads and fold their hands in the presence of an acquaintance from offshore; men's hats should be removed; children should make a bow or curtsy. *Sir* and *madam* are the first and most acceptable methods of address. The face should be kept lowered until one is spoken to directly, or until one's chin is taken in hand and raised.

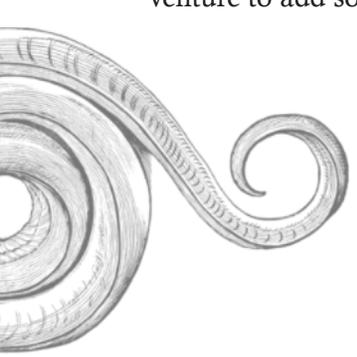
Do not expect jokes or jesting remarks to be understood. They will not laugh and they will not understand kindly if you seem to tell them an "untruth" for a light reason. Nonetheless, they do in fact possess humour and make joking remarks after their fashion, although these generally involve violence or death and may not be amusing, at all. It is best not to pretend to be amused; they abhor the lie.

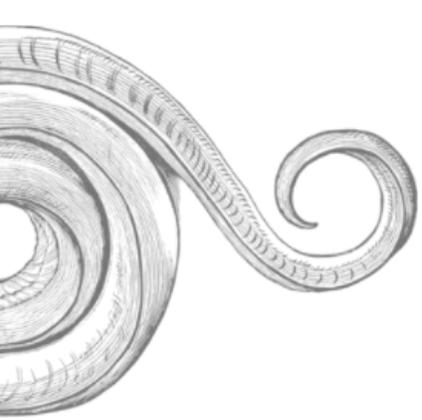
If a request is made of you, whatever it be, fill that request, or let them know why it cannot be done. They ask nothing idly or lightly. However severe it may be, consider that the consequence

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Childbed

Other volumes address this subject at length in view of a general female audience, to which I may venture to add some remarks, following my own experience and consultation with Mrs. C— and Dr. H—.





Local mothers will no doubt be much relieved to find that, when the father's bloodline is entirely or one-half from offshore, the peculiar inherited qualities can allow for a birth with a great deal of ease, even if the mother should be of small stature, or the child should be turned; for there is a gelatinous quality to the young bones, that admits of ease in parturition. It may be that a mother is overcome with her water and then has her child in her arms within fifteen minutes. Then, however, it is essential to the health of the infant that no swaddling should be done, or any other tight constriction; otherwise, the limbs and torso of the child may remain in that constricted shape and will not come right for many days.

It is most likely that your child will appear very much like any other infant, red and wrinkled. It may, however, be, upon the birth of the child, that you find that it does not appear, to your eyes, to be sound in all its parts; be assured that this is not the case, and that you merely are not yet advised of which parts it is that the infant has and how it is that they are sound.

If the child is born with teeth, *do not* nurse it nor put it to nurse with any other woman, even if it should only seem that the child was born with simple milk-teeth, as has happened among many families beforehand. I am acquainted with the case of a woman who did not know why she should not do so, and thereafter died of her injuries.

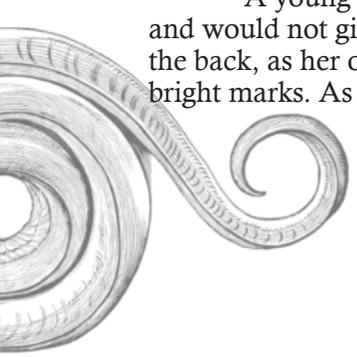
Instead, send for your husband straightaway, or, if it is quicker, the nearest lady from offshore that you may send word to. This lady will know what to do and, indeed, it is likely that she herself will insist on taking the child to remain with its relatives offshore. The child born with teeth will not be suited to nurse or take any milk whatsoever, but must be fed solid flesh, either fresh or regurgitated; and the ladies from offshore do not nurse, but have a capacity to regurgitate their own food as still useful for the young, which we do not possess.

A child whose blood is half from offshore or greater may develop, during its first two years, several rows of teeth, and grow and cast these teeth at a prodigious rate. If this is the case, it should cause no alarm for the health of the child, but the father must be advised and the child will no doubt be best suited to live offshore with his family there within a matter of months.

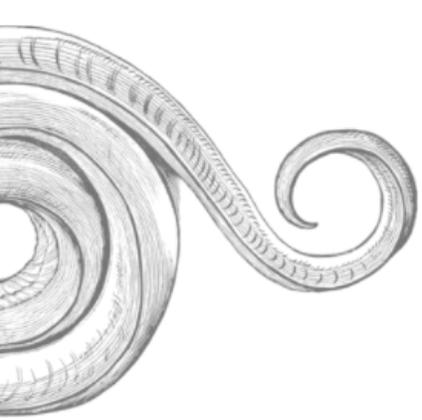
Further Regarding the Management of Young Children

Miss Beecher's policy of a steady, kind hand in the upbringing of children is not to be contradicted and I write further to enjoin the reader to recall that, in the raising of our children, Love is the law, Love under Will.

It is the object of those from offshore that they should raise living and whole children, who will be lords upon earth and sea, and it is impressed upon us all that no harm should come to the young. Let the reader be reminded of this, no matter how she herself was raised, no matter how gently she supposes she bears with her children. To strike a child is against all custom.



A young lady of my acquaintance had a child of five years who would hit and strike at his sister in play, and would not give over, no matter how his mother scolded and pled. At last, she struck him with a belt across the back, as her own mother had done when a child did not obey her. This did the boy no great harm, but left bright marks. As it happened, his father came home a day after this and observed the marks, and asked the boy



whence they came; and the boy told him. So much we know, for the boy told this to his mother's sister, who keeps the two children in her home, now that their mother is gone.

Modesty, Youth and Courtship

Again, there is little to be added to Miss Beecher's advice here in regards to the raising of continent and modest young men and women, save that the customs of our relatives from offshore do not require that young ladies

[Editor's note: Here the page terminates. The next page is missing. The text resumes as follows.]

... company of other gentlemen, anymore than a husband would be expected to take a jealous interest in his wife's favorite colours, and the same is the case with ladies from offshore.

This indulgence, however, is best not taken too frequently or carelessly. If a woman were to find herself embarrassed as the result of such a friendship, her husband would not be insulted or angered, but would expect her to continue to follow the custom of those offshore in the matter, and it is still their custom that unwanted infants are killed by the mother's own hands and eaten

[Editor's note: Here the page is smoked through and no longer legible. The final page is blank.]

THE END

L.T. Patridge, who is originally from Greenville, Mississippi, now lives and works in the Metro-Boston area. To the best of her knowledge, she is the only former Delta debutante who writes Lovecraftian fiction. She blogs at: ltpatridge.tumblr.com.





At night, there are lights in the distance – yes, I say lights. I have seen them, as have many others. These are not the torches of another vessel, merchant or pirate.

THE LOST CONTINENT

By Lane Heymont

Winter. Month of Tarranuary, Day 10

Dearest love,

No doubt you have learned of our departure by now. I must apologise profusely for the deception – the lost continent of Londinium is out there somewhere to the east in the dark and unforgiving Torcdywyn Sea. Again, I must apologise, my love, for your brother, Caedmon, has joined the *Marvelous Poet's* crew. I swear he insisted upon it and, frankly, we can use a strong, stalwart soldier like him. The sea holds many pirate vessels and things much darker. But do not worry. Caedmon is not our sole defender. In the coastal city, Durc, I acquired the service of a stranger, one of those nefarious charlatans. Kimball is cold and quiet. His eyes, like ice, shift constantly, as though he is plagued by distrust, even when he studies his strange, archaic book. The men fear him and rightfully so, but I keep them occupied with tales of Londinium's treasures. Mounds of gold, gems and fine silks await us on the Lost Continent, I say. The crew rejoices at that, as do I, but some act strangely the smaller the mainland appears behind us. Some whisper of shapes in the sea and speak of the Torcdywyn Monster.

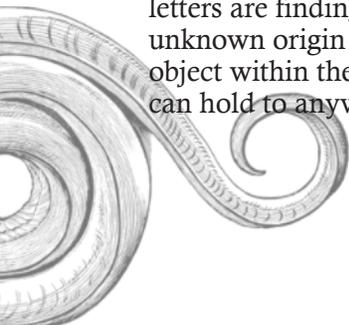
I must finish this letter now. My first mate, Ralf, wishes a word about Kimball. Hopefully, this letter finds you well or at all, and I will divulge the method of its arrival next time. Farewell, Sapphira, my love.

Signed Newlyn Pemproke, Captain of the *Marvelous Poet*

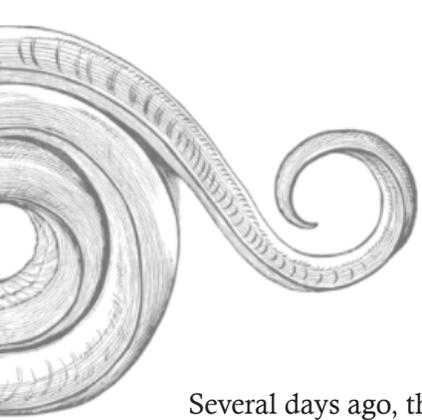


Winter. Month of Tarranuary, Day 14

Dearest Sapphira,



Much has happened since I last wrote you and I apologise for the delay. First, let me elaborate on how these letters are finding you, if they are. Kimball the Charlatan has a strange, ornate box carved with symbols of unknown origin to me. A large aquamarine gem tops its lid and, from what I know, when Kimball places an object within the box, closes it and opens it again, the letter is gone. He says the box lets him send anything it can hold to anywhere he has seen. I hope he speaks truly and is not secretly taunting me.



Several days ago, the mainland disappeared below the horizon. It is disconcerting. We are now alone in the open bleakness of the sea. Stretches of ripples follow behind us, as should be expected, but there is something below the *Marvelous Poet*. Something following us. My navigator, Thomlin, claims he saw it. A dark, bulbous body of grotesque portions, matching of size of our ship – about one hundred and thirty feet long! It glided beside the hull for several minutes, Thomlin said, breaching the surface with thick, leathery flippers as large as a horse. He watched at first in horror, then said its splashing seemed like a wave hello, as though it were a curious child. A moment later, the “bloated water-lizard,” as Thomlin called it, descended and vanished back into the ocean’s vast, black unknown.

This is not all, my dear Sapphira. I fear even writing this. Perhaps you will think I have gone mad! But I swear by my love for you I have not. At night, there are lights in the distance – yes, I say lights. I have seen them, as have many others. These are not the torches of another vessel, merchant or pirate. We are far too east of the mainland ... beyond where any man has been. No, these lights dance and they do not flicker with the red-orange glow of flames. These dance, Sapphira! Somersault through thick mists, twisting and twirling, and seemingly chase one another as if they were fireflies upon the sea. Some of the crew, Ralf and your brother Caedmon, say they are will-o’-wisps that have left the swamps and somehow lost their way in the darkness. I do not believe so. Nor does Kimball the Charlatan ... He says they are ... I cannot even speak it in fear of bringing its wrath upon us! Not until Kimball says it is all right to do so. He plans to stay up this night and study the lights, perhaps find some reason or pattern to them.

I grow weak, my love. It is early evening and I must rest. Caedmon sends his love and insists you not worry. I shall write again, soon, Sapphira. I swear it.

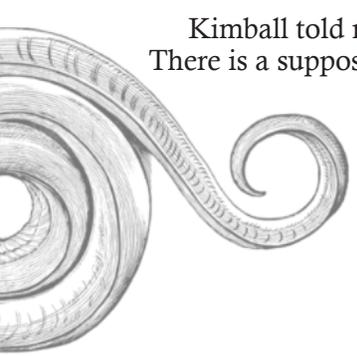
Signed Newlyn Pembroke, Captain of the *Marvelous Poet*



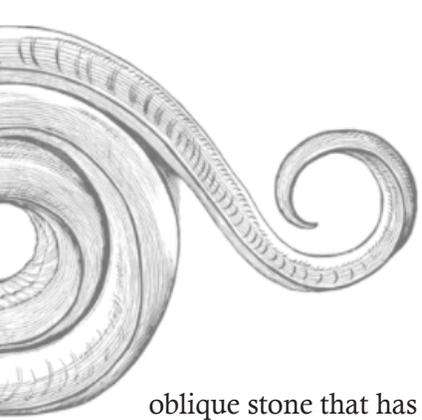
Winter. Month of Tarranuary, Day 16

Dearest love,

Both Florent and Baldwick have vanished! The *Marvelous Poet* is haunted; I swear it! Ralf went to wake them this morning and they were both gone from their beds. All the stranger is that their quilts were tucked in a way that suggests they had not moved. Yet, they were gone and their clothes were not. It is as though they had been swallowed by nothingness, pulled ever-so-gently from their clothes and bed, and simply ripped from existence. More alarming news follows. I told you yesterday of Kimball’s intent to wait and study those spritely lights dancing in the distance, glittering through fogbanks that seem to sporadically constrain our view. Study them he did.



Kimball told me of a seamen’s fairy tale, but his cold eyes and icy expression showed he believed it fully. There is a supposed island in these seas. An island which has no name, or so says Kimball. On this chunk of



oblique stone that has risen from the depths of the abyss sits a tower of perverse nature and making. “The Tower of Lost Bones,” Kimball calls it. A tower built out of some unearthly black rock, and worse. Bones. It is built from the bones of those lost at sea. “A truly horrific sight of unfathomable evil and disgust,” says Kimball. If this malevolent wizard thinks this, what are my crew and I to do if we find such a monstrosity? I pressed the frightened Charlatan for more information about the tower, but he won’t speak of it. Refuses to! But he does report what the lights are and they are just as otherworldly wrong as the tower. Kimball used magic of some sort and found that the will-o’-wisp is, in fact, a ship! However, he is more concerned about its distance. Each night he has kept meticulous notes on that subject, using all sorts of archaic magic that sends shivers down the spines of most men. In his calculations, which Kimball has corroborated with our navigator, Thomlin, the ship grows closer at a dizzying rate!

I made Thomlin and Kimball swear to speak of this to no one but myself. The crew already has fallen into despair. The disturbing disappearance of Florent and Baldwick sent many to the mess to prepare a funeral feast ... or drink. I believe the pain of their loss stings even more without their remains to properly cast off to sea. Other men have taken it much harder ... I fear Caedmon is one. He shared a room with the two and has not left his bed since it happened. Only a day, but still it worries me for you. When I went to speak with him, I stopped at the door. I heard him through the wood ... sobbing. And talking to himself, rather, gibbering. I do not know what to make of his words, for I can only hear bits of them: “At th... ower los ... we ..hall be.” I decided to let him rest, but do not worry, my love, Sapphira. All will be all right.

Signed Newlyn Pembroke, Captain of the *Marvelous Poet*

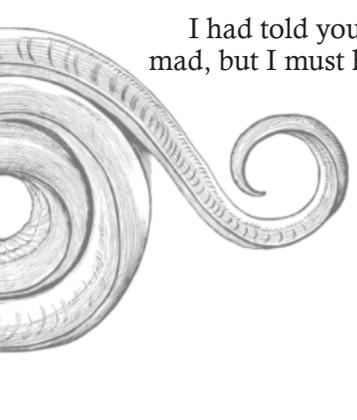


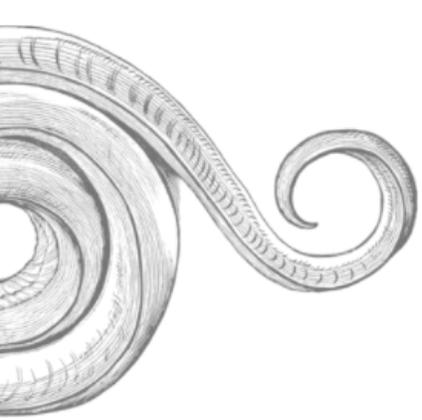
Winter. Month of Tarranuary, Day 18

Dearest love,

Things have worsened, my love. Two days ago, I did not think that possible. But lo, here it is. Perhaps it is the full moon out now in the murky sky that so resembles the sea, or that the prancing lights appear nearly a mile from us starboard! The men ... something has come over them. Yesterday, there were rumors of a mutiny, Ralf being the instigator. My first mate, you ask? Yes, but he is the one who came to me, warning of the ill-will spreading through the crew like smallpox or Greek fire. Ralf says your brother Caedmon plots against me, but that cannot be! Caedmon still has not moved from his bed since Florent and Baldwick disappeared. I do not know whom I can trust. Sometimes, not even myself. It may be my imagination, but even for winter in these warm climates, the days grow darker and colder more than is natural. Something is wrapping its claws around my ship, my crew and, I fear, even me. Kimball claims we stumbled upon a stretch of ocean which no man was meant to find. He speaks of the Tower of Lost Bones often and claims the lights are its hands reaching out from the unholy otherworld to drag us down into nothingness! He says these unknown things have a god, but Kimball won’t dare speak its name.

I had told you I feared speaking of what Kimball told me ... of what I saw. Still, I fear you think I’ve gone mad, but I must heave this secret from my shoulders and cast down its weight! I do not think Kimball can admit





this to himself, but he and I have seen this phantom ship. He and I know it well. Like the *Marvelous Poet*, it is a great galleon, the fiercest and most advanced ship for merchant trade or warfare. But this ship is *too* like my own, boasting four thick, towering masts with sails flapping dangerously in the sea wind. Three through-decks that run the full length of the ship. Both the castles fore and aft have two decks, my quarters being in the aft ... as it is on this ship. I say my love, that ship is ours and ours is theirs!



Winter. Month of Tarranuary, Day 20

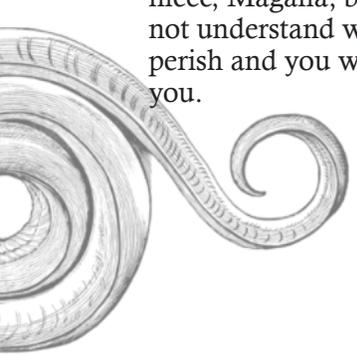
Sapphira,

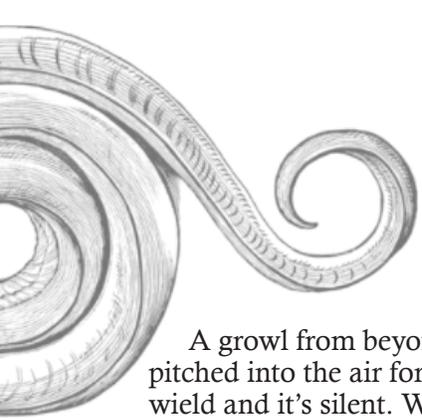
You may be wondering why you are receiving two letters, one from two days ago and this one. Mutiny has struck the *Marvelous Poet*! Not against me, but against sanity! A majority of the crew have gone wild since I last wrote – the abrupt end of the previous letter was due to Ralf striking me from behind with ... I do not know what. When I woke, I found myself in your brother Caedmon's room, along with Kimball the Charlatan and our navigator, Thomlin. Though a barrel-chested man and a rugged, masculine exterior, Thomlin was crawling up on the floor like a newborn babe with his head in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

Kimball was shaken, as well, but not to such a degree and your brother stood by the door with his weapon drawn. Thankfully, his soldier's instincts had taken over. It seemed Ralf had indeed led the mutiny against me, but for what reason? I do not think I will ever know. However, I had your brother relate the details to me as precisely as he could. It seems that about the same time I discovered the light's secret, Ralf did as well. Some men thrive under the heaviness of war, while others fracture and shatter like dropped china. As your brother, Caedmon, reacts honourably and bravely, Ralf broke. His psyche tore itself apart at the very sight of what appeared to be our ship destroyed and our accursed souls working those infernal riggings. Wanting to return home, Ralf spread vicious rumours among the crew and turned them against me. The only men who stood by me were Thomlin (Thank God, for he is our navigator!), Caedmon and, strangely, Kimball the Charlatan. I suspect he fears what Ralf and the others have become.

Even now, I can hear them on the deck above us, howling at the full moon, screaming until their voice boxes expire from thirst and wails. Wails of the dying can be heard as my former crew falls to their knees, no doubt hacking and slashing one another as their reason is consumed by the insanity of witnessing that which should never be viewed by mortal eyes, lest this very same event occur. They chant wildly. Even those who died must be chanting; it's deafeningly loud. Reverberating off the wood of the ship, bouncing off the waves and piercing through the heavens – I cannot hear over the noise. Even as I write this, I tremble at the thought of what is happening above.

Caedmon covers his ears while maintaining his weapon and post at the door. Thomlin still blubbers like your niece, Magalia, but this is more pathetic. High-pitched too. Kimball screams to me, "We are almost there!" I do not understand what he means, but this is no time to ask nor should I be writing to you, but I fear that I may perish and you would never know what happened to your sweet husband. Now you know I at least listen to you.





A growl from beyond the depths of the universe rumbles through the sea below us and the *Marvelous Poet* is pitched into the air for the briefest of moments. Then we crash down with a force only a celestial being could wield and it's silent. We hear no more chanting ... whatever gibberish they were saying. No more guttural rumblings from the throat of a creature that should never have been. We hesitate. This cannot truly be over and with such a good ending! It is! The *Marvelous Poet* glides listlessly and strikes land, the wood of her hull scraping against rock. My three companions cheer joyously, even Thomlin, who has stopped his keening.

Slowly, we make our way through the decks of the ship. They are painted with gore to the point the original coat cannot be seen. Bodies! They are everywhere; you would never think an entire ship could be littered with so many pieces of people. Not a single identifiable person as we reach the first deck. It is even worse up here. And the stink! I look about the deck, not for anything or anyone in particular, but out of respect ... to make certain these men – my men – are not forgotten. But that smell! It is a foul mixture of coppery lifeblood and marrow, or bone meal. I hear Kimball screaming, “See, Newlyn! See!” I look and spy Caedmon running up the shore. How did he get down there so quickly, did he jump? Where is he going? I bark at Kimball.

Kimball points up the island of oblique, frightening and even paranoid-looking stone, and draws my attention to the tower ... the Tower of Lost Bones! I cannot describe the empty, forlorn horror that this structure of stone holds, nor the method by which skeletons, femurs, skulls, hands, knuckles, knees and even those still living, are built into this heinous thing.

I will finish this quickly, my love, my Sapphira. Your brother Caedmon runs for the tower, screaming some more gibberish, but I will bring him home to you. That I swear, my love! Farewell, for now or forever.

THE END

Lane Heymont was born in Pennsylvania. After earning a BA in Liberal Arts, with a double minor in psychology and business, he turned his focus back to writing. He has written two novels and attends Harvard University in Extension, pursuing an MLA in creative writing. When not reading, writing, or researching his next book, Lane attempts to run a fantasy blog at *A Goblin, a Unicorn, and a Dragon: A World of Fantasy* (<http://laneheyont.com/>).



I first had raw liver, which was nicely sliced, four years ago. I was on holiday in Japan. At this crowded restaurant, my friend ordered it for us. I first flinched from the idea of eating raw liver.

MARKET

By Sayuri Yamada

WHAT DO YOU think of Numbers Five and Nine? Look at Number Five. She's big: tall and chunky, a lot of yummy meat inside. Oh, you prefer Number Nine? Yeah, she is slender and looks beautiful. Some people prefer the same, favouring slim ones, but I like bulky ones better. See the Five? What's her name? ... The catalogue says here her name is ... 'Sheena Sheenan' from South Devon. What kind of name is that? Let's see what it says in the bio Oh, she is the youngest of eleven children. Probably her parents were sick of naming their babies when she was born, so they just gave her their surname without the last N. Anyway, her name doesn't matter. Look at her neck. It's so broad, the same width as her head, which sits evenly on her shoulders. Her head is firmly supported, no teetering. It must have a big chunk of flesh there. Juicy.

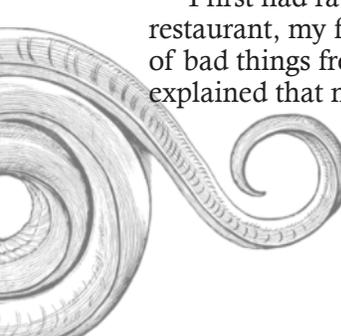
Look at Nine. Her name is ... in the catalogue ... 'Jane Smith'. Oh, what a unique name she's got. Do all of them have names like Five and Nine? Let's see ... Elisabeth Owen, Prissy Rodríguez, Abbie Morgan, Wilma MacDonald Other names are, it seems, all right. Oh, well, nothing is perfect.

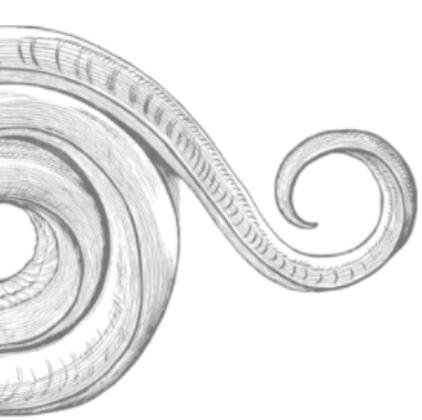
Where was I? Oh, yeah, Number Nine: Jane. Her neck is also slender, which means her head isn't well-supported. Her neck looks like it has only bones and skins. No good. It looks pretty, but the appearance doesn't count too much.

This wild boar terrine is so good. It's got tiny chunks of meat in it, which tease your tongue. This place always serves it. I've been coming here for five years and the wild boar terrine is the first food I start enjoying the contest with and the last food I finish it with. In my second year here, it was all gone at the end, so I couldn't eat it then. From the third year on, I kept some on my plate for the last taste. See, I've put this bit aside. It's for the end. Would you like to try some? It's on the second table from the left. It will melt in your mouth. What? You're a vegetarian? A big guy like you? And what are you here for, then? Just out of curiosity? Okay. But you can enjoy yourself more at a plant market next to Compton Park. You are a vegetarian! I haven't seen one before. Yeah, okay, not everybody is the same. Fair enough.

Look at Sheena's long torso. It must have good inner organs inside. Her long intestines can make good sausage cases. Her liver would be excellent. Have you had raw liver? Yeah, you're a vegan. No? Not that strict? Do you eat fish? No? How about cheese? Good. We can talk about cheese some time later, then.

I first had raw liver, which was nicely sliced, four years ago. I was on holiday in Japan. At this crowded restaurant, my friend ordered it for us. I first flinched from the idea of eating raw liver. You know, livers get rid of bad things from blood, so they could be full of toxins. I might get afflicted by some diseases. But my friend explained that no poisons are kept there and the liver was good, soft and smooth.





I know you're fidgeting. You must be uncomfortable to hear my story about the raw liver. Remember, you are not at a plant market. You should've known beforehand.

Jane has a short torso. You like that, don't you? It looks nicer, I know. But the appearance sometimes is deceptive. Not in plants? When they look nice, they are nice to eat? Fine. But you aren't looking at your food, now, all right?

Where was I? I can't keep to one subject with a vegetarian. Why is your seat here, next to me? All vegetarians should be at the same table. What? You didn't tell the organiser you're a veggie? No wonder. Well, this is an experience. I should look on the bright side, as they say.

Jane's legs are long and slender. I bet you like them. But not much muscle, only bones and skin. Look at Sheena's legs. They are shorter than Jane's but more muscular. A lot more to eat. Her thighs are thick, especially right above her knees. See the two big muscles there? They're mouth-watering. Jane has nothing much there. Maybe only good for soup.

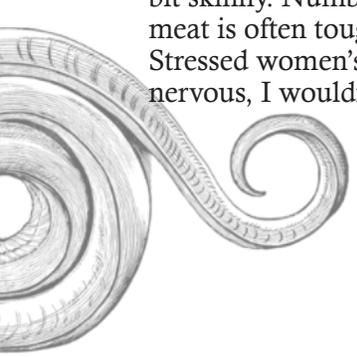
What did you just say? I couldn't hear you because of the noise over there. What happened there? Looks like a waiter dropped a glass onto somebody's food, which splashed everywhere. The waiter looks like a teenager. He must be a part-time worker. Big functions like this shouldn't hire inexperienced waiters like him. And the poor customer. His white suit is now blotches of brown, red and yellow.

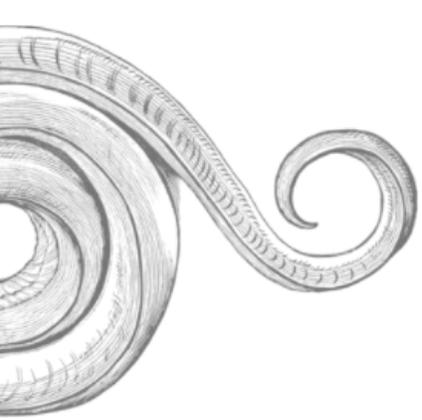
Oh, yeah. I can hear you now. What? You want me to teach you about meat? That is why you're here? Why? Why do you want to learn about meat? You're a vegetarian. Yeah, you've told me it's just out of curiosity. Okay, I'll tell you something about it. You might not like it and I'm not good at talking. Yeah, I've been speaking about Sheena a lot, but it was like talking to myself out loud. It's different. Okay, I'll try.

You see Sheena's mouth? It's broad. Jane's is small. Big mouths mean a big appetite. Small mouths mean a small appetite. Women with a big appetite eat a lot and develop good muscles. It's natural Sheena is big and Jane is thin. You still prefer small mouths? It's hard to change your feelings overnight. You'll learn slowly. Don't worry.

Yeah, Jane's got big ears, protruding through her hair. Sheena's are small, almost hidden in her hair. But ears don't matter. How they can hear doesn't affect their flesh. Of course, there is a bit more meat in big ears, but same difference. Unless she had huge, flapping ears like Dumbo. If you like women like that, you should go to a rarity market, which is held at the nearby city once a year. I don't know the details, but I'm sure you can find out online.

Sheena's torso is straight. Jane's a bit tilted to the right. A straight torso has healthy organs inside. A tilted one must have some abnormality in its innards. See other women? Number Seven is okay, although she is a bit skinny. Number Two is very straight, but she is rather rigid. That means she is nervous. Nervous women's meat is often tough and stringy, even when they are young. Calm women produce light-red meat that is tender. Stressed women's flesh is dark-red and tough. You should look at how they stand: still or fidgety. If Sheena were nervous, I wouldn't choose her. Her behaviour would tell the quality of the meat.





Do you know some company has made a perfect GM woman? She is tall and big, lots of meat. Her back is straight. Her torso is nice and long. Her neck is broad. But her flesh might affect us later. You know, nobody knows for sure what will happen to our bodies if we keep eating GM women. Even the company is vague about it. I saw that on TV the other day. Would you like to eat her? Oh, you wouldn't, anyway. You're a veggie. I prefer natural women who might have some blemishes, with the future safe.

Now they've turned round. Their backs are to us. See how Sheena's shoulder blades are totally the same on both sides? Her body is very well-balanced.

You want to know about Number Three? Oh, she is over-finished. You don't know the meaning? Sorry, you're a veggie. It means she is too fat. See her double chin? Inside, she must have thick fat, like pigs. Do you know people in some remote regions eat animals like pigs and cows? Can you believe it? It's revolting. Anyway, Number Three should've done more exercise. Sheena's chin is tight. Her meat must be marbled with white fat, nice and juicy. See Jane? She is under-finished – not fat enough.

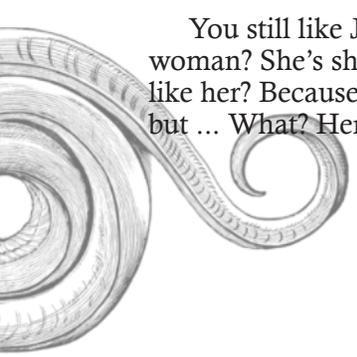
And Sheena's bottom is wide and her feet are set wide apart. That's the good balance. It's okay to have a small bottom, although there's less meat. But a small-bottomed woman should have her feet close together. It's all a matter of balance.

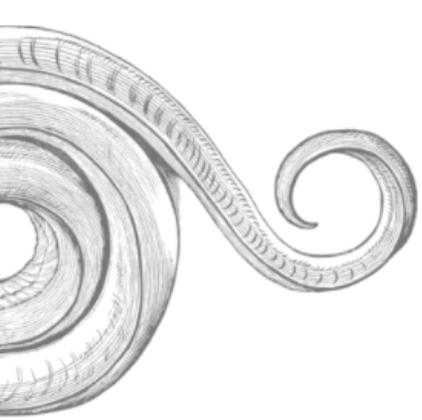
I'll tell you my favourite recipe. It's chop marinade. You just put the meat into the marinade sauce, which is soy sauce, brown sugar, minced garlic, minced ginger, and chili sauce. You are supposed to leave it for only ten minutes or so. But you know what? When I was cooking it last time, I had a row with my partner and didn't grill the meat for two days. The meat cooked after two days in the marinade was just excellent. All the sauce was in the core of the meat. It was so smooth and tender. How we enjoyed it, then. So, if you have time, leave the meat in the marinade for longer. I guarantee it.

You think I buy whole women often? No. I wish I could. I usually go to a local market to buy meat in packets. Whole women are so expensive. The last time I had enough money to buy a woman was last spring. But my clocks had malfunctioned. They didn't change the time – you know, the Daylight Saving Time. So, I was one hour too late. I almost sued the clock company.

You still like Jane? You've changed? So, you prefer Sheena? What? You like Number One? That tiny woman? She's short and skinny. She's got nothing. I don't know how she's passed the criteria test. Why do you like her? Because of her eyes? Oh, eyeballs are small in any women. They're highly regarded in some regions, but ... What? Her eyes show her intelligence? Maybe, but what's that for? Their brains have nothing to do with

The meat cooked after two days in the marinade was just excellent. All the sauce was in the core of the meat. It was so smooth and tender.



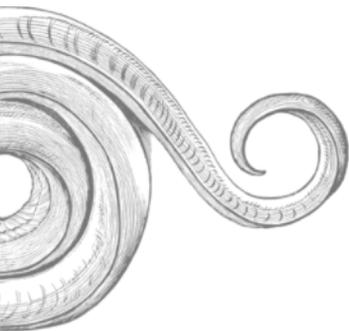


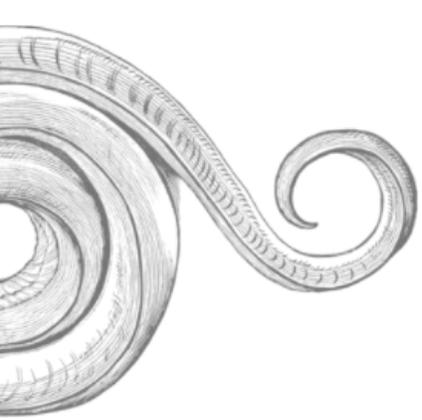
their flesh. Good-functioning brains might taste better, but then, you are in the wrong place. You should go to, I think, Parts Market on Bath Lane. No? What do you want? Why are you whispering? What? Speak up. Companionship? From a woman? How? To talk? About what? With women? You are a freak. In some very remote places, I've heard, some women are treated as if they were almost the same as men. But not in decent cities like here.

Hey, Security! There is a mutant here!

THE END

Sayuri prefers animals and machines to people. Her friends are Charley (a black-and-white cat) and Sebastian (a black cat), her neighbour. She know some people at her gym, but they are only acquaintances. Also, she prefers bad people in stories.





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Born in the dark, withered forests of Virginia, Abigail was inspired to create from the time she could first hold a pen. Despite her mother's honest attempts to curb her daughter's bizarre affinity for imaginary monsters with classical girls' literature, Abigail grew to love Shelley, Poe, Gorey, and classic horror movies. These days, Abigail creates art for books, magazines, albums, events, and a variety of other venues. She works in pencil, watercolour and digital media.



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