

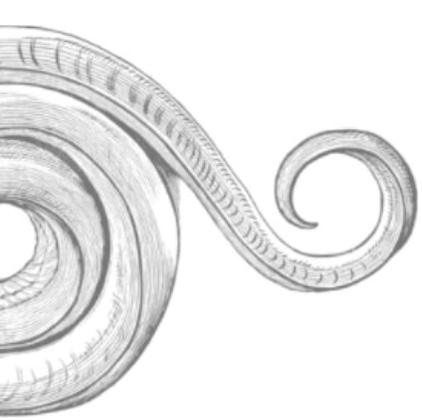
Issue 11 | October 2012

# INNSMOUTH

MAGAZINE



Triannual Magazine of Weird Fiction



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Editorial  | 2  |
| The Dark Island   William Meikle                                       | 3  |
| The Drowned Ballet is Gone   Kirsten Alene                             | 11 |
| Charlotte Babbage and the Engine of Liberia  <br>Andrew G. Dombalagian | 16 |
| The Boston Look   Evan Dicken  | 25 |
| A Prayer to the Priest of Dreams   Josh Storey                         | 38 |
| Dinner at Majak's   Nghi Vo  | 53 |
| Available Now: Collected Issues 5-7                                    | 56 |
| Our cover artist: Bernie Gonzalez                                      | 56 |



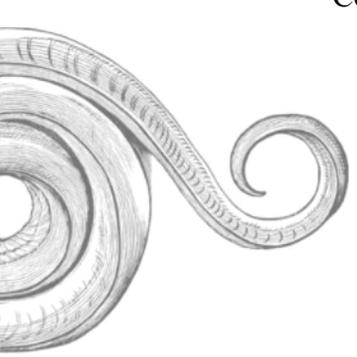
**Cover art:** Bernie Gonzalez

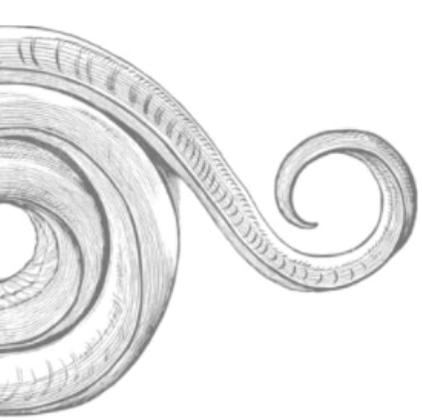
**Interior images in order of appearance:** John Atkinson Grimshaw, Degas, wwarby, Boris Mitendorfer, Richard North and William Kalf.

**Publisher:** Silvia Moreno-Garcia

**Editor-in-Chief:** Paula R. Stiles

Contact and submission information available at [www.innsmouthfreepress.com](http://www.innsmouthfreepress.com)





## EDITORIAL

Hello ghouls and gals! It's October, Halloween time, and time for our third and final *Innsmouth Magazine* issue of the year. Before you dig into the pages of this magazine, we'd like to update you on what's been going around Innsmouth.

Our biggest news is the successful funding campaign of our upcoming anthology *Sword and Mythos*. Second of all, we have some other releases for 2013. Bryan Thao Worra's Weird poetry collection, *Demonstra*, will be out in the spring, followed by the urban fantasy novel, *Confraternitas* (second in the *Fraterfamilias* trilogy). *Sword and Mythos* will be out in the fall and *Innsmouth Presents: Jazz Age Cthulhu* should be out in December. We'd also like to remind you that subscriptions to *Innsmouth Magazine* may be purchased via Weightless Books.

Finally, before you dig into the stories, the tagline of *Innsmouth Magazine* (Bet you haven't noticed it, hu?), which has been "a magazine of Lovecraftian fiction," is being changed to "a magazine of Weird fiction." It doesn't mean we'll cease to publish Lovecraftian fiction, but, with the release of *Fungi* this December and the release of a Weird poetry collection next year, we have begun to move in a broader direction that matches the approach at our website, where we blog about a bunch of horror topics, with a special interest in the Weird and Lovecraftian.

What you can expect from *Innsmouth Magazine*, therefore, is a Weird vibe with some Lovecraftian stuff for good measure.

Now to the stories in this issue. There's a dark, foreboding island on a loch. A restaurant which redefines the term "Today's Special." A Lovecraftian steampunk adventure set in Liberia. Dive into issue 11 of *Innsmouth Magazine*. We'll be back with issue 12 in February.

Many tentacles,

Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles



Far out over the water, a deeper blackness in the gloom, the island sat like a blot on the water. Until now, I had paid it little attention, but I found myself trying to pierce its dark secrets.

## THE DARK ISLAND

By William Meikle

THE SUN WAS going down behind the mountain and the loch was fading from blue to black, the breeze throwing refraction patterns in intricate dances across its surface. Later, the moon would dance in those patterns, but, for now, there was only blackness.

There was still over an hour till nightfall, but already there was a chill in the air, a portent of the winter yet to come. The trees rustled softly and occasionally a leaf fell to swim in the ripples for a while, before softly sinking to join its decaying brothers.

Far out over the water, a deeper blackness in the gloom, the island sat like a blot on the water. Until now, I had paid it little attention, but I found myself trying to pierce its dark secrets. Despite my best efforts, the night kept it hidden from me and I had only the memory of the passage from that last fearful tome to remind me of the taint it threw on the waters of the loch.

From my vantage point on the balcony, I watched the patterns in the water, trying to instil some meaning to order my thoughts. My body was remembering the relative warmth of the library and goosebumps ran over my arms. I was going to need a jacket sooner rather than later, but my discovery had thrown all such thoughts out of my mind.

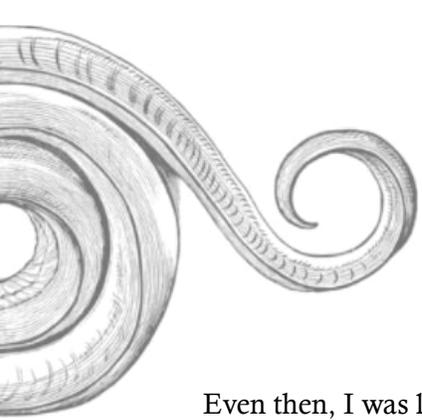
I needed to talk to someone, to share my bewildered thoughts, but Mrs. Jameson, the housekeeper, had long since closed up for the night, the remainder of the staff were abed, and Sir John wasn't due back till the morning.

The house was dark and quiet behind me. I knew that a fire was burning in my bedroom, keeping a small spot warm just for me, but, from out here on the balcony, the house was as cold and bleak as the surrounding countryside. How Sir John coped with the solitude I could never fathom.

"Come down for the week," he had said. "I believe Grandfather's library has a good deal of that esoteric waffle that you find so interesting."

We were in his club in Pall Mall, all elegance and leather and, yes, warmth.

At the time, I believed that it was a plea for company — for someone to relieve the tedium of the duties forced upon him by a chain of unfortunate deaths that led to his inheritance.



Even then, I was loath to leave London — I need the comforts of the city more than I like to admit — but then he mentioned, in his offhand way, the names of some of the books and I knew that I had to take him up on his offer.

And when I got to his residence — a journey I pray I never have to repeat — I found that John was going to be away for three days, called to officiate in some provincial court. I almost turned at the door and left, but Mrs. Jameson would have none of it.

She is one from that unbreakable mould of Scottish housekeepers; stout and broad, with a bristling energy that is as hard to ignore as it is to deny.

Within ten minutes, she had me sitting in her kitchen, a bowl of soup with enough gusto to feed a small army placed in front of me.

After that, I had no desire to travel farther than the comfort of an armchair, further fortified by some fine brandy and an even finer cigar.

“The maister telled me tae mak ye maist comfortable.” Mrs. Jameson said. “And I would no’ be doing ma job if I did onything other.”

After I recovered from her ministrations, I headed for the library.

Sir John had underestimated the worth of his Grandfather’s collection. There were early editions of Boehme and Paracelsus, but, best of all, the jewel of them all, was the collection of the works of Michael Scott, that figure of legend, astrologer to Ferdinand II, consorter with demons and necromancer. Even my beloved Corpus Christi could not boast such a hoard of delights.

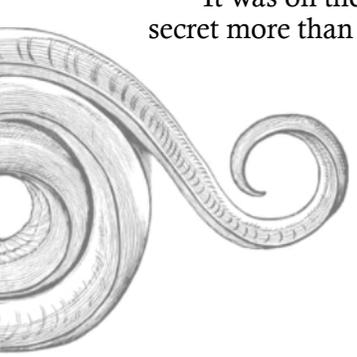
I settled myself in the library that very day — if I was to plunder its secrets in a week, then I would have to apply myself.

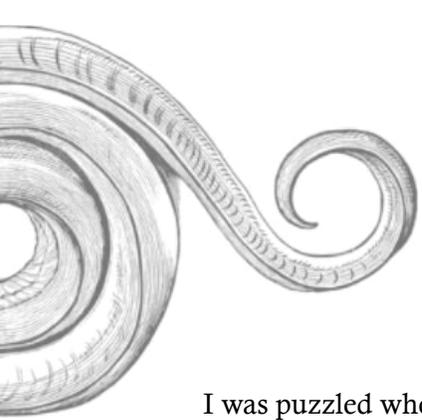
And there I stayed for two whole days, leaving only for sustenance and sleep, fortified by more of Sir John’s fine brandy.

As I worked, I became aware of a presence among the works: a fine, legible hand that annotated and collated; a scholar who had, like me, been striving to make sense of an older, altogether different, philosophy.

The scribbles held pointers to other works on the shelves, cross references that expanded and illuminated. Soon, the table at which I worked was groaning under the weight of the books and I had taken to utilising the floor space as I strove to bring the threads together.

It was on the evening of the second day that I realised I was being led toward a conclusion, the answer to a secret more than six hundred years old, a clue to the final resting place of Auld Michael, himself.





I was puzzled when the final note in the volume I was studying pointed me to *A History of the Earls of Kilbeith*, but, as soon as I took the book from the shelves, I recognised the same neat handwriting to which I had become so accustomed.

It was then that I discovered the writer's identity — it was none other than the 23<sup>rd</sup> Earl, Robert, Sir John's grandfather. The pointer led me to a heavily annotated page near the beginning of the volume. As I read, a chill seemed to work its way into my bones, a chill that has stayed with me ever since.

*I have been searching for many years and now I believe I have tracked down the source of that scourge which has so plagued my family down through the centuries. To understand it fully, it is necessary to go back to the early years of the 13th century. The first Earl, my ancestor, one Richard de Bourcy, raised the first castle on this spot, but it was not the first dwelling. At that time, there was a chapel on the island on the loch — a small cell which was home to a local cleric whose name is lost to history.*

*It was while the castle was being raised that a stranger came to the chapel, an old, bent man with silver in his hair and red fire in his eyes. Not long after that, strange rumours spread across the region — rumours of a jet-black steed with hooves of iron that carried on its back an old man whose very gaze spelt death. The local country folk beseeched Sir Richard to rid them of this devilry and so it was that the Earl took himself to the island. And there, on that accursed island, his eyes met great abominations and outrages against good Christian nature, which I shall not detail here for fain of disturbing my reader's sensibilities.*

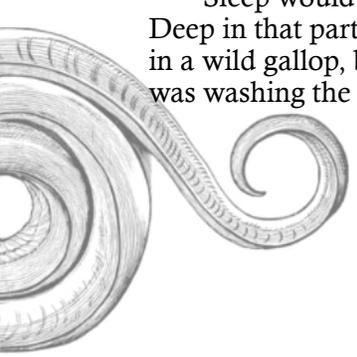
*And Sir Richard took up his sword against the perpetrator of the crimes, an old man with blood on his nails and at his mouth. Yet, even as the old man was struck through the breast, he uttered an almighty curse, that the Earl and all his family would be joined with him on the island before any of them should see 50 summers. The Earl razed the chapel to the ground, cleansing it with the pure fire of his faith, but that same faith failed to sustain him and the next summer, just short of his fiftieth year, he passed from history, his resting place unknown. And so it has gone down the centuries, the old man's curse laying its foul hand over us all. I have tracked him down, the old devil, the necromancer Michael, and tonight, I will go to the island and say the rites. If I succeed, then the curse will be forever lifted. If I fail, I leave these notes so that one who follows me might see where I did not and, if his faith be strong, succeed where I could not.*

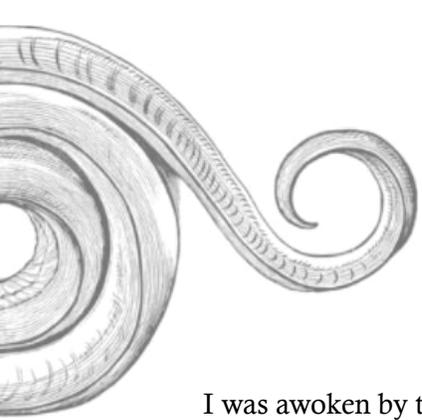
*By the hand of Robert, 23<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Kilbeith, in his 49<sup>th</sup> year in the sight of our Lord, in the sure and certain hope of his infinite mercy.*

I laid the volume on the desk, noticing with horror that my hands were shaking, a tremble that I could not stop. It was then that I felt drawn to the balcony, but I did not stay there long, the dark and the cold soon sending me back to the relative warmth of the library.

But the room was no longer a comforting place to be, the books now enemies rather than trusted friends. I made sure that the windows were firmly locked and repaired to my bed.

Sleep would not come. Images flowed in my mind, of dark islands and warlocks, of swords and flames. Deep in that part of the night where nothing moves, I heard, as if from far off, a loud drumming as of a horse in a wild gallop, but it was soon over and I was left staring at the soft interplay of shadows on the ceiling. Dawn was washing the sky pale before a troubled slumber finally took me down and away.





I was awoken by the rattling of the doorknob in its casing, followed by the entry of Mrs. Jameson.

“A guid morning to ye, sir,” she said, laying before me a tray of food that would have sunk the trustiest battleship. “The maister has sent word that he’ll return after lunch and asks that ye forgive his further absence.”

She didn’t wait for a reply. The door slammed behind her as if to punctuate her exit and I was left staring with dismay at the mound of food before me.

I managed a single cup of tea and two spoonfuls of porridge before my troubled thoughts drove me from my bed and out into the cool morning, where I thought that a brisk walk might bring a clearer view on my discoveries of the previous night.

For the first time, I had a view of my old friend’s estate, but I am afraid that the panoramic splendours passed me by. From all vantage points, I found my gaze drawn back to the loch and to the dark island at its heart.

By the time I headed back to the castle the sun had already passed overhead, or as near to overhead as it ever gets this far north. When I entered, I found John in the hall, a brace of fine, plump pheasants in his hands.

“William. I’m so glad you could make it,” he said, and the warmth of his welcome almost dispelled the deep chill inside me.

“Do you believe it?” he said, “I sit in trial of a poacher, find him unjustly accused, and what do you think he does? Only gives me a pair of my own birds in gratitude.”

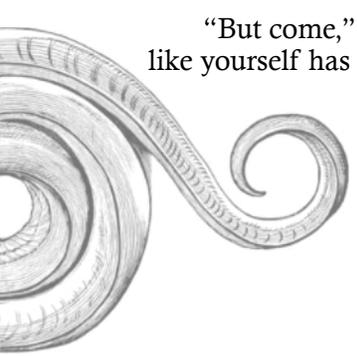
He laughed, his head thrown back, showing off the proud, Roman profile enjoyed by all his family. The laugh was such a joyous thing that I was forced to join him. Five minutes later, we were ensconced in his study, sharing a bottle of clear, golden whisky, watched over by the imperious portraits of his ancestors. I couldn’t help but notice that they had all been caught as young men.

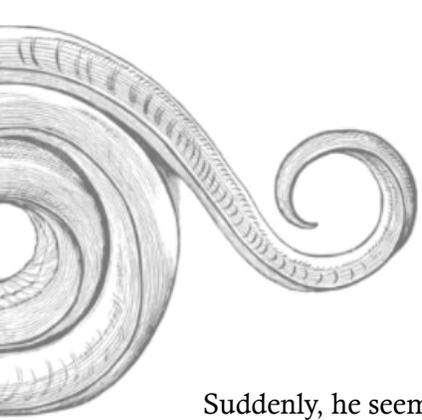
John was full of tales from the courts, completely enthralled in the life of the people in the area. For the first time in our long acquaintance, he looked truly happy and at ease with the world.

I was loath to break the spell that this place had woven around him. It took two glasses of whisky to loosen my tongue and a further one before I could relate my findings. I was serious and tried to impress the gravity of the situation on him. He listened intently, but his eyes told me that he didn’t believe a word of it.

“I’ve heard parts of the tale before,” he said, “We used to have an old gamekeeper here — Jim Callender. He was full of the old stories — how that man loved to hear himself talk. He tried to frighten my brother and me when we were little more than children.”

“But come,” he said, leaning forward and placing a hand on my knee, “Surely, a sophisticated gentleman like yourself has not fallen for such old wives tales?”





Suddenly, he seemed to come to a decision.

“Come on. I’ll show you that there’s no need to be afraid.”

He stood and made for the door before turning back to me.

“Well? Are you coming? There’s just enough light for the task.”

I took a last, lingering drink before placing the glass on the table and had a longing look back at it before following Sir John out to the loch.

There was a small rowing boat tied to a makeshift jetty. John must have noticed the look on my face when I saw it.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “It’s more stable than it looks. I take the boat out most evenings — there are some terrific trout in the waters around here.”

Without another word, he led me into the boat, which swayed alarmingly until we were both settled. He had taken the oars and allowed me no argument. He rowed with the ease of one well-used to the task and was not even breathing heavily when he spoke.

“You know, It’s a curious thing. I have been out on this loch more times than you can imagine, but I’ve never set foot on the island. Nobody has, for as long as I can remember.”

“I’d wager that your grandfather did.” I said, my mouth working faster than my brain. I immediately regretted it, as a cloud seemed to pass over John’s features.

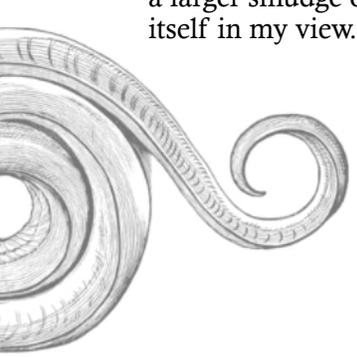
“For pity’s sake, man — Granddad was going soft in the head, by all accounts. He was obsessed with the old stories. And it wasn’t the curse that got him — he killed himself, up there in that library you are so fond of.”

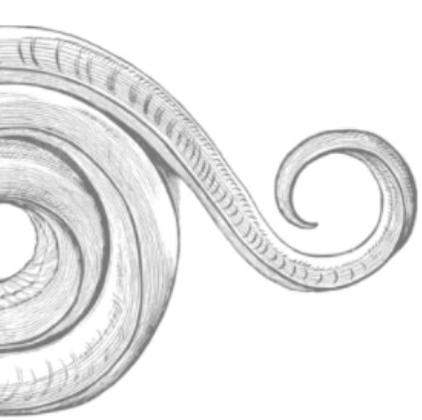
I jumped at that, causing the boat to sway slightly, but John didn’t miss a stroke and his face was now set against me. I could do no more than watch that dark blot appear ever closer over his left shoulder.

It was less than five minutes later when there was a grind of wood against stone and the boat came up on a steep, rocky shore.

The sun was closing in on the mountainside, laying layers of orange and red across the sky. The loch itself glowed gold like the whisky I was missing so much, a gold that was slowly turning blood-red.

I turned away from the view and forced myself to confront the island itself. At first, it was no more than a larger smudge of darkness, but then the splendour of the sunset faded from my eyes and the island asserted itself in my view.





It was smaller than I had thought — barely thirty yards in diameter, raising itself no more than six feet from the surface of the loch at its highest point. A grove of twisted yew trees seemed to grow straight from the rock, so dense that it was impossible to guess what might lie beyond them.

John was already up and out of the boat before I had time to take in the whole scene. Even then, I found that I no longer had the desire to explore this godforsaken patch of land. I watched him scramble across the slimy rocks and followed his progress until his shape melded with the greater darkness of the trees.

A stillness descended around me like a shroud, the loch around me as flat and calm as the surface of a lady's mirror. No bird sang; nor did any of the fabled trout disturb the waters. Suddenly, I felt more alone than I had ever desired.

I called out to John, twice, my first attempt coming to little more than the thin, croaky pleading of an old man. There was no reply.

I pushed myself out of the boat, the soaking of my good brogues not improving my temper. I was glad of them only seconds later — the rocks proved a more tortuous route than I had imagined.

Once more, I called out for my friend and this time, was rewarded by an answering call, muffled, as if having travelled a great distance to reach me.

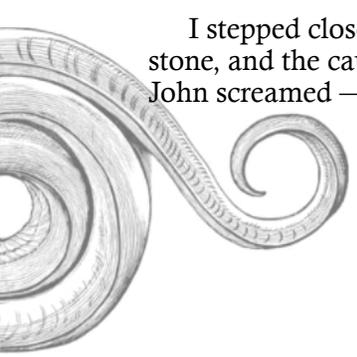
“Over here, William,” the voice said and my heart immediately lifted. I followed the source of the voice to the grove of elms and began to push my way through them, all the time becoming ever more aware that darkness was beginning to draw itself in around me.

Just when I began to believe that the grove had, somehow, become larger than the island on which it stood, I emerged into a rough clearing, no more than nine feet across. The ground rose to a taller mound, one formed of fallen rocks and rubble, rubble that seemed strangely black, even in the dim light.

“John?” I shouted and this time, I could trace the reply — he was in the mound itself. As I stepped closer, I could see a rough entrance, just above and to the left of where I was standing.

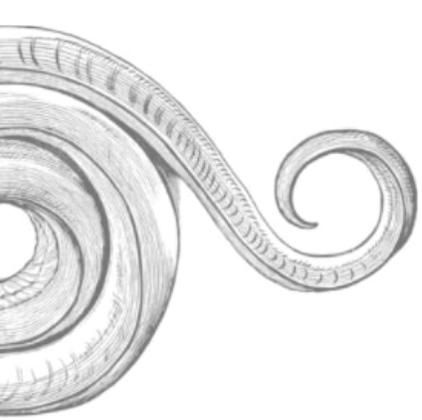
“In here,” the voice said.

I stepped closer, then stopped, halted by a sudden whiff of corruption. There was a scrape, as of stone on stone, and the caustic odor strengthened. I started to call out, but everything was driven from my mind when John screamed — a cry the like of which I hope never to hear again.



A stillness descended  
around me like a  
shroud, the loch around  
me as flat and calm as  
the surface of a lady's  
mirror.





A figure barrelled out of the mound, knocking me over to scabble, dazed, amongst the rubble. I managed to push myself upright, just in time to see John's stout frame push away from me through the yews.

The stones beneath my feet shifted and the smell became so strong as to sting at the back of my throat and cause my gorge to rise. It was all the excuse I needed — I hurried to follow my friend.

At first, I thought that he had already gone, leaving me to go insane on this rough rock, but then I saw that the boat was still where we had left it. I came across his prone body several steps later — by that time, it was becoming so dark that I might have missed him if I had passed several steps to either side.

He had fallen victim to the rocks, losing his footing and striking his head hard. There was a warm wetness in his hair, but his breathing was strong. With no little difficulty, I managed to manhandle him into the boat — I still have a scar on my left knee where a rock sheared clean through my tweeds and into my leg.

I only looked up once, no more than a glance back to the island to get my bearings, and then I was rowing, with an energy I never knew I possessed, rowing with all haste back to the safe, warm lights of Sir John's ancestral seat.

I will say nothing of that mad flight across the loch — the fears and terrors of it have been blanked from my mind, a necessity if I am to remain sane.

Some time later, Mrs. Jameson met us on the doorstep. The walk from the jetty, all the while carrying the dead weight of my friend, exhausted me and I fell across the door, tumbling both myself and the master of the house in an unruly heap on the carpet.

By that time, I was most willing to give myself over to the ministrations of Mrs. Jameson. She did not let me down. Within five minutes, we were installed in the stout armchairs in the study, the whole household having been roused for our attention.

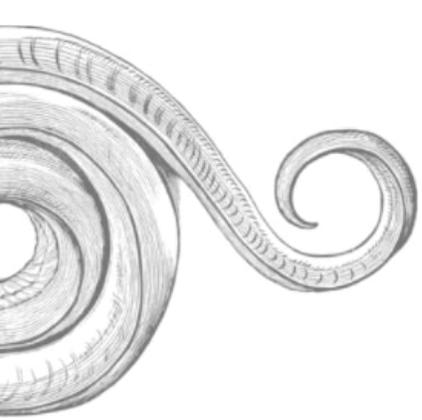
Which is how I came to be facing John on his awakening.

His eyes opened first: strange, unfamiliar, red-rimmed orbs. He stared at me then his gaze lifted, looking beyond me to the portraits on the walls.

That's when the screaming started.

I left that very night, ignoring all of Mrs. Jameson's protestations, and since that night, I have never left London. Indeed, I rarely set foot from the safety of my warm, suburban home.





But at night, I dream.

I am once more back in that rowing boat, having managed to tumble John into position. I pick up the oars and look back, just a glance to get my bearings.

And there, backlit by the last rays of the dying sun, I see a group of figures proceeding towards us, their bare feet shuffling amongst the hard rocks, tattered clothing flapping about their flanks. One bends and lifts a rock from the shore, and I see the red of John's blood appear at its mouth. And as the boat begins to drift away from the shore, one of my oars strikes a rock and the figures all turn towards me.

I wake, screaming, at the sight of those proud, Roman profiles, the same profile I see adorning the face of my friend Sir John, my good friend Sir John, who will be 50 in less than two months time.

---

**William Meikle** is a Scottish writer with 15 novels published in the genre press and over 250 short story credits in 13 countries. His work appears in many professional anthologies. Recent work for Dark Regions Press includes *The Creeping Kelp*, *Sherlock Holmes: Revenant*, *The Invasion/ The Valley*, and *Carnack: Heaven and Hell*. He lives in a remote corner of Newfoundland with icebergs, whales and bald eagles for company. In the winters, he gets warm vicariously through the lives of others in cyberspace, so please check him out at: <http://www.williammeikle.com>.



Maggie and her brother had been within the windowless, stainless steel castle for so long that their skin was papery and translucent.

## THE DROWNED BALLET IS GONE

By Kirsten Alene

I

MAGGIE AND HER brother had been in the castle for 17 years. That was as far back as either of them could remember. For 17 years, they had been searching for the Drowned Ballet.

Clues and signs of its whereabouts often trickled down the stainless steel walls or appeared in dark corners when no one was watching. Often, whispers of the Drowned Ballet swept through the forests of fox flowers that grew in the castle.

But despite the numerous vibrations and countless clues, Maggie and her brother did not know where to find the Drowned Ballet, or even exactly what it would look like if they found it. They did not know how long the Drowned Ballet had been in the castle. They were scared to think of what would happen when the Drowned Ballet was gone. And they were scared to wonder if the Drowned Ballet had already gone.

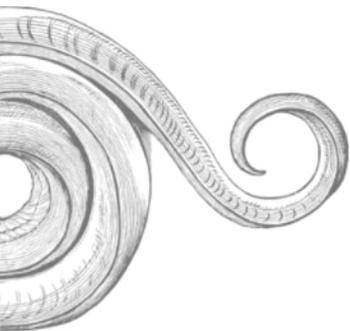
Maggie and her brother had been within the windowless, stainless steel castle for so long that their skin was papery and translucent. The spidery paths of veins close to the surface of their skin pulsed in unison with the castle's curious vibrations.

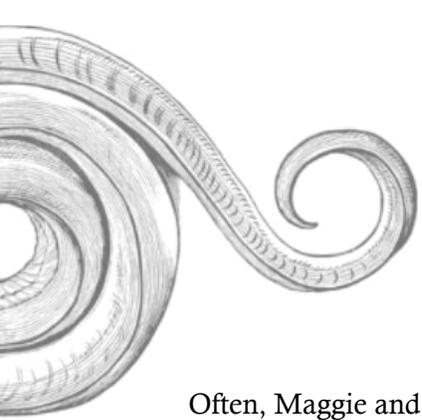
After some time, Maggie and her brother stopped speaking aloud and began to tell their stories and play their games late into the night by way of a code they had invented that consisted mainly of blinks, winks and nods.

This was the way that Maggie and her brother spoke in the castle because, whenever a loud noise was made, they felt the walls of the castle moan in pain and imagined that the Drowned Ballet was moving further from them.

When they were very young, Maggie and her brother had been taken to see the Drowned Ballet by a person they no longer remembered, in a place that was not the stainless steel castle. They did not remember anything about the Drowned Ballet, except that they had seen it.

There were many flowers that grew in the castle and all of them had the heads and tails of foxes. The fox flowers covered everything in their path and had been known to bury armchairs, boudoirs and bureaus.





Often, Maggie and her brother picked the fox-heads off their stalks and drank the yellow nectar they produced. Drinking fox-heads was a favorite thing to do in the evenings in the castle while they walked soundlessly through the stainless steel corridors in search of the Drowned Ballet.

Sometimes, days would stretch between the finding of a clue and the next sign of the Drowned Ballet.

One time, it was a month.

When the sign eventually came, Maggie and her brother were almost beginning to believe that the Drowned Ballet was gone.

When they thought the Drowned Ballet had gone, all of the fox-head flowers roared like lions in the darkened corridors. When they thought the Drowned Ballet had gone, they did not play any games, and they only sat together in the stainless steel castle and wondered what would happen next.

“Maggie,” said her brother in their silent wink/blink language, “I think the Drowned Ballet is gone.” But two days later, a blue mask was found lying in a pile of rose petals in the antechamber to the main hall. After that, there was a slipper in the cloakroom.

Maggie and her brother saved the clues that came to them in a large cabinet in the smallest bedroom of the castle.

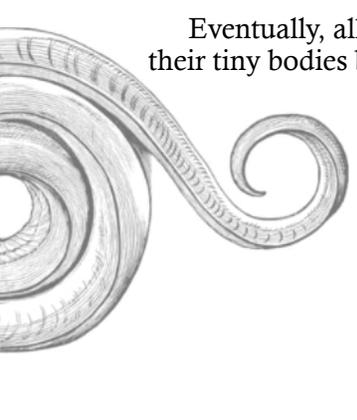
Maggie and her brother kept the clues in this room because they wanted to keep the fox flowers away from the clues and it was easier to defend a single small space. They ran to the smallest room in the stainless steel castle, and they sat among their clues and hints and rumors. Maggie and her brother did this to reassure themselves that the clues they had received of the whereabouts of the Drowned Ballet were real.

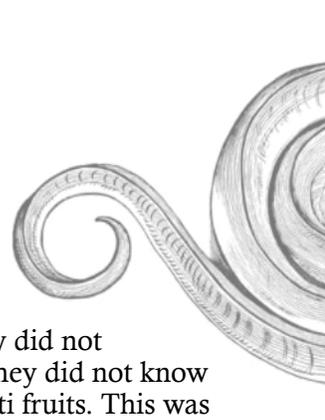
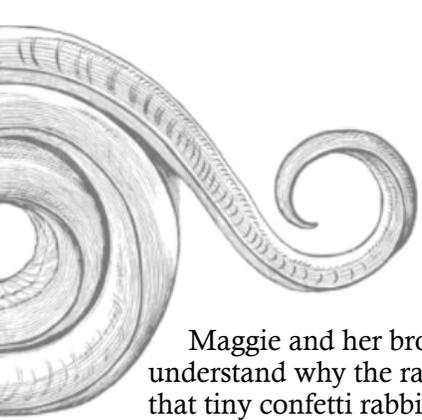
Sometimes, Maggie and her brother would dress up in the clues and play elaborate games that always ended in the discovery of the Drowned Ballet.

The best clue to ever be discovered was discovered by Maggie in the kitchen late at night. It was a golden bowl full to the brim with red-and-gold confetti. At first, the contents of the bowl looked like normal paper confetti, but, as Maggie approached, she realized that the confetti was made of extremely small rabbits. The rabbits crawled all over each other in the bowl, cooing softly. As Maggie reached a hand into the bowl, many of the little glittering confetti rabbits leapt out and scattered across the kitchen.

Maggie and her brother transferred the remaining rabbits, each no larger than the head of a pin, to a jam jar. They put breathing holes in the lid and tried to feed the rabbits all of the things that they thought rabbits loved. They tried carrots and lettuce and peas and the left over crusts of sandwiches. They tried lemonade and fresh fruit. They even tried to feed the rabbits a fox flower, but the fox-head ate all of the rabbits that came near it.

Eventually, all of the little glittering confetti rabbits in the jam jar died, and Maggie and her brother squished their tiny bodies between their pale fingers to see what they felt like.





Maggie and her brother were sad that they could not keep the tiny confetti rabbits and they did not understand why the rabbits had not eaten any of the wonderful foods they had given them. They did not know that tiny confetti rabbits could only eat tiny confetti carrots, tiny confetti peas, and tiny confetti fruits. This was why all of the tiny confetti rabbits had died.

Some of the tiny confetti rabbits had escaped capture and imprisonment in the jam jar, however, and lived out the rest of their lives eating the tiny confetti foods that grew in the space beneath the refrigerator and behind the water heater in the stainless steel basement. When they grew old, they wrapped each other's tiny bodies in bright-yellow cocoons and transformed each other into small, green butterflies that pollinated the fox flowers in the hallways and the bedrooms of the castle. The small, green butterflies sometimes banged their rabbit bodies against the stainless steel walls of the castle, as if they knew that sun awaited them on the other side, but the walls moaned in pain and the small, green butterflies fell, exhausted, to the floor.

When this happened, Maggie and her brother heard the music of the Drowned Ballet receding deeper and deeper into the stainless steel walls, lower and lower in the castle. But when they rushed to the stainless steel basement of the castle, all they found were butterflies and fox flowers.

Sometimes in their dreams, Maggie and her brother imagined that the Drowned Ballet was gone. They imagined that the fox flowers overtook the smallest room in the stainless steel castle and that the clues to finding the Drowned Ballet were buried beneath them forever. Maggie and her brother sometimes woke up with a gasp and looked at each other across the floor of the smallest room of the castle and, sometimes, one would say in their wink/blink code, "Did you dream that the Drowned Ballet had gone?"

And the other would reply, "Did you?"

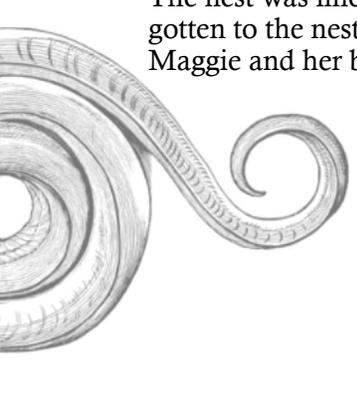
Another time, Maggie and her brother were walking on the ninth floor of the stainless steel castle, sucking the nectar from two fox-head flowers and having a silent wink/blink conversation about the Drowned Ballet, when a great, shivering moan shook the castle. It was the loudest moan the castle had ever made. Maggie and her brother shook with fear, so much so that they almost cried aloud in the silence of the stainless steel castle.

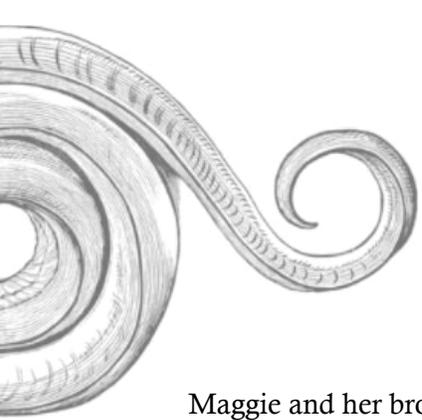
Maggie and her brother hurried down the hall toward the sound, but, when they arrived at the staircase, they found a very disappointing clue. It was only a length of blue, satin ribbon on the floor, pointing due south.

Maggie and her brother picked up the blue ribbon and hurried due south. But all they found at the end of their path was a dense grove of fox flowers. Beneath these fox flowers were a few of the corpses of the confetti rabbits, but Maggie and her brother did not know this.

Maggie and her brother clutched the blue, satin ribbon that had been pointing due south, glad that it had appeared in the corridor to tell them that the Drowned Ballet was near, even if they had not been quick enough to catch it.

One of Maggie's favorite clues had been the nest of lady's shoes that they had found in the early morning. The nest was lined with velvet cloth and set up in a corridor they often walked through. No fox flowers had gotten to the nest, yet, and all of the shoes, not one looking more than slightly worn, were the right size for Maggie and her brother.





Maggie and her brother kept most of the shoes in the smallest room with the other clues, but they took them out often to try them on and walk around. Their skinny, pale ankles looked like lilies blossoming from beaded satin paddies in the water.

## II

Right now, Maggie and her brother are playing dress-up with the clues they have collected in the castle, clues that have not led them to the Drowned Ballet.

Maggie and her brother are playing a game where, in the end, they will find the Drowned Ballet that they remember having seen only briefly, a long time ago, led to the location by a series of increasingly promising clues that, in real life, they will never find or hear, to a place that is in the stainless steel castle where the Drowned Ballet has been waiting to begin, waiting for them to arrive. When they enter the theater, the dancers will begin to dance and the musicians will lift their dusty violins.

At the end of their game, Maggie and her brother take their seats in the crowded theater and watch the Drowned Ballet, acted for them in their game by some fox-head flowers, a green butterfly, and a pair of beaded satin shoes.

Maggie and her brother are playing soundlessly in the smallest room of the stainless steel castle. The descendants of the tiny confetti rabbits flit past the open door. Fox flowers grow around the hallway outside, peering in curiously, as if they are hoping to grow into the smallest room and bury the clues about the Drowned Ballet that Maggie and her brother have collected — clues they hope will lead them to the Drowned Ballet, which they are watching now, in the game that they are playing.

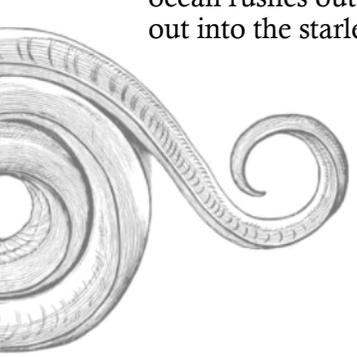
## III

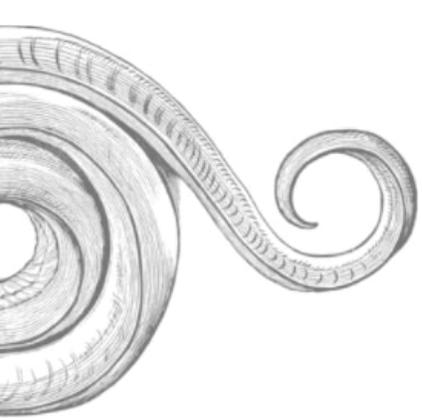
It has been three months since the last clue was discovered beneath a bathroom sink. It was a hatchback ticket. The ticket was number 37. Maggie and her brother know that the Drowned Ballet has gone. It rains inside the stainless steel castle. It rains in every room and in every hallway. Walls of water rise up from the stainless steel basement, washing up descendants of the tiny confetti rabbits.

Every creak and every moan of the stainless steel castle sounds like bending and breaking. Maggie and her brother pack the clues into three enormous barrels that they sew together with the tails of the fox flowers. To lash the barrels into a raft, Maggie and her brother harvest all of the fox flowers. It is a fox-flower genocide.

The water rises and rises in the castle.

With all of their clues and hints and rumors packed away, Maggie and her brother clamber onto the foxtail raft and wait for the stainless steel castle to bend and break. When the stainless steel castle bends and breaks, an ocean rushes out of all of the floors of the castle at once, carrying Maggie and her brother on their foxtail raft out into the starless night.



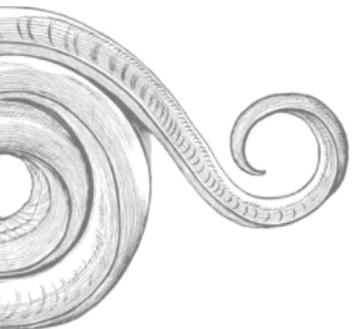


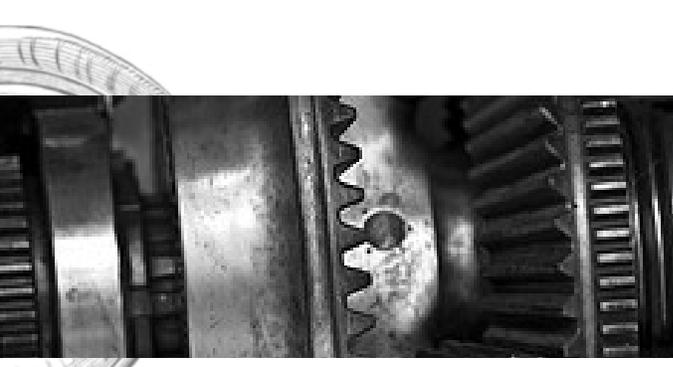
Maggie and her brother cling to each other with beaded satin shoes on their hands and feet. When the ocean settles, they look around for the Drowned Ballet. There is no sign of the Drowned Ballet, until a little green butterfly flutters past.

Then, drawing out two paddles made from bedposts, Maggie and her brother row across the sea toward the Drowned Ballet.

---

**Kirsten Alene** is the author of *Love in the Time of Dinosaurs* and *Unicorn Battle Squad* (recently published by Eraserhead Press). Her fiction has appeared in *Amazing Stories of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, *New Dead Families*, *The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction*, and *Bust Down the Door and Eat All the Chickens*. She edits fiction for *Bizarro Central*. See more exciting things about Kirsten here: <http://www.kirstenalene.com>.





It was a queer night. In the wan light of the moon and sputtering lantern, Babbage could see a single schooner listing at the quay. The vessel bore black sails, but also carried odd iron along its bulkheads.

## CHARLOTTE BABBAGE AND THE ENGINE OF LIBERIA

By Andrew G. Dombalagian

A HEN SHRIEKED of night terrors in the distance. The spindly steeples caught glints of moonlight on the squat hill overlooking Monrovia harbor. Charlotte Babbage shuffled restlessly beneath the bleached veranda framing the church entrance. She huddled within the glow of a dying lantern at the Georgian doors. Madam Allegretta would only visit the church at night, when the hallowed and deserted house of God was hers alone.

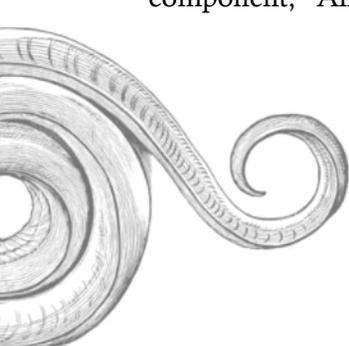
Madam Allegretta was inside, introducing their latest crafted bauble to the blessings of holy water. She would also bring wine to anoint her gadgets, even though the Protestant reverend would raise Holy Hell if he discovered such Catholic wickedness in his parish. He did not approve of Allegretta's "devilish" inventive work, either. Normally, she bade Babbage to await her return at home. This night, however, Allegretta instructed her employee to meet her at the church.

It was a queer night. In the wan light of the moon and sputtering lantern, Babbage could see a single schooner listing at the quay. The vessel bore black sails, but also carried odd iron along its bulkheads. The ship had been refitted to overcome storms with the might of steam, but it was unlike the steamships from America and Europe which called to port in Monrovia. These mechanisms were of an eccentric make. Only the scribbled pages in Madam Allegretta's study bore witness to similar contraptions. Her employer's work inspired wonder or incredulity; this ship only fostered wariness and suspicion in Babbage.

The burlap satchel in her tired arms suddenly doubled in weight, so she laid the bag down amongst the yellow dust that had collected on the veranda. At that moment, Babbage witnessed a trio of figures fleeing from the rear of the church like silent carrion birds spooked from a tree. Heavy shawls, too hot for even the warm night wind, cloaked their hunched, skittering gaits. Babbage watched as they fled toward the schooner, but the grind of wooden hinges heralded Allegretta's muted exodus from the church. A small bag, stitched together from many-shaded swathes, swung in slow, gravid arcs from her right hand.

"Madam Allegretta, are we performing another favor for the Masonic Order?" Babbage asked, already knowing the answer. She could tell dead away that those unseemly men were not among the reputable Americo Liberians from the Masonic Lodge.

"Not this time, Charlotte. This is a far more special, more important commission. This will be the first component," Allegretta said, hefting the pouch with her intact right hand. "What is that at your feet?"





“The waiting grew tiresome, so I stole away to the market to find some rice and cassava. The fool tried to gouge me on the price, but then he realized who I was — who I worked for — and he became very eager to donate to our private guild. A guild so exclusive, only we are welcome.”

Allegretta did not need to ponder how her cunning employee could have found any food in the deserted, midnight marketplace. With a step down from the church, she gestured for Babbage to follow, using her left hand to cut through the night air with her lone finger and four blunt stumps.

“I was afraid I would need your magic weapon again,” Babbage laughed. “Then I remembered that I never asked you to recharge it after I dispatched the bosun from the French steamer.”

“Is that where you found those brass-and-copper fittings?” Allegretta asked, letting the gadget in her pouch briefly swing in a less calculated arc. “Let me have the Hesperia; I will reset the mechanism tomorrow. There will be many more errands for you, soon, and you will need its protection.”

Babbage reached for the inside pocket of her fraying frock coat and drew out a fountain pen carved from a stout shaft of mangrove wood and inlaid with golden bracing too thick to be called filigree. The nib was gone and its absence revealed a dark cavity lined with intricately fashioned bits of metal. A heady, sweet aroma wafted from the secret workings of the Hesperia — the Sunset Pen.

“Will you tell me now how this tool works?”

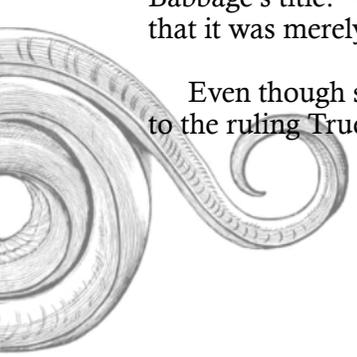
“Would you believe me if I said that the Hesperia imprisons a faerie soldier who hurls a magic spear at your enemies?”

“What sort of simpleton do you take me for?” Babbage asked, using the derisive term Allegretta had taught her. “I’m smart enough to see that I have not yet earned this level of tutelage. I can also see that this new commission is something extraordinary. If not the Masonic Order, then perhaps a favor for President Cheeseman? Refitting some fishing boats into gunships? A special longarm to kick the Europeans in the seat of their britches?”

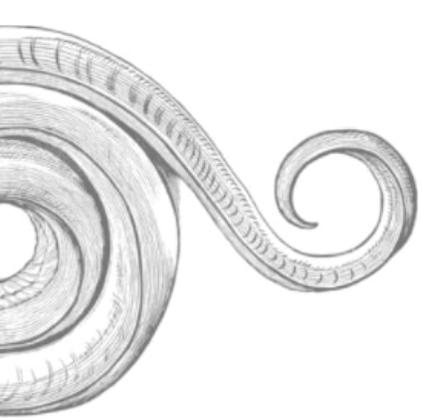
“You would never guess this project, Charlotte, nor should you try. It is of paramount importance and we shall leave it at that. I will instruct you on what to fetch, what to crank, what to fasten, and what to bolt. You will question our work, but do not hope for answers.”



Madam Allegretta had hired Charlotte Babbage after the gears in one of her creations crushed and severed every finger on her left hand, except the tiny end finger. With the loss of her gifted hand, she needed an assistant to complete her bizarre and gilded works. The neighbors, Americo Liberian and tribesmen alike, coined Babbage’s title: “Crank Servant.” Babbage thought of herself as Allegretta’s student, but spent days worrying that it was merely a delusion.



Even though she was one of their own, the Americo Liberians distrusted Allegretta. However, her utility to the ruling True Whig Party and the Liberian Masonic Order made Allegretta indispensable. While the



neighbors fretted about maintaining the grandeur of their houses, parroting the trends of Europe and the American Plantations, Allegetta only busied herself with bizarre mechanical adaptations to her home.

A punctual steam boiler drove pulleys and hinges that latched the window shutters against the oppressive heat and eyes of the morning light, only to fling them open in wide welcome of the starlit wind. Instead of the Kpelle or Krus servants employed to shuffle tableware or linen up and down ankle-twisting staircases, Allegetta's walls hummed with the workings of an automatic dumbwaiter.

Supposedly, Allegetta was a granddaughter of the freedman-turned-legendary sea captain, Paul Cuffee. A popular rumor around Monrovia claimed that the timbers from two of Cuffee's schooners, *Mary* and the *Sun Fish*, were used to build her home. Locals were certain that the bones of several modern steamships had also been cannibalized to construct her house of mechanical oddities. The strongest evidence of her relation to the sea captain was the fact that Allegetta ciphered her notes and designs in a hodgepodge of an Akan dialect from Ghana and a Wampanoag native script from America, a blending of languages alluding to Cuffee's own lineage.

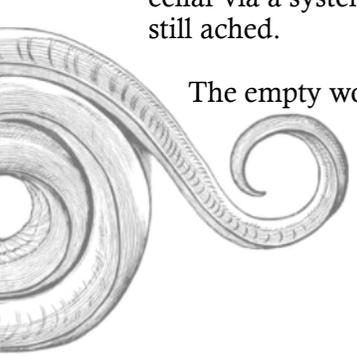
Allegetta had met Charlotte Babbage — a name she gave her as a term of their “contract” — during the presidency of Hilary Johnson, four years prior. Everyone suspected the young woman was a common thief that Allegetta dredged up from Krutown, the neighborhoods fringing Monrovia where the “uncivilized” Liberians dwelled. A popular story passed around the markets and saloons recounted how Allegetta “caught” Babbage in one of her household traps: a device of winches and spools that spun like a dervish. Locals wrote the younger woman off as a Kru, or perhaps a Grebo, even though Babbage insisted her father was Dutch.

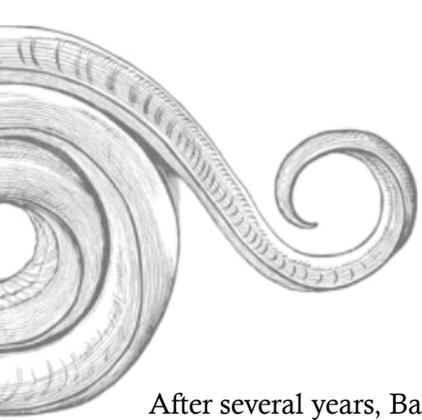


Babbage choked into the rag tied around her face. Her eyes watered behind specially treated lenses; her hair was pinned in a rough bun. The merciless heat refused to relent, even so late at night that the stars die from the sky to make way for the pending dawn. Beaded sweat raced down her cheeks as she pumped the handle to pressurize the storage vat. The atmosphere within the workshop was made all the more oppressive by the hellishly bubbling pitch excreted by the nozzle gun she used to seal the punctured flanks of the *Charon*. Earlier, near moonless midnight, Babbage had used her sleek, modified skiff to raid a Dutch ironclad anchored in the bay. The rogue had managed to “recover” all of the items on her errand list, but it was not an easy feat. European sailors, in their defiance of Liberian tariffs and taxes, made certain to be both wary and well-armed. During the escape, the *Charon* had sustained a fusillade along its hull and, more worrisome, the boiler and drive shafts powering its main propellers. The auxiliary propeller unit, some good fortune, and a moment of bare-handed paddling had brought Babbage to her only safe harbor.

A payment for one of her “favours,” Allegetta owned a small boathouse along a lonely beachhead. The boathouse — in reality, little more than a rambling shanty — concealed a waterlogged tunnel that slithered beneath Monrovia. In the tunnel, a harness of hooks and clamps conveyed the *Charon* to and from Allegetta's cellar via a system of engine-driven chains and pulleys. Babbage could only walk from the boathouse; her feet still ached.

The empty workbench along the wall distracted Babbage from her muscles' cries and the stench of pitch.





After several years, Babbage had grown accustomed to working beneath the predatory gaze of the eyes seemingly grafted into the back of Allegretta's head. Allegretta gave exacting directions to Babbage without needing to raise her head from the ever-changing lines and angles on her papers. Allegretta had reached the level where she could recognize progress merely by the grating of iron, the shriek of steel, and the groan of Babbage's wrench arm.

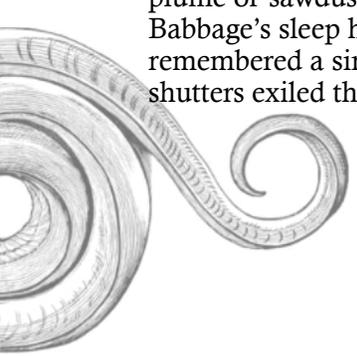
Now, Allegretta was an absentee overseer. They devoted their efforts solely to this mysterious commission. Every morning, Babbage found schematics for components that her madam could not construct herself. Each evening, Allegretta made a terse exchange: offering a new list of parts and materials, and confiscating the completed mechanisms into her study. For the first time in their history, Babbage found herself forbidden from the study. In fact, Allegretta gave orders that, in the unlikely event that she should see her Madam shuffling about the house, Babbage was to ignore her.

These new procedures and customs revolted her. Babbage was somewhat resigned to being but an employee, but the undeniable sense of solidarity with Madam Allegretta — their “guild” as Babbage called it — had always made the work enjoyable. Now, Allegretta's secrecy and absences left a taste in Babbage's mouth fouler than the stench of pitch. In the recesses of her mind, there was a place where superstition still held sway, despite her madam's attempts to purge its depths. It was the corner where the Hesperia's imprisoned faerie hurled spritely spears at her enemies and where the *Charon* skimmed the water on the back of an ensorcelled djinn. Seeking comfort in that corner of her mind, Babbage convinced herself that her madam — her mentor, her friend — had been bent by wicked magic.

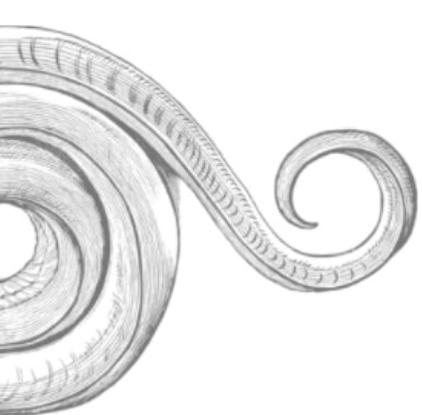
There were too many oddities. Two raids on schooners used to be a busy week for her. Now Babbage raided two ships a night, and they were always steamers and ironclads. The pace had worn down both the *Charon* and its pilot. The oddly curved rods and fluted arches crafted from the stolen materials were unlike their usual manufactured fare, too. Babbage could not fathom the invention that required so many impossibly angled, many-faced geometric shapes in place of gears and cogs. Then there were the sounds.

Allegretta's manor was always a symphony of noises. Whistles, hisses, clinks, grinding, creaks, pops, and crackles heralded the household machinations. They soothed Babbage to sleep. In the past few nights, however, coldly unfamiliar scratchings haunted her rest. At first, Babbage assumed an infiltration by a rat or two. Increases in volume, frequency and severity urged her to suspicions of larger, more sinister animals.

Babbage tossed herself onto the corner cot. The pitch on the *Charon's* hull needed time to set and Babbage could not repair the minute drive mechanisms on the skiff without Allegretta, so the limit to her labor was reached and a few hours' rest was earned.



Babbage awoke when she rolled off the cot and onto the wood planks of the floor. While coughing into the plume of sawdust rising into the air, she found a note pinned to her shirtwaist: a list of materials to be collected. Babbage's sleep had been fitful. Those animal scratchings reverberated through her dreams and she half-remembered a sinister growl in her ear. Babbage found the foyer deserted and unnaturally cold; the mechanical shutters exiled the morning light. Babbage shouldered her satchel and tools, and braved the outside world.



Babbage returned in the eerie stillness of deepest midnight. Monrovia was silent as a tomb city. Below, Krutown roared with distant music. The rattle of hollow gourds, the mystic chiming of the Yomo Gor's wooden bars, and the call of song sounded as though rising from the depths of the sea. The moon and stars hid their frightened faces behind a blanket of clouds. Babbage sliced through the darkness with the Hemera, the "Wand of the Daylight Goddess." It was one of the first contraptions on which she had assisted Allegretta; the intricate curls of wire and the assembly of the battery components were too exacting for her mentor's ruined hand. Even the cultured and educated Americo Liberian neighbors were superstitious of the women's "ghost light."

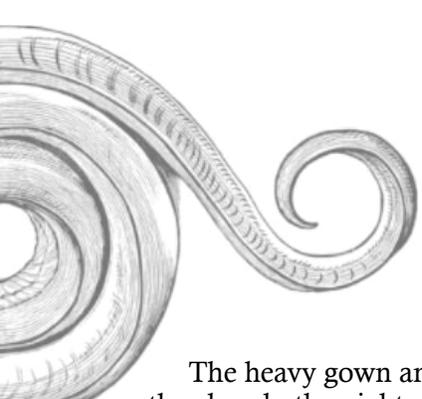
The Hemera did not grant Babbage the usual sense of protection she always derived from her mentor's mechanical artifacts. The wind was dead and the air was chilled. Babbage was certain that the sailors of the *H.M.S. Indigo* never detected her presence when she collected the items on her list. Nevertheless, the sensation of being stalked was unshakable. The peculiarity of the scavenged prizes she carried heightened her paranoia. Previous raids had procured brass, copper, zinc, ammonia, and other materials of mechanical or alchemical endeavors that were in short supply around Monrovia. The *Indigo*, however, was a merchant's paddle steamer bearing incense, spices, herbs, and other rarities from parts unknown. Allegretta's need for such things was an enigma to Babbage.

The Hemera's light finally fell upon home. Every shutter was sealed tightly by its pistons. Glowing hints of emerald light crept out from behind the shutters of one room: Madam Allegretta's study. Babbage had no time to puzzle over the strange luminance as the scratchings and growls of her night terrors sidled up behind her. The sound of claws and paws padded along in the dark. Babbage waved the Hemera's beam through the gloom to frighten the beasts skulking just out of sight. It was futile and the young machinist grew afraid as she realized that no mere wild dogs hunted her.

Babbage dashed for the workshop door, which never looked so inviting nor so far away. She was too focused on the teeth and claws at her back to notice that the green glow momentarily brightened and deepened in intensity. Babbage reached safety as the unseen creatures' pursuit slackened. She kicked the door closed. Immediately, flywheels spun and the locking bars slid into place to seal the door. Babbage wanted to catch her breath, but an unearthly howl rattled the walls and her nerves. When the door to the foyer shrieked open, she nearly shrieked, herself.

Madam Allegretta stood silhouetted in the doorway. She beckoned for Babbage to hurry. She waved with her crippled hand, which now shone in the gas-lit foyer. Babbage did not require coaxing, for the savage beasts pounded and slashed at the doors and walls. As Babbage bounded into the foyer, Allegretta seized upon a nude statue of Eros beside the staircase; with a swift, brutal twist of his lever, the house's strongest guards activated. Bars of native-wrought iron slithered free from hidden ports, thus securing every exit with a portcullis of enmeshed metal. The old injury to Allegretta's gifted left hand, having snapped the statue's lever into attention, was now corrected with artifice. Her arm culminated in a veritable gauntlet of gold and iron, ending in carefully crafted digits of precise dexterity. Between her mentor's new appendage and the gross injury Allegretta had just inflicted upon Eros's appendage, Babbage was hard pressed to finally notice the third woman in the foyer.





The heavy gown and shawl this woman wore brought back memories of those three figures fleeing from the church, the night seeming like a distant nightmare. The moonlight paleness of her flesh contrasted with the earthen tones of Babbage and Allegratta's skin. She appraised the "crank servant" with one eye of contempt and one eye of utter indifference. In return, Babbage only offered two eyes of creeping distaste for the strange woman.

"Dear Charlotte, this is our guest, Lady Garrity," Allegratta introduced. "She was sent by our contractor — her mistress, Ezinma — to assist with the completion of the project."

"What are those creatures outside?" Babbage asked, ignoring the stranger. She had dropped the Hemera torch in the workshop and heard its electric eye shatter on impact. Babbage drew the Hesperia from her shirtwaist pocket. The pen elicited a sneer from Lady Garrity.

"That toy will have no effect on the Hounds," Garrity said.

"Hurry, we must activate the Engine," Allegratta breathed, already halfway up the stairs.

Lady Garrity, practically hovering, ascended the stairs without so much as a ripple in her petticoats. Babbage followed behind, dragging along a hefty iron wrench she had seized from the umbrella stand. As she slammed the study door behind her, Babbage heard the roar of splintering wood, then the clang and clash of so many tools tossed aside in the workshop.

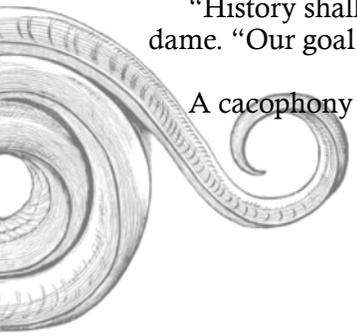
A monolithic machine dominated the room. Babbage could only scarcely compare it with the printing press that she and Allegratta had assembled for the *Liberia Herald*. Whereas the *Herald's* print press appeared like a torture device for newspapers, the closest analogy for the present mass of gilded parts was an altar of worship to artifice itself. This image was reinforced by the choir of light convoked by the numberless candles arrayed around the study. Sloughed and hardened wax suggested they had been burning for some time. Within the glittering monstrosity, Babbage could hardly recognize the individual pistons, gears, coils, hoses, and wires she had fashioned. The arched and fluted housing resembled a Gothic cathedral Babbage had once seen in a French news print. The spidery internal machinations of this engine had already begun to operate with click-clack efficiency and celerity.

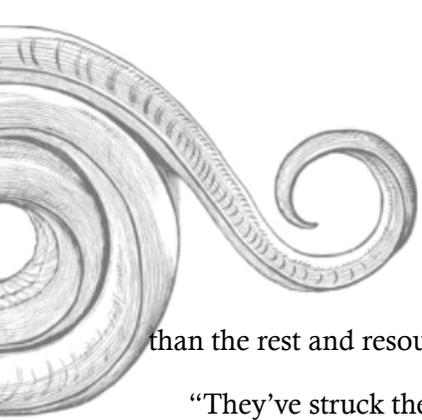
"My input of the Pattern Sequence and Frequency Translations is almost complete," Lady Garrity murmured.

"I only have to prepare the power supply and the harmonic resonator. The all-important broadcast unit is ready," Madam Allegratta said, never stopping her fingers' nimble work. Babbage had never known her mentor before her accident and she considered it a privilege to see her talented hands in action, thanks to their newfound improvements. "Garrity, do you realize what we have here? The Menlo Wizard, that pompous hack, would eat a bucket of screws if he saw this. He'd probably try to purloin the design, as though his mind could fathom this complexity."

"History shall never again see the likes of this engine for decades," asserted the unsympathetic European dame. "Our goal lies higher than mere tools."

A cacophony rocked the walls. The crashing and howls never subsided, but this sound was more catastrophic





than the rest and resounded from the basement. The gas lights sputtered and began a slow death.

“They’ve struck the gas supply,” Babbage hissed. “I think they hit the boilers and the *Charon*, too.”

Allegretta abandoned the power supply, now rendered useless, but she found reassurance with her employee, her student. Without missing a beat, Babbage seized upon the small crank-driven turbine beside the grand engine. Her arms fed electricity into the machine with the strength of a cyclone. Lady Garrity, heedless of the chaos consuming the house, connected coppery and bluish wires between the engine and a wooden box mounting a horn of beaten, shaped gold. Madam Allegretta pilfered a small wrench from the pocket of Babbage’s waistcoat and set upon final adjustments to the engine.

“Charlotte, I am sorry for keeping you so distant on this project. Since you share our danger, you rightly deserve to share our knowledge on this creation.”

“You did not pick a simpleton; I recognize notable elements of this device. Our guest is tinkering with a phonograph of strange design, as evidenced by the amplifier horn. The absence of any obvious mount or port for a wax cylinder seems to be a design flaw. As for this impressive centerpiece, I have seen the sketches accompanying your correspondences abroad; of course I would recognize a scion of the Analytical Engine, that child of Lovelace and my own namesake. I have taken to heart one of your philosophies.”

“It is good to seek answers...”

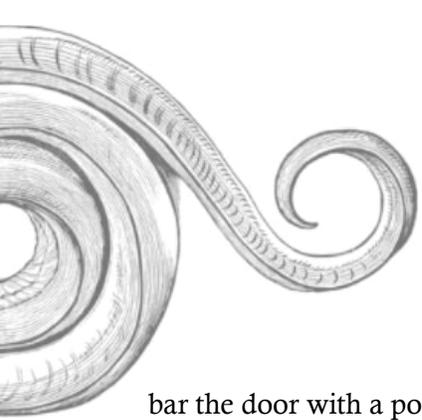
“...but it is better to know them,” Babbage completed her mentor’s axiom. “What I have yet to fathom, beyond the beastly cads besieging our home, is the intended interplay between these disparate components.”

Lady Garrity sneered above her ministrations to the hybridized phonograph. Babbage’s inability to understand the whole picture was anticipated, yet satisfying, all the same.

“Our rendition of the Analytical Engine,” Allegretta explained to Charlotte, “extrapolates some of Countess Lovelace’s theories regarding the incorporation of machine, mathematics and music. It will calculate a specific and rather complex algorithm sequence, which, in turn, will be translated and etched into a sound recording. The wax cylinders are sealed within the phonograph interior, which is shielded against even minute outside interference to preserve the integrity of the recording.”

The sound of claws clambering up stairs distracted Babbage from the explanation. Chipping and scratching threatened at the door. Babbage turned her eyes to the statue of Hymen kept near the door. Long ago, when Babbage was a novice in Allegretta’s house, she had taken a grease pencil and smeared grotesque facial hair upon the youthful overseer of marriages. Allegretta caught Babbage in the midst of this lark. Rather than expressing anger, Allegretta took the grease pencil and scribbled garish pubic hair upon the classical nude. The raucous laughter that followed on that day sealed an unbreakable pact. Now, in the face of impending doom, Babbage struck upon a hunch.

Without interrupting her rhythm at the crank turbine, Babbage lashed out with a kick square to the marriage god’s low-hanging, burning torch. In an inspired move that made the whole male pantheon wince and earned a nodding smirk from Allegretta, just as with Eros downstairs, a safeguard activated. The iron bars shot forth to



bar the door with a portcullis; however, such an important room deserved greater protection. Hidden batteries were also triggered, filling the bars with a harmonious voltaic hum.

Not nearly as serene were the discordant whine, buzz and hiss that issued forth from the golden horn. The sounds tormented Babbage for reasons deeper than simple disharmony. Something was intrinsically wrong, even frightening, about the sound waves produced. Allegretta also suffered, clutching her ears. Lady Garrity stood unaffected and her bizarre smile spoke of pleasure from the strange signals.

Caught between the disharmonious broadcast and the interminable clicking of the engine plotting out those terrible sounds, Babbage noticed that the battered door was now quiet and still. The house stood peaceful, albeit haunted by the machine's aural output. Whatever wonders the three women had produced in that room, they had seemingly driven their attackers back into the dark recesses from which they had crawled.

"They will not return," Lady Garrity answered the unspoken question. "Not for some time, at least. The prayer transmissions have sealed their avenues of entrance to our world and the opening of new doors will be difficult for their masters. Queen Ezinma thanks you for your service, Madam Allegretta. We shall return tomorrow evening to accept delivery of the device."

"Will you need a proper power source?" Allegretta asked, while signalling her student to rest her heroic arms. "We could construct a very efficient steam boiler to operate the engine."

"That will not be necessary. We have our own reliable source of energy. I will now take my leave of you both."



Charlotte Babbage spat on the floor to cleanse herself of the latest cascade of sweat to invade her mouth. Allegretta rolled her eyes behind her welding visor; she noted that another sweep would be necessary with the rotary-powered hot scouring mop. The aftermath of their catastrophic victory was a shambles of a house. Doors had been torn asunder and walls were gouged with fang and talon. The only other tangible legacies of the Hounds were a caustic slime and an odious odor that clung to the scarred walls and floor.

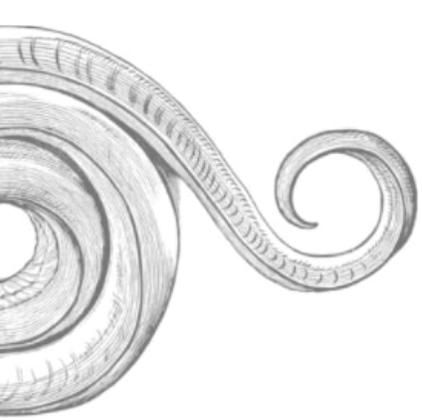
"It smells as though every ironclad in the world just fired off their main guns loaded with brimstone," Babbage said, swabbing her brow with a bare arm. "After the great commotion last night, do you suppose the neighborhood opportunists, bandits and looters will be too frightened to come poking their noses around our business?"

"Never underestimate greed. Greed conquers all."

"Speaking of which, do you suppose we'll get any credit for building that engine?"

"I never said this was about fame or notoriety."

"Yes," Babbage sighed. "I suppose we should become accustomed to obscurity. We are neither fully African,



nor European, nor even American — yet they all distrust us just the same. It would be a kick to know where we stand in the world, though.”

“We stand in a wretched-smelling foyer where, even behind this visor, the morning light and heat give me a terrible throbbing at the temples.”

Babbage leered at the wisps of noxious smoke rising from the head of the push-broom she wielded against the slime left by the Hounds. Spitting again, this time on the sizzling bristles, she tossed the ruined tool into the pile of debris they had heaped. Babbage surveyed the metallic restoration of her madam’s talented hand. She could not fathom how such a precise replacement was possible. Allegretta caught her student staring again.

“Another part of the payment for our work,” she explained. “Deuced if I can explain how it operates. If I seemed rather scarce over the past fortnight, part of it was the secrecy to which I was held by Lady Garrity and her mistress, Ezinma.”

“It appears that my work is no longer needed, since you can screw your own bolts and splice your own wires anew with your repaired hand. Once I’m done mucking out this house of yours, I suppose that will be the end of me.”

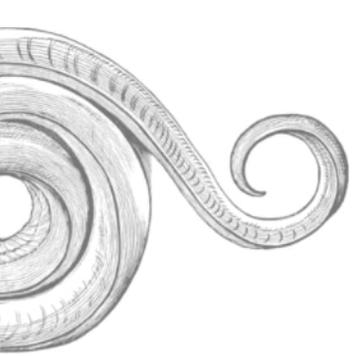
“Indeed, this triumph must mark the end of your employment contract...and your apprenticeship. After last night, I would feel proud to call you my equal and elevate you to full membership in this silly guild of ours which you always speak of.”

“Hear hear! Let’s have the birth of the...of the Liberian Women’s Machinists Guild. May its ideals be upheld by its right and honorable membership.”

“Yes, all two of them.”

---

**Andrew Dombalagian** lives, works and dreams in the Philadelphia area, although Innsmouth has become his second home. He works as a writing tutor at his alma mater, Penn State Brandywine, and he keeps away the night creeps with the help of his fiancée, Ellen, and their three cats. Andrew hopes readers will look forward to Charlotte Babbage’s return in her next adventure.





The Gilman House was Innsmouth's only remaining inn. Like all the buildings in town, it was a riot of crumbling brickwork, rust and rotten wood, kept upright by nothing more than stubborn inertia.

## THE BOSTON LOOK

By Evan Dicken

EVERYONE WAS IN church when the Stranger came to Innsmouth. He arrived just before eleven, the only passenger on Joe Sargent's dilapidated motor coach. Strangers were uncommon enough to elicit curiosity from the parishioners at the Old Masonic Lodge, but when it was learned that he had actually *disembarked*, the whispers became so loud that Father Eleazar stopped his sermon.

"My children." Eleazar fixed the congregation with one bulbous, unblinking eye. "I know you are full of anticipation for tonight's Declension, but please, let us not forget the reason for the season. Now, if you would all join me in a chorus of *Iä-R'lyeh?*"

After church, the adults went below to consort with the Elders and prepare the Declension festivities, leaving the town youths to their own devices.

"Where do you think he's from?" Cornelia Marsh wiped a thin streamer of drool from her slack jaw. At 18, she was an early developer. Her gills were just starting to come in and Eugene Gilman hung on her every word.

"Probably Boston," he said, trying to look knowledgeable.

"He came from the *north*, stupid. Do you even know where Boston is?" Shadrach Waite sneered down at the smaller boy, his cronies circling like hungry remoras.

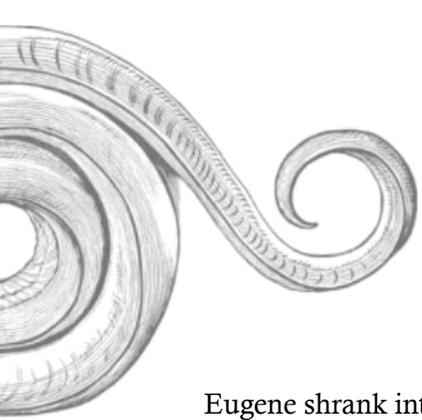
Puberty had not only sharpened Shadrach's teeth and claws, but also flooded his body with eldritch hormones. Shadrach had always been a bully; now he was a monster, as well. Normally, Eugene would have backed down, but he was painfully aware of Cornelia's eyes on him.

"Just 'cuz he came down the coast, don't mean he's *from* there," Eugene mumbled.

"What'd you say, Gilman?" Shadrach tilted his head to glare at Eugene with one pupilless eye.

Eugene gritted his teeth — his flat, human teeth — and tried not to visibly quail. "I said, just *because* he came *down* the coast, don't mean he's *from* there. Outsiders travel, you know, move around."

"You think you're so smart. You're practically an Outsider, yourself, Gilman. You could certainly pass for one of them."



Eugene shrank into himself, cramming his stubby, web-less hands into his pockets. “My family has been here long as yours.”

“My family has been here long as yours.” Shadrach mimicked Eugene’s rasping tenor. Everyone but Cornelia laughed — low, gulping noises, like the night calls of big-bellied toads.

“You can tell the Outsider that while you’re up here tonight, sucking air.” Shadrach wiped a handful of mucus from the side of his neck and smeared it on Eugene’s shirt.

Eugene looked away, unable to meet the bigger boy’s eye. His cheeks burned as the laughter came again.

“Look, he can still blush.” Shadrach tottered on fluke and tentacle, looming over Eugene like a breaking wave. “Maybe he can still cry, too. Is that what you want to do, Eugene? Cry?”

“Leave him alone.” Cornelia shuffled forward. Surprise shaded Shadrach’s batrachian features. He seemed to wrestle with something, mouth twitching between humor and fury.

Finally, he smiled. “Sure, Cornelia, I’ll leave you to your Outsiders. Who cares about ‘em anyway? It’s Declension. Tonight, I’m going down.”

He tossed his narrow head and turned to the other girls. “Look here, Eugene’s momma came to take care of him.”

The girls chattered like spring peepers, eager to wound in their uncomfortable jealousy of Cornelia.

Shadrach sunned himself in their insipid glee for a moment, then gave a lazy sneer. “Do what you want. C’mon, let’s go down to the harbor and dive for gold. Just remember, Eugene, your momma’s not always gonna be around to help you.”

The others trailed behind like the wake of a great ocean predator. King Shadrach, holding court for his admirers. Only Cornelia remained, the look of pitying concern she gave Eugene somehow more hurtful than all the ridicule.

Eugene tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Shadrach’s mucus dripped from his shirt in thick, wet globs.

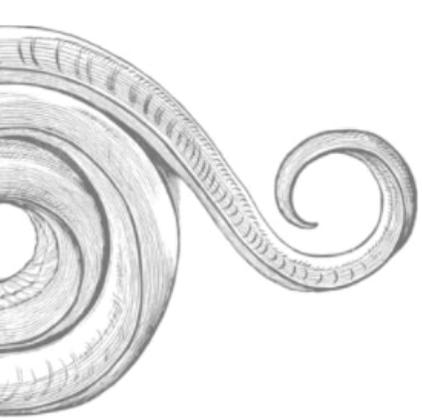
“He’s probably going to your uncle’s,” Cornelia said.

“Who, Shadrach?”

“No, the Outsider.”

Eugene looked to Cornelia with pleading eyes. “My uncle won’t like this. I don’t wanna get in trouble.”

“Then don’t come.” She brushed thinning hair back from her face and waddled away.



Eugene looked back and forth between Cornelia and the sea, a pained expression on his face. It wasn't much of a struggle, it would be easier to fight a riptide than not follow her.



Owned by Eugene's uncle Azariah, the Gilman House was Innsmouth's only remaining inn. Like all the buildings in town, it was a riot of crumbling brickwork, rust and rotten wood, kept upright by nothing more than stubborn inertia.

Azariah glanced up from his ledger as the two slouched in through the warped doorway of the common room. "You'll be after the Stranger?"

"Is he here?" Cornelia asked.

"He was. Stepped out to take some air. Your parents know you're here, Cornelia?"

Both of the children suddenly developed a keen interest in the room's décor.

"Thought not. Best you not get mixed up with strangers. You better not be plannin' to follow him. Nothin' good *ever* came from outside." Azariah set down his book to fix Eugene with a pointed glance. His uncle held strangers in particular contempt, ever since Eugene's mother had run off with 'that Boston scoundrel,' when Eugene was just a baby. Eugene could never shake the feeling that Azariah somehow blamed him for his mother's departure.

"Naw, we're gonna swim out to Devil Reef, watch Y'ha-nthlei light up. Do you want me to drop anything down to Great-Great-Grandma?" Eugene stammered, hoping his flush didn't give him away.

Azariah snorted. "Jus' my regards."

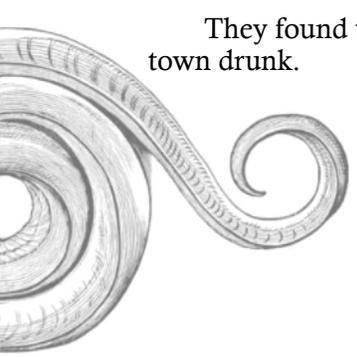
Eugene nodded as his uncle turned back to his reading. He tried to appear casual as they left the foyer. They weren't two steps out before Cornelia rounded on him.

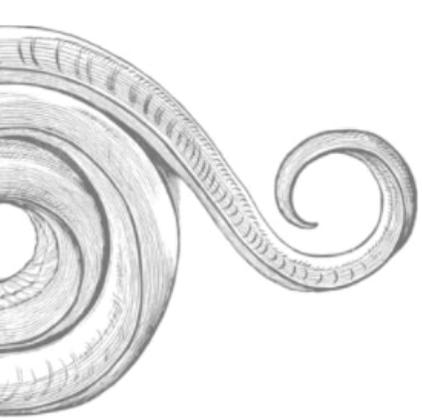
"I bet the Stranger headed downtown, maybe to look at the Refinery. If we hurry, we can probably use the tunnels on Main Street. He won't even see us." She shambled off toward the slums.

Eugene gave a heavy sigh, but Cornelia didn't seem to notice.



They found the Stranger loitering on an algae-covered wharf, sharing a bottle of local whiskey with the town drunk.





“What’s he want with old Zadok?” Cornelia peered through a grimy window at the distant figures. Eugene pressed his face to the filmy glass, but, although he tried to keep his eyes on the Stranger, his gaze kept sliding to Cornelia’s bare shoulders, where scales were just beginning to show.

“I bet if we’re careful, we can scull up under the wharf and listen.” Cornelia limped back to the partially submerged sea tunnel that was the shack’s only exit.

Eugene opened his mouth, but snapped it shut when she smiled at him over her shoulder.

They swam out to the pier. Cornelia, so ungainly on land, was a gray-green blur in the murky water. At first, Eugene struggled to pace her, but slowed as he realized how foolish he must look, clawing at the sea with stubby fingers and toes.

He bobbed up under the pier just in time to hear Zadok let out a piteous shriek. Boards creaked as the Stranger sprinted off down the wharf toward Water Street. Eugene caught only a glimpse of him. Tall and straight-backed, with small, close-set eyes and a head full of wavy brown hair. He ran with a peculiar upright gait, arms pumping at his sides as he bobbed forward on legs that seemed too long and thin to support his weight.

“What happened?” Eugene squinted up through the gaps in the planks. Above, the old man’s scream tapered off into wheezing laughter.

“Zadok scared him off,” Cornelia said.

“Eh, who’s that?” Zadok’s weathered face appeared over the edge of the dock. “I know you’re there. Don’t make me come in after you.”

They grudgingly swam out into open water.

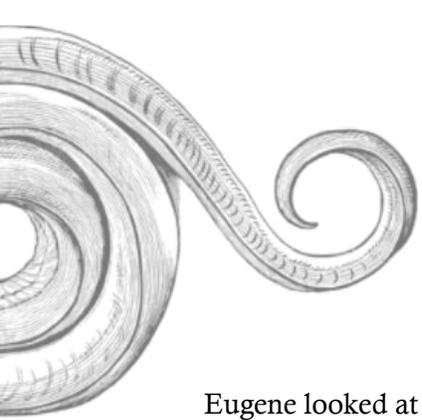
“Oh, s’you.” The old man wiped a tear from his eye, glanced down Water street, and was promptly seized by another fit of laughter.

“Why’d you have to do that?” Cornelia slapped the water with her fins.

“S’fun.” The old man drummed his heels on the rotting pier. “Damn tourists’ll believe anythin’.”

They swam out to the pier. Cornelia, so ungainly on land, was a gray-green blur in the murky water.





Eugene looked at Cornelia and felt his chest tighten. “You’re not supposed to —”

“I hain’t done nothin’ nor told nobody nothin’.” Zadok spoke in an effected coastal drawl, one hand raised, the other over his heart, his face a mask of solemnity. “I taken the First an’ Second Oaths. Besides, if you snitch on me, I’ll tell your parents you was out after the Stranger.”

Cornelia’s face crumpled. She favored the old drunk with a look of disgust, then dove below the waves. Eugene started to follow her, but a call from Zadok brought him up.

“Better you don’t go chasin’ after her, boy. Even if you land that fish, someday soon, she’ll get the call, go down to Y’ha-nthlei, an’ you’ll be stuck up here. Take it from one who knows, she’ll only break your heart. The Deep Ones always do.”

“You don’t know anything; you’re just an old drunk!” The words battered their way out of Eugene’s mouth before he even knew what he was saying. He flinched, sure that Zadok would make good on his promise to tell Uncle Azariah. He could see the look on Azariah’s face even now: angry but also a little pleased to be finally proven right about Eugene.

But Zadok only cast a wistful glance towards Devil Reef. “Old drunk? I suppose I am, boy. I suppose I am.”

“I’m sorry.”

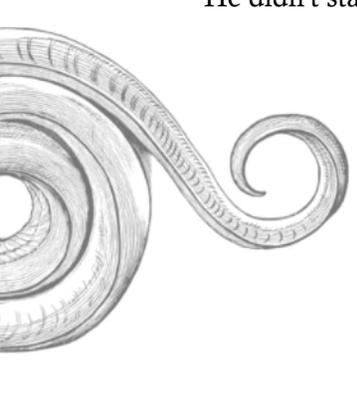
“Go on. Git outta’ here.” Zadok jerked his head towards open water, his expression somber.

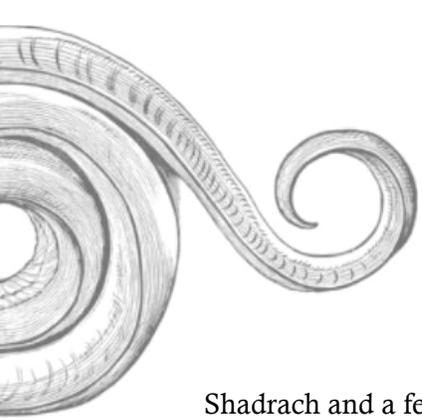
Eugene sculled away before Zadok changed his mind. He thought of going home, back to the tumbledown mansion on Washington Street that his family had occupied since before Captain Obediah Marsh returned from the South Seas. It would be empty, the majority of the Gilman clan being embroiled in aquatic preparations for the Declension festivities. The idea of being alone in the sprawling manor unsettled Eugene, as did the thought of leaving Cornelia in such a state of distress. He should find her.

Eugene dove down, searching the shadowed, seaweed-choked reefs until his lungs burned and he was forced to the surface to gulp at the salty ocean air. He cursed his lack of gills. If Cornelia had gone deep, he would never be able to find her.

Something bumped against his leg. Eugene peered into the murky water, but caught only a quick flash of pale skin. There was another jolt, harder this time. He turned just in time to see a rough, scabby fin disappear beneath the waves. Something closed around his leg and jerked him under the water. Eugene came up spluttering, brine spewing from his nose and mouth. At first, he was more confused than scared. Instinctively, he struck out for shore, only to be buffeted back by a blow from a powerful fluke.

He didn’t start to panic until he saw who it was.





Shadrach and a few of the other boys circled him like sharks, occasionally darting in to tug at him with their rudimentary tentacles. Their smiles were wide and wild, their eyes luminescent in the watery gloom.

“Where’s your momma, Gilman?” A snub-nosed head broke the water. Eugene recognized Ephraim Waites, Shadrach’s cousin. The other kids called him “The Whale” but not to his face. Ephraim made up for his slow wits with a quick temper and a cruel disposition.

Boaz and Robert Eliot were there, as well. Not bad on their own — Boaz and Eugene had even been friends when they were little — they were both the type of boy who could get nasty in groups.

“I don’t want any trouble.” Eugene rasped out through mouthfuls of seawater.

“You think you’re pretty smart, trying to show me up.” Shadrach wrapped a tentacle around Eugene’s neck. “Well, how smart are you now? You f —”

The rest of Shadrach’s words were lost in a swirl of seawater. Eugene tried to take a breath as Shadrach let him up, but one of the others butted him in the chest. He felt slick hands close on his feet, dragging him down, down. Eugene gagged on seawater, his head feeling like it was caught in the soft, smothering grip of a deep-sea mollusk.

Then they let him go.

Blackness tugged at the edges of Eugene’s vision as he struggled back to the surface. He paddled toward shore, crying and moaning, snot dribbling down his chin.

If he could only make it to the surf, where the other boys wouldn’t be able to maneuver as well, he might get away. They let him get just to where he could feel the sand with the tips of his toes before they drove him back out. Once, twice, three times, Eugene fought his way to shore, only to be torn off his feet and dragged away by the spiteful riptide of his pursuers. His strokes became sluggish, his arms leaden. Soon, it was all he could do to keep his head above water.

Eugene floated, exhausted, perhaps thirty yards from shore. The boys surfaced around him, looking at each other with excited grins. They had played their game. Their prey was defeated, unable to flee.

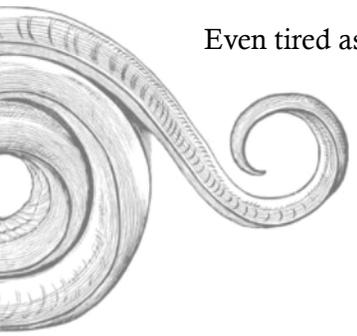
Ephraim’s wide face broke into a dull grin. “I think this smartass has learned his lesson.”

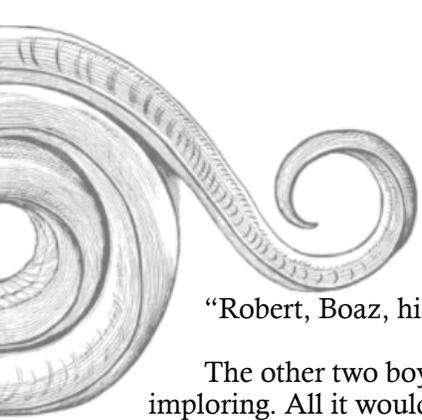
“No,” Shadrach’s gaze was flat. “He’s never gonna learn. Grab his arms.”

Ephraim looked confused.

“Grab his arms!” Shadrach shouted.

Even tired as he was, Eugene tried to struggle in Ephraim’s grip. He didn’t like the look in Shadrach’s eyes.





“Robert, Boaz, his legs. We’re going to teach this Gilman a lesson he won’t be able to forget.”

The other two boys shared uncomfortable glances. Eugene tried to catch Boaz’s gaze, his eyes wide and imploring. All it would take would be for one of them to refuse, to break the terrifying spirit that had seized the group. But neither of them did. Boaz looked away as he took hold of Eugene’s leg, unwilling or unable to meet his eyes.

“We’re going to have our own Declension ritual. Right here.” Shadrach reached for Eugene with clawed fins, his lips parting to reveal a lamprey circle of fangs. “You’re going down.”

Eugene’s scream was little more than a breathless whine.

“Here, now, what you doing? Leave him be!” Zadok Allen’s warbling tenor cut through the pounding of Eugene’s heart.

“We’re all brothers in the eyes of Father Dagon. Would you treat your brother like that?” The old man waded out into the surf, almost up to his chest, waving an empty whiskey bottle in the air to punctuate his words. “You let him go an’ you do it now!”

Shadrach rose up out of the water to look down at Zadok. He was at least three feet taller than the old man, but Zadok just glared at the big boy like *he* was the one sporting a mouthful of fangs. As if waking from a dream, the others released their hold on Eugene, who splashed his way back to shore.

When he looked over his shoulder, Shadrach was watching him, his expression not one of anger but the calculating gaze of a predator robbed of its prey.

“Don’t look at him. Look at me!” Spittle flew from Zadok’s wrinkled lips. He poked Shadrach with one boney finger, seemingly unaware of the change that had come over the boy. “When I tell your parents —”

Eugene tried to shout a warning, but couldn’t find the breath.

Shadrach glanced down at his chest where Zadok had prodded him, then back at the old man. “My *parents* say you’re an embarrassment to the Order, that it would be better for everyone if you crawled into one of your whiskey bottles and died.”

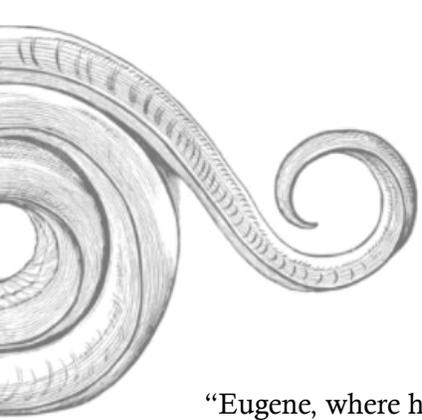
“Listen here.” Zadok went red with rage. “I’ve taken the first two Oaths of the Order —”

“You’ll never dive to Y’ha-nthlei, never see the true wonders of the deep, while I, I will live forever in Father Dagon’s splendor. You are nothing.” With that, he shoved Zadok back into the surf. The old man surfaced, wet clothes plastered to his bony frame.

Eugene took a step toward Zadok, hands outstretched, then realized there was nothing he could do. So, he ran, helpless tears cutting cool tracks down his face.

The old man’s reedy screams pursued him all the way down Water Street.





“Eugene, where have you been? I’ve been looking for you for hours.” Cornelia poked her head from a nearby canal. “You okay?”

Eugene rubbed the front his shirt across his face. “Yeah, I was....” He fought for an explanation

Cornelia flopped onto the bank beside him. “What happened?”

He thought about telling her everything. Cornelia would believe him. Unfortunately, no one else would.

The Waites were an old and well-respected family. Shadrach would lie and the others would back up his story. He would probably blame Zadok’s disappearance on the Outsider. After all, they *had* been seen together. The Innsmouth chapter of the Esoteric Order of Dagon was a clannish bunch. No, it was better not to tell anyone. If Eugene could avoid Shadrach for the rest of the evening, all his problems would be over. Those who went down to Y’ha-nthlei never returned.

He frowned. “Nothing happened.”

“Eugene.”

“I said *nothing happened.*”

“Fine,” she said. “I was just coming to tell you that the Outsider isn’t gone.”

“What? Sargent’s bus should have left hours ago.”

“Broken radiator. He’s going to spend the night at your uncle’s.”

“But, it’s Declension!” Eugene said.

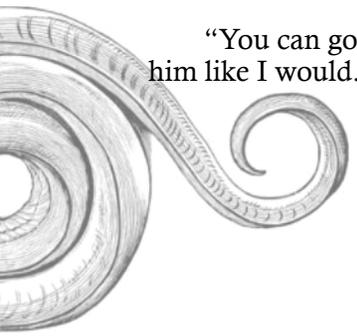
“They changed the parade route to go around the Gilman House. Since the rest of the celebration is underwater, the Outsider would have to go prowling around after dark to notice anything amiss. Your uncle is going to lock him in, just to be sure.”

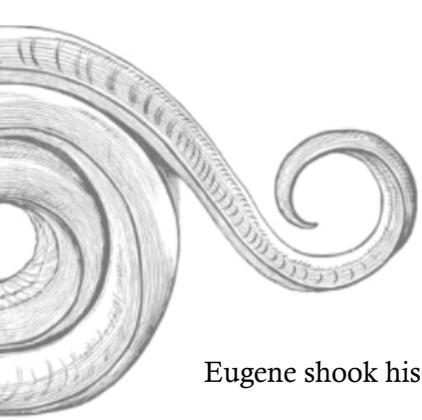
“Why do you wanna see the Stranger so bad?”

She looked away. “Eugene, please. You’re the only one who can get your uncle’s keys. We can be quiet; he won’t even wake up. I just want a closer look. You know, to see what they’re like.”

Eugene tried to refuse her; he really did. There on the shore of the canal, again when they snuck into the Gilman to borrow the spare keys from a dozing Uncle Azariah, and one final time when they stood outside the hotel, staring up at the Outsider’s lit window.

“You can go in first. If he’s startled, just apologize and leave. He might think it odd, but you won’t frighten him like I would.”





Eugene shook his head, but couldn't say no.

Cornelia brushed Eugene's arm as they crept up the stairs. Three of her fingers had already fused into a long, flat flipper, and her skin was clammy and slick with oil. Goose pimples rose on Eugene's bare skin and he tried not to shiver at the strange electricity that passed between them. He could see that she felt it, too, because her face took on a suddenly thoughtful expression.

"Eugene," She whispered, her fin threading through his fingers. "I'm glad you're here."

For the first time in his life, Eugene didn't worry about anything. He smiled. "C'mon, let's go see an Outsider."

A thin runner of pale light slanted from under the Outsider's door. Eugene listened, but could hear no sounds from within. He nodded to Cornelia, who was waiting back on the landing, and slowly turned the key in the lock.

Eugene had barely started to ease the door open when there was a tremendous clatter from inside the room. Something banged against the wall, followed by the sound of running feet.

"He's in the next room!" Eugene cast a helpless glance back at Cornelia. Uncle Azariah had only locked the entrance door, apparently forgetting about the smaller portals that connected adjacent rooms.

"He'll have to come out into the hall to get down." Cornelia struggled up the stairs. "You go. I'm too slow."

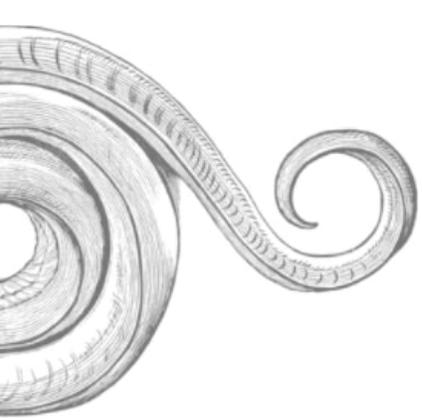
Eugene nodded and ran off down the hall, trying the doors as he went. He could hear the Outsider on the other side, pounding from room to room. There was no way this wouldn't wake his uncle, but, hopefully, Eugene could still keep the Outsider from getting out onto the street and ruining Declension.

He paused, breathless, outside the last room, tried the door, and found it locked. As Eugene fumbled for the key, there was a crash from inside, then silence. He flung open the door to see a shattered window, curtains blowing in the night breeze. The Outsider had removed the window rod and used it to bridge the gap to the deserted house next to the Gilman. Pale hands hung, spiderlike, on the peak of the old roof, then disappeared as their owner slid down the other side. Eugene cursed as he sprinted back down the hall. He might be able to make it to the ground level before —

"Eugene Habakkuk Gilman, you stop right there!" Uncle Azariah stood on the landing, a rusty lantern in one hand, and Cornelia Marsh in the other.

"The Outsider, he got out!"

"And I don't suppose you had something to do with that?" Azariah's eyes smoldered with barely suppressed anger.



“No, I —” Eugene started to lie, then realized he was still holding the spare key ring. “ — It was all my idea. I made Cornelia come.”

Cornelia’s face showed surprise. Azariah only snorted, as if he’d known all along. Of course Eugene was responsible. Cornelia was practically a Deep One, Father Dagon’s favor plain for all to see, while Eugene barely had webs between his toes.

“I told ‘em you were no good. Blood always tells. T’was a mistake for your ma to take up with that Boston man. When the Elders hear of this....”

Eugene looked at his feet.

Azariah pressed Cornelia forward and pointed at a nearby room. “In there, both of you. And not a croak ‘til I get back.”

“But Cornelia, she didn’t —”

“Not a croak!”

They sat down on the bed, listening as Azariah stomped down the stairs and onto the street. The night resonated with clicks and whistles as word of the Outsider’s flight spread through town. The calls grew faint as the search widened. Still, it was almost ten minutes before Cornelia spoke.

“Why did you tell your uncle you did it?”

“It’s what everyone would believe, anyway. No need for you to get in trouble, too.”

The bed creaked as Cornelia slithered closer. “That’s sweet, but it’s my fault.”

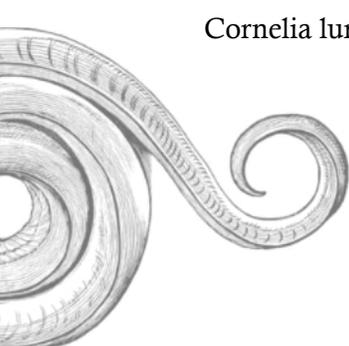
“Too late. Even if you try to confess, no one will listen. It’s like Shadrach said: I’m practically an Outsider.”

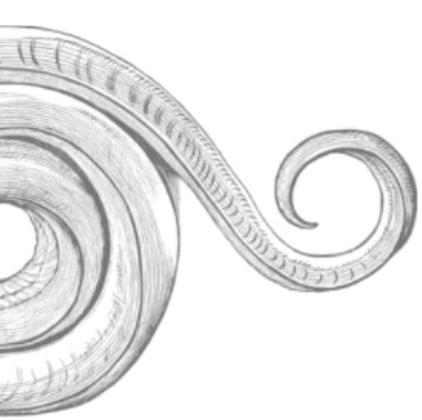
Cornelia was silent for a very long time. Then she started to cry. “I’m sorry for dragging you into this. I-I’ve been in Innsmouth my whole life. I wanted to see, just once, what an Outsider was like before....” Her shoulders hitched.

“Before what?”

“Didn’t she tell you, Gilman? Your girlfriend’s going *down*, tonight.” Shadrach Waite loomed in the doorway, glow-lamp eyes bright with cruel mirth.

Cornelia lurched to her feet. “Shut up and leave me alone!”





“Of course.” Shadrach flopped forward. “After all, we’ll have forever to get to know one another in Father Dagon’s realm.”

“I’ll never —”

“You should treat me with more respect.” Shadrach’s tone was gentle, but his eyes had the same flat, predatory look as back on the beach. He shambled toward the bed.

Eugene finally found his voice. “Cornelia, watch out. He’s —”

Shadrach heaved himself at Eugene, his heavy bulk knocking the smaller boy against the wall. Cornelia raised a flipper to slap Shadrach. One of his tentacles caught her arm and pulled her close. “There, see? It isn’t that bad.”

Eugene closed his eyes. He couldn’t stop Shadrach. It would be just like it was back in the water — he paused, his last thought bobbing like a buoy in his mind. *In the water.*

Shadrach laughed, rocking back and forth as he struggled to maintain his balance on fluke and tentacle, barely able to hold himself upright without the ocean’s buoyancy.

Eugene stood, his legs shaky, his heart hammering in his ears. He came up behind Shadrach and pushed him, hard.

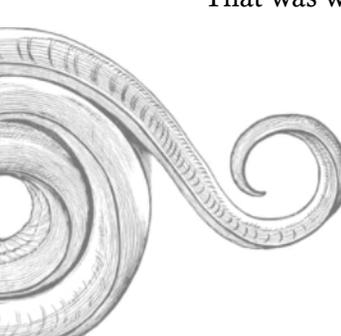
Shadrach fell in a tangle of fins and tentacles, losing hold of Cornelia as he hit the floor, face-first. She wriggled towards the bed and began to pull herself upright.

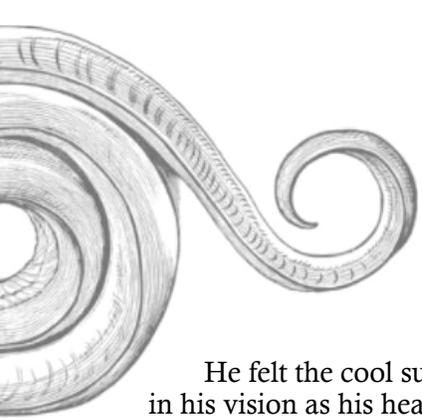
Shadrach rolled onto his back. Thick, green blood dripped from his lips where his teeth had broken through the skin. He tried to stand. “You stinkin’ air-breather! I’m gonna —”

Eugene hopped forward and kicked him in the chest. Shadrach’s eyes went even wider, his broken-bottle jaws open in a surprised cough. He swiped at Eugene with a ridged flipper, but Eugene only backed out of reach and circled around to stomp on one of the boy-creature’s sensitive tentacles. Shadrach tried again, with the same result.

The bigger boy seemed to realize he was out of his element. He crawled backward toward the door, jaws snapping in helpless rage. Pride rose in Eugene’s chest like a warm southern current. He looked to see if Cornelia was watching.

That was when Shadrach got him.





He felt the cool suction of tentacles on his calf and then the room spun. Bright beacons of light flashed in his vision as his head struck the floor. Eugene could only gasp like a landed fish as Shadrach dragged him closer.

“I’m gonna take you out to the sea and drown you. One more mongrel sent to Father Dagon’s embrace. But before I do, I’m —”

There was a crash and the tentacles holding Eugene went slack. He looked up to see Cornelia tottering over Shadrach, the remains of a shattered lamp in her flippers.

Shadrach moaned, his eyes blank and unfocused.

“We’ve got to get out of here.” Eugene got to his feet and grabbed Cornelia’s fin. She followed him down the stairs, almost in a daze. Out on the street, they ducked into a nearby alley. The far-off calls of searchers still echoed through the streets.

“Sorry, Eugene, this was all my fault. I’m supposed to spend eternity down in Y’ha-nthlei, but, if it’s anything like Innsmouth....”

He brushed a strand of lank hair from her face. “It’s okay. I know.”

“When the Elders find out, they’ll be furious. Shadrach will be out for blood.”

Eugene drew in a long, slow breath. Innsmouth was all he’d ever known. He thought of Zadok Allen, forever alone, unable to leave, the world flowing by as he drank himself to death.

He looked at Cornelia. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We can’t go back to my parents’ house. That’s the first place Shadrach will —”

“No, Innsmouth. Let’s leave.”

She tilted her head to regard him with first one eye, then the other.

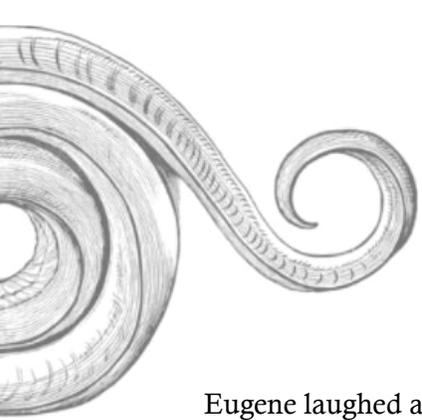
“There are schooners down at the docks. We’ll take one and sail away. We can catch fish and crabs, go anywhere we want, north to Boston, maybe even visit the South Seas.”

She bit her lip. “But Y’ha-nthlei, my parents.”

“You have all eternity. What’s a few decades?”

A smile dawned on Cornelia’s face, lips drawing back from pointed teeth with the slow inevitability of a rising tide.





Eugene laughed as he angled the small schooner away from Innsmouth Harbor. He glanced off the port side, where a thin, green-blue shape kept pace with the ship. Cornelia would come back on deck when she was tired, but, for now, she said she just wanted to swim.

With all of Innsmouth caught up in the search for the Stranger, no one had even seen them leave. Perhaps, if the Outsider escaped, they might not even notice that Eugene and Cornelia were gone. With stories of Declension spreading through New England, the Elders would have bigger things to worry about than two wayward youths.

The night wind filled the sails and ruffled Eugene's hair. He breathed deeply of its salty scent, feeling, for once, like he belonged. He was of the ocean but of the land, as well, the blood of Father Dagon mingled with that of generations of hardy seafarers. The call of the deeps was not the only siren song that pulled at his heart.

Far behind, a muted glow rose through the churning water. The great city of Y'ha-nthlei flickered to life, its immortal inhabitants turning out to meet those of their descendants who made the pilgrimage down to its welcoming depths. If either Eugene or Cornelia had turned to look, they might have seen the ancient city pulse once, twice, like a lighthouse beacon stoked to full flame, almost as if old Father Dagon was bidding them good journey.

For, like all good fathers, he knew when to let go. After all, they would come back. They always came back.

And he had forever to wait.

---

**Evan Dicken** is a graduate student studying Japanese History at the Ohio State University. In between classes, he helps fight entropy for the Ohio Department of Commerce. His work has most recently appeared in *Ray Gun Revival*, *10Flash Quarterly* and *The Lovecraft eZine*. For more information, visit: <http://www.evandicken.com>.



His silhouette cuts a mean slit in the darkness, like a deep gash of shadows ripped into the blue flesh of night. Rumor has it Dad wears bodies the way other men wear jackets.

## A PRAYER TO THE PRIEST OF DREAMS

By Josh Storey

*My son, there are three things you must know when you go skinny dipping in the ocean after midnight. First and foremost, you must be naked. Stop snickering. It's obvious but true. You must be naked; otherwise, you're just swimming. Present yourself to Mother Pacific as a corpse on a slab being prepared for the final rite and she will welcome you.*



FOG ROLLS IN along the coast thick and creepy, John Carpenter-style. Taka's beside me in his wetsuit, anxiously rocking on the balls of his feet. I promised him big game tonight.

"How will they know we're here?" he asks.

"I left a note." And by that, I mean I left a bloody conch shell on Uncle Ingram's pillow.

Taka rubs his arms and watches his breath puff in the cold night air. "Do you love me, Thoth?" he asks out of nowhere.

"Hey with the who, now?"

"You say you love the ocean and I think you love your mother. I know you loved your uncle and look what you did to him." His round face swims in a tidal pool of mist.

A hundred yards inland, three sets of headlights cut through the fog.

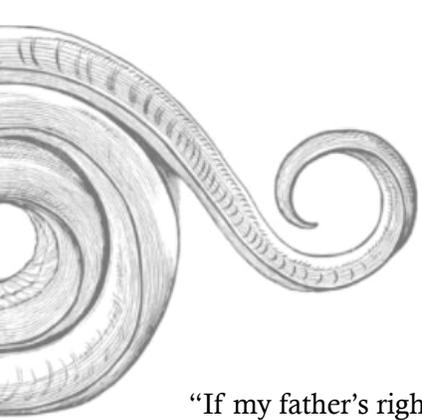
"Not the best time to update our relationship status," I say, looking between the beach and the parking lot.

"I could have gone after a vampire nest in Washington State," he says. "Or a zombie grotto in Bolivia, but I came after your family. Do you know why?"

"Opportunity?" I hazard.

Car doors open and shut. Long shadows split the lights.

"Because Lovecraft never gave humanity enough credit," Taka says and draws his knife. "Tell me again what happens if they open the box?"



“If my father’s right, your niche industry experiences a boom.”

He nods once then fades into the shadows, slipping out through the only opening as my family make their way out of the fog.

Philip’s first, a hellhound dressed in a three-piece. Flanking him left and right: Uncle Albert and Aunt Eustace. Brother and sister. Husband and wife. Traditional family marriage. So glad I’m an only child.

Eustace works as an animal trainer at a water park. She’s been slipping demonic dolphin babies into the general population for a couple of years now. By next summer, the Sea Life Spectacular is going to have one hell of a finale. Pro tip: Avoid the splash zone.

Though, in my opinion, Albert’s worse. He’s a clown. He looks beat to hell, too. Both of his arms and his head are wrapped in bloody bandages. He drags a rusty pickaxe along with him, leaving a deep furrow in the sand.

“You have something that belongs to us,” Philip says.

This is the key to planning a successful trap: Know your enemy’s wants and weaknesses.

I step nervously in front of the steamer trunk Taka and I have unceremoniously dumped onto the beach.

“Stay back,” I say.

Philip scoffs. Eustace draws a long surgical knife. Albert hefts his pickaxe. The three fan out around me.

Father steps onto the beach. His silhouette cuts a mean slit in the darkness, like a deep gash of shadows ripped into the blue flesh of night. Rumor has it Dad wears bodies the way other men wear jackets, changing and discarding them based on the season.

He’s got someone beside him, tied up with a rope.

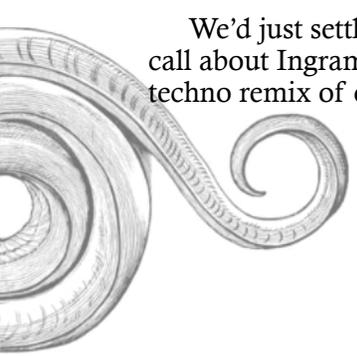
Mom.

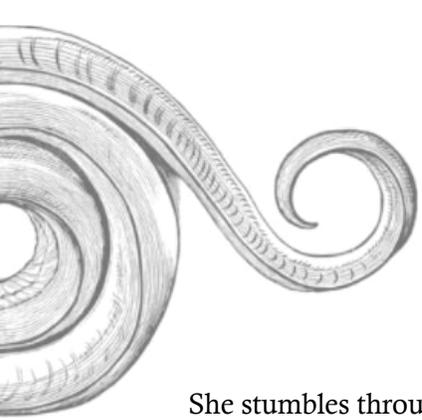
Shit. There goes plan A.



Four days earlier: We step off the earliest flight in the history of Oh-Gods-Can-Anyone-Actually-Be-Awake-Right-Now O’clock and into the gray haze of a San Diego morning.

We’d just settled into our new apartment (third in under a year, twelfth since the divorce) when we got the call about Ingram. One hasty airline reservation and three hurriedly packed bags later, and Mom’s mind is a techno remix of exhaustion, anxiety and doubt.





She stumbles through the hotel check-in. Can't find her credit card in the cavernous carry-on she's using as a purse. She keeps checking the trip itinerary, the hotel registry, her voice mail, and her makeup. Anything she can touch and hold, she checks and rechecks.

Me, I'm checking out the desk clerk. The kid is either Hawaiian or Mexican. I can't tell the difference. Straw-dry hair and board shorts. Floral print shirt, unbuttoned most of the way down a smooth chest. He's a surfer, no doubt. Tanned skin under the shirt, shapely pectorals and (uh-oh) a crucifix dangling between them.

Then keys, room number, Mom nodding and shoving everything back into her bag, that shiny cross glinting in the fluorescent.

Despite the midwestern perception, not everyone in California is a sodomite. Unfortunately. So, I abandon all hope and lug our bags up to our room. I'm not here to be young and horny, anyway.

Just so you don't think I'm playing coy, I should tell you that my Uncle Ingram is dying. Prostate cancer. Metastasized. That could be a metaphor, but it's not. The rest of the family hates Ingram, so we came here to sit with him, to make sure he's not alone when he dies.

Uncle Ingram teaches — taught — earth science and oceanography at California College San Diego, the community college for stoner surfers too strung out for UCSD. Ingram knew, academically speaking, that he had a shit job. Especially compared to my father, the Ivy League professor. Sure, Ingram lived in a trailer, but he lived on the beach and, every night, he watched the sunset, mojito in hand, toasting a well-lived life.

Mom checks the bathroom, the smoke detector, and the wall sockets. She's looking for pinhole cameras. She's seen *60 Minutes*. She's seen *Law & Order: SVU*.

I toss the bags near the TV cabinet and head back to the rental for our steamer trunk. Like everything else in our life pre-divorce, the trunk belonged to my father's side of the family. It's kind of an heirloom, passed down from first son to first son. Since I'm not the breeding kind, I'll be the last owner and, yeah, that makes me smile.

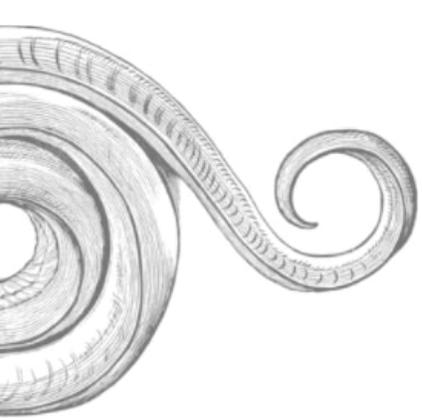
The trunk is huge and covered in hand-cured leather. The handles and corners are solid brass carved into goblin faces; the lock is as thick as a paperback book by Stephen King and just as convoluted. Every man in my family since the beginning of our line has tried to open the thing at least once. No one's ever succeeded.

Long story less long: It's heavy. Too heavy for me to lift — let alone carry — by myself. Luckily, Cute Desk Clerk just finished his shift.

He trots over to help.

“Heavy,” he says.

“Observant,” I say.



“Taka,” he says. “What you got in here?”

“Three hundred pounds of Columbian cocaine.”

“Most people say bodies.”

I watch his muscles work as we haul the trunk up the stairs and I imagine what he looks like in (and out of) a wetsuit. But that cross keeps swinging into view, glinting in the lights along the stairwell.

“I’m not most people,” I say.

He smiles. I smile. We smile.

Then Mom rushes over.

“There’s change on the TV,” she says and picks up the other end of the steamer trunk.

Taka shakes his head, but he takes the money and leaves.

“Check the trunk,” she says after we drop it in the closet.

“It’s fine.”

“Check it.”

I do.

After every move, the first order of business is always ensuring the trunk has not been damaged.

“How’s the room?” I run my hands along the leather, rattle the weird lock. “Angles in the right places?”

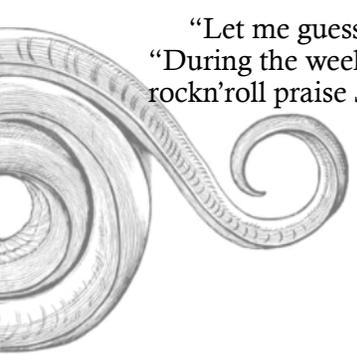
She says, “I think I gave that Mexican kid a twenty.”

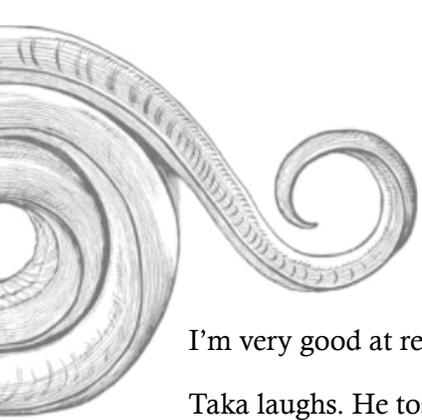


Later that night, I find Taka behind the hotel restaurant, sitting in the shadows on the edge of the beach. He wears his wet suit opened to the waist and rests his back against his surfboard. He’s got a glow stick looped round his neck and he uses the light to read a little pocket-sized hardback. A prayer missal, or maybe a tiny Bible.

“Let me guess.” I sit in the sand across from him. (If I squint, I can pretend he’s more than half-naked.)

“During the week, you work at the hotel and save money for school, but, Saturdays and Sundays, you play in a rockn’roll praise Jesus band.”





I'm very good at reading people.

Taka laughs. He tosses me the book: *The King in Yellow*. Only hardcore or highbrow horror fans read this stuff. We might have more in common than I thought.

"You never told me your name," he says.

"Thoth," I say, always embarrassed. "With two 'th's."

"You're an ibis bird?"

Shouldn't be surprised he makes that connection. He reads like a nerd and talks like an academic. Which, might I add, pushes all of my buttons. But there's no way he's into guys. Not with that cross around his neck. I'm never wrong about these things.

I shrug. "I've always loved the water." I knock his leg with my foot and play his game. "What are you, a sea otter?"

He motions me over. I slide in next to him and steal some of his warmth.

"You see that slip of silver?" he asks, pointing at the ocean. "Right before the wave breaks?"

The restaurant points spotlights at the water so guests can watch the surf roll in at night. A reflection shoots across the crests like an arrow.

"That's me," Taka says. "That's what I am."

It's a beautiful thing to say in the dark, under the moon, close together. But -

"That doesn't make any sense."

Taka laughs again. I want to swallow his laughter and let it linger in my stomach.

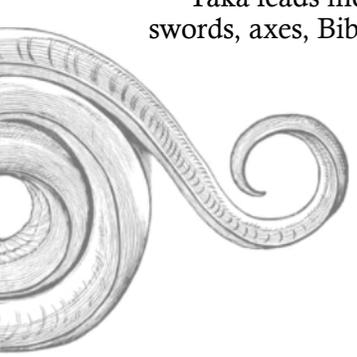
"You wanna go for a swim?" he asks.

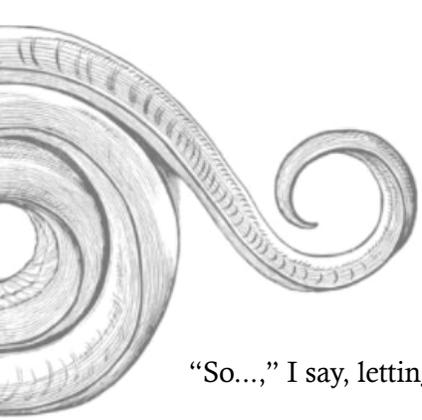
I'd love to, but: "What time is it?"

Taka looks at a military grade watch looped through his bag's strap. "10:45."

"Too early," I say and pull him to his feet. "Show me your place." I move to pick up his bag, but he snatches it away.

Taka leads me to a suite on the first floor of our hotel. Odd. He opens the door: crossbows, shotguns, swords, axes, Bibles, Korans, Tibetan scrolls, and treatises on ancient witchcraft and modern Wicca.





“So...,” I say, letting the “o” linger.

Either he’s kinkier than I thought, he just bought out the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* estate sale, or....

“I know what you are,” he says.

Shit.

“My mother’s not involved,” I say immediately. “She’s as supernatural as an eggplant.”

“I’m not after her.” Taka leans his surfboard against the wall. On the way into the bathroom, he starts stripping away the rest of his suit. He doesn’t bother to close the door and I spot a mandala tattoo along his lower back.

“Then why haven’t you —”

“Pulled a Norman Bates?”

I start edging towards the exit.

“Maybe I like you,” he says.

His words go straight to my groin. I am an optimist, but I am not stupid. “You’re hunting my father. What makes you think I’ll betray him?”

Taka comes out of the bathroom. His wetsuit does not.

I’ve never been *that* fond of my father.



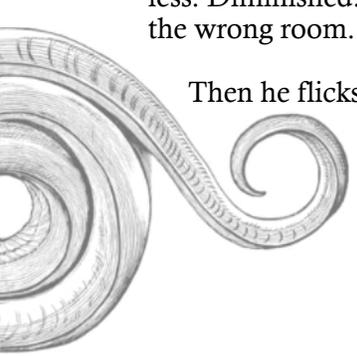
*Step two: Bite your tongue and mix your blood with the ocean’s. Like sand and sea, water and blood twine about one another. Drink it. Taste it. Seventy percent of your body came from the sea. Take her in. Let her become you and you she.*



Outside Uncle Ingram’s hospital room, three huge palms totter on the edge of a cliff. Beyond those: Mother Pacific. There is no horizon today. It has disappeared into the low-hanging clouds like a centipede scuttling under the rug. Heaven and ocean have eaten one another, Oroboros-style.

Uncle Ingram’s been eaten, too. He used to stand an imposing six-four, weighed a sturdy two-ten. Now he’s less. Diminished. Withered. This isn’t my uncle. This is a sick person. We’ve made a mistake; we’ve walked into the wrong room.

Then he flicks me off.





“Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu,” he says.

“Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn,” I say, then I rub his peach-fuzzed head. “About time you went punk, old man.”

“Don’t tease your Uncle,” Mom says.

Ingram was the father his brother could never be. When I was six, he gave me a paperback collection of Lovecraft’s short stories. He let me read about tentacled sea gods until all hours of the night. Then, the next day, he dragged me out of bed at 3:00 am and took me down to Mission Bay. He found the weirdest shit the ocean could cough up and shoved it into my sleep-deprived face.

Imagine looking a horseshoe crab in the eye when its body is bigger than your head. All those pincers and plates and tiny feelers, the dark slime oozing from every joint.

The next night, he took me out on his rocket boat, threw me into the ocean, and taught me to swim. And in the span of two days, I’d learned everything I needed to know about Mother Pacific.

“Iggy,” Mom says, and begins running the seams of his sheets through her fingers like Rosary beads.

Uncle Ingram gives me this look. We don’t need words.

“Let her go,” I tell him. “She’s had a rough couple of months.”

Ingram rolls his eyes. *Look who’s talking.*

“I know,” I say.

Ingram looks at me again.

“Yes,” I say. “We brought the trunk.”

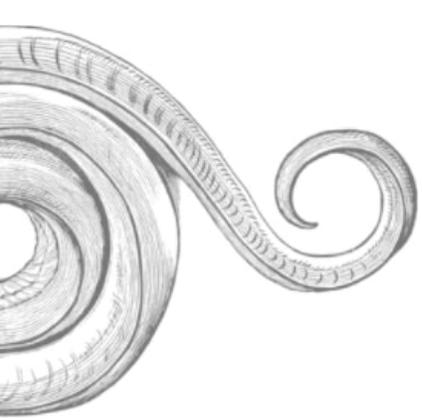
Outside, a black snake slides down one of the palm trees. Its tongue flicks against the window as its body drips from the branches. I’m not saying it’s connected, but, thirty seconds later, Philip is in the doorway.

The hellhound wears the shape of a man, not a dog, but the difference is negligible. “I hope you brought your appetite, Master Thoth,” he says and slithers his way over to the bedside. “There will be another funeral soon. I daresay a bountiful one.”



Imagine looking a  
horseshoe crab in the  
eye when its body is  
bigger than your head.  
All those pincers and  
plates and tiny feelers,  
the dark slime oozing  
from every joint.





“Not if we have anything to say about it.”

Philip ignores me.

“Charlotte,” he touches Mom’s shoulder. “My condolences.”

“Philip,” Mom says, patting his hand.

Mom’s not part of the cult, but she’s not stupid, either. She knows the world’s tilted 45 degrees to the left of normal, and she knows Dad and the family are big-time into the hoodoo.

Her threat is subtle and sharp: “Never touch me.”

The hound recoils. “Let’s get your mother a coffee, hmm?”

His mallet-sized hand clamps down on my neck and drags me into the hall.

Squirm. Pry. Futile. “What are you doing here?”

“I was invited.” Philip sniffs me. “New boyfriend?”

Taka and I spent last night doing things I’m not legally allowed to describe.

“Hardly.” I scoff. “No.”

“Well, I hope he proves as useful as the last one.”

I almost tear at his fucking arm with my teeth. “Never,” I say. “Never talk about Jake.” I can’t seem to muster Mom’s icy menace, but I do rip free from his grasp.

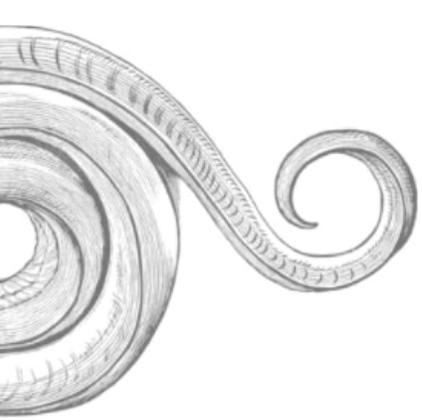
Poor, stupid, helpful Jake. I didn’t know what I was asking when I invited him to my grandmother’s funeral, but, in the end, it’s still my fault.

“You’ve had your *rumspringa*,” Philip says. “Your father arrives in two days.” He looks into the hospital room. “We’ll need blood for the ceremony. It can come from your new friend, or from someone closer to home.”

Inside, Mom fusses over the bed, speaking softly into Ingram’s ear, probably rambling on about mundane nonsense just to fill the silence.

“See you soon, Charlotte.” He waves from the doorway. Smiles. And walks away.





The next night. Taka's room. Empty pizza boxes and takeout cartons lie strewn between swords and crossbows. He's got a small stack of comic books by the bedside, a large stack of newspapers in the corner, and a map of North America on the wall. Red ink scribbles mark where he's been and where he's going.

"I can't believe she called him," I say, trying not to whine.

"Who?"

"Mom," I say. "She called Philip. She *invited* him."

"Why?" Taka flips through an issue of *Hellboy*.

"Something about an agreement. There was screaming. I stormed out." I trace inky strings of binary code, looped double helix-style, along Taka's inner thigh. He has tattoos in unobvious places and I learn more about him with each slow shift of his thighs. We've been pumping each other for information all evening. "Why do you wear that cross?"

"I grew up in a Catholic orphanage," Taka says.

"Those still exist?"

"In Brazil, sure. The cross reminds me never to go back." Taka tosses the comic away, rolls over, and pins me with his legs.

"I like that," I say. "Never go back."

Before I can think much more about the implications of my mother's phone call — *We're not going back; we're not going back* — Taka shows me the ASCII twin to his binary tattoo.

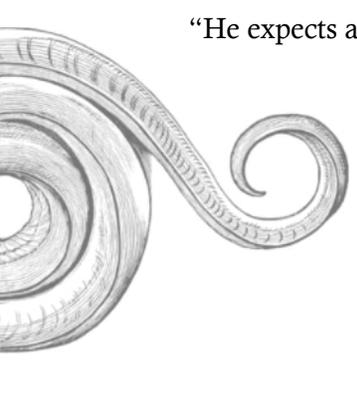
"My father's not an easy target," I say. "He's as close to an Old One as a you can get without growing tentacles."

"Just get me close enough. You're sure he's going to show? If he doesn't show, I'm settling for the smaller kill." He squeezes me between his legs.

"Small?" I twist his pinky toe and Taka goes wee, wee, wee all the way to the edge of the mattress.

"When Ingram left the family," I say. "He took a large chunk of ancestral knowledge with him. Intricacies of the bloodlines. Forgotten names. Pasta recipes. Father won't let that knowledge die."

"He expects a deathbed confession?"





“That is not dead which can eternal lie,” I quote. “Cthulhu and the other Old Ones survive inside the dreams of humans as a kind of quantum knowledge. Information held in a state of perpetual potential.”

I slip off the bed and start pacing.

“My family worships that information. Hoarding it is a holy obligation. And if someone’s unwilling to pass it along....”

“What, you eat their brains?”

I stop pacing. He’s trying to be funny, but I don’t laugh.

“Seriously?”

More silence.

“Then your uncle, he’s....” Taka sits up.

“No. He’s fine.” I say. “I killed him four hours ago.”



Four hours ago: When most boys turn 13, their dads teach them about condoms. Mine taught me how to devour the memories locked inside a person’s soul.

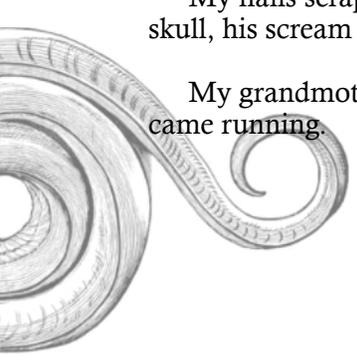
Taka had offered me a new life, free from my father and his kin. My hunter had connections. I could take Mom and run away. But Ingram knew how to open the trunk and, unless I did something to stop my father, he would crack open Ingram’s skull, scoop out the secret, and leave Ingram an empty husk.

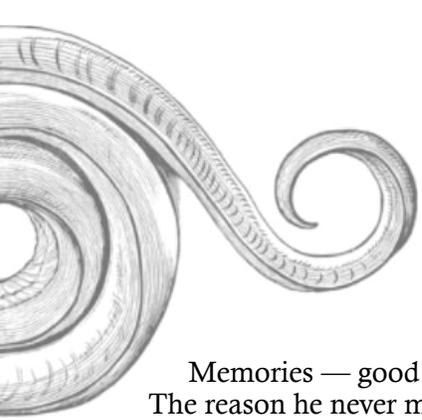
I knew how funerals worked and I knew Ingram didn’t want to go out like that, the main course in a psychic cannibal feeding frenzy. I didn’t know if I could pluck a single memory from his brain and leave the rest of Ingram to die in dignity. But I knew I had to try.

I pushed Ingram’s bed away from the wall, unplugged his tubes, and removed his catheter. Then I used a knife to slit the pads of my fingers and dripped blood onto the floor in a circle. I can still feel the baby-soft fuzz as I rubbed my hand along the top of his shaved head.

My nails scraped across his flesh. He couldn’t talk, could barely moan, but when I slid my fingers into his skull, his scream rocketed through the hallways of the hospital.

My grandmother’s funeral took four hours and twelve practitioners. I had maybe a minute before the nurses came running.





Memories — good ones and bad — came flooding out of his head: the first time he drove a motorcycle. The reason he never married. A map in my father’s study. Memories of me at six, at twelve, sixteen, yesterday. Ingram’s mind slipped like Jell-O to the floor, where it pooled with my blood and his piss.

Suddenly, I was in a dream — Ingram’s — hovering above the ocean. The black water was all loops and curves. Waves like labyrinths. And below those, Ingram’s hospital room.

Yesterday, when Philip was threatening me in the hall. I saw Mom, fussing with Ingram’s sheets, but this time I could hear her.

“Philip will seal the contract,” she said to him. “If you tell them how to open it, they’ll leave us be. We get a normal life and your nephew will be safe.”

I swept away the vision and forced my hand all the way through Ingram’s skull. I latched onto the single memory I’d come to retrieve and yanked it free.

The memory squirmed in my hand like a tadpole. It was tiny and fragile. I slid my finger along its spine. Then I lifted the memory to my lips and swallowed.

Ingram cried out in big, dumb sobs. Three long ones and then he died.

Covered as I was in gore, I thought it best if I slipped out the window. I slithered like a snake from the branches to the parking lot below and took my leave.



My father steps out of the fog, dragging my mother along behind him. She stumbles, obviously drugged. She must have put up one hell of a fight; my eyes flick to Albert and all those bloody bandages.

Father looks at the trunk, then at me. He smiles and cuts the rope around Mom’s wrists. “No one has to die tonight.”

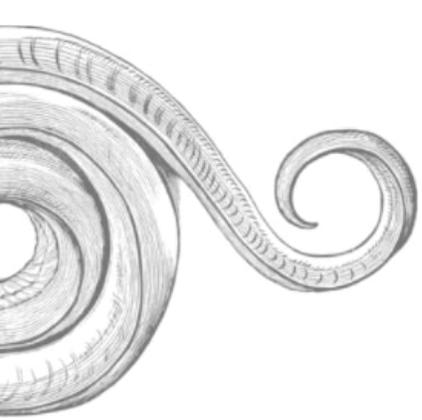
“You’ll forgive me if I’m a little skeptical,” I say. I do a little shuffle in front of the trunk. Albert and Eustace continue their advance, but Philip stays back a bit.

Mom teeters in a circle and I’m mentally telling her, *Run, damnit! Turn around and run!* She’s too close to the action. Taka doesn’t have an attack angle.

“I came here to apologize,” Father says, taking another step closer. “I’ve been absent for too much of your life. I want to make amends.”

“You just want what’s in my head.”

Father actually looks a little hurt at that. “What have we done to deserve your scorn, son?”



“Do I really need to answer that?”

“We didn’t kill that boy, Jake. We gave him to you,” Father says. “There is a gulf between mortals, an unknowable hole they fill with words. That boy loved you and you *know* that. What greater gift could we have given?”

And fuck him, but he’s right. Jake’s dumb teenage love has been a little warm glow in the back of my head ever since the family sacrificed him to my grandmother’s memory. Which makes my part in the whole thing a thousand times worse.

“You did something amazing today,” Father says. “I’m impressed. I’m proud.”

Does he think that matters to me? Does he think that’s why I’m hesitating?

“Amazing? I killed my uncle.”

My words cut through whatever drugs Father has pumped into Mom and she collapses onto the ground. She’d come here, hoping to cut a deal, and now that deal is dead. Likely, so are we.

This is Highway 61. I am Abraham’s son. There is no God.

Before we can banter more, Taka shoots out of the fog. His knife is a flash of light headed directly for my father’s throat.

“Don’t!” I yell, but it’s too late.

Shit, meet fan.



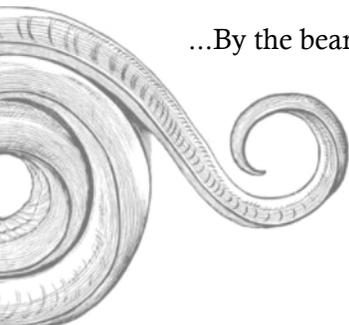
*Finally, save no energy for the trip back home. Commit yourself to the sea. Waves may touch the land, but they stay for a moment, only. If you long to return to the shore, then you are not part of the sea, and if you are not a part of her, her children will smell your blood and they will eat you.*

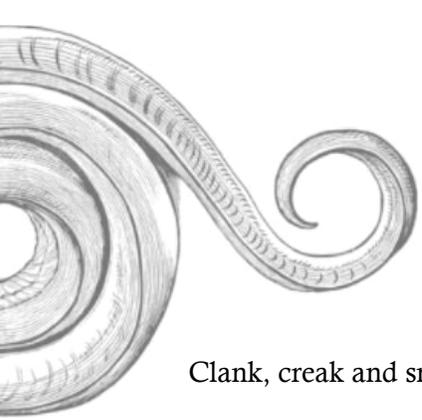


As Taka and my father tumble to the ground, Eustace, Albert and Philip rush me.

I’ll be honest: I’m scared. I’m on my own. And I’m surrounded.

...By the bear traps Taka and I buried in the dunes earlier this evening.





Clank, creak and snap.

Game, set and match.

Philip and Company fall to the ground, screaming and clutching their mutilated legs. Their weapons and their mission forgotten.

Taka moves to slit my father's throat, but the old sorcerer is quick. They strike at one another. Snake and mongoose. Cloak of darkness and slip of silver.

Just when I think, yeah, maybe this will work, Father snares Taka's knife arm and, with inhuman strength, tears it off. He tosses my hunter away like a rag doll before turning to me.

"Open it," he says. His muscles writhe with crawling chaos.

"No."

Father's left arm becomes a whip, a tentacle; his fingers become teeth and his palm a gaping maw. The horrible mouth-hand strikes me in the back of the head, at the point where skull meets spine. It drills.

A tongue moves into the back of my skull, tickling my scalp as it slithers into my gray matter, looking for the secret to the family trunk.

I'm kneeling in a pile of broken seashells, blood and spinal fluid leaking out in a quick trickle. Mom slumps face down into the incoming tide, too drugged to roll over and breath. Taka, meanwhile, washes up on shore, water licking at the hole in his torso where his arm should be.

It doesn't take Father long to find the memory I stole from Ingram: Twelve years ago. Ingram is tall and strong. He's just taught me how to swim, and I look at him and say, "I love you." And he looks down and says the same.

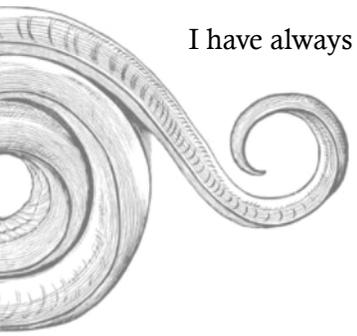
That's it. No cosmic secrets.

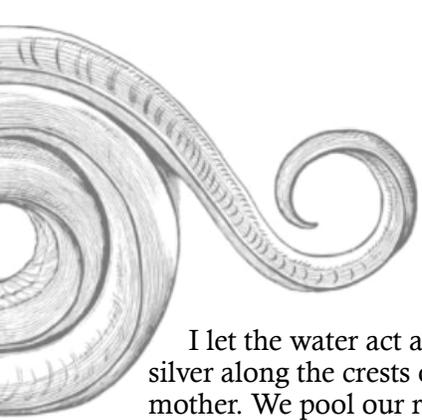
Furious, Father flings me aside. I slump face-first into the frothy blood-water. I'm sorry to say that continence and I had a falling out.

This next part happens quick and, truthfully, I didn't expect it to work:

When I was in his head, Ingram showed me a map of my father's body dumps, all the locations across the country where he kept backup copies of his consciousness. My father dies in Maine, so what? He's got an extra life on ice in Connecticut. Both brothers knew the magics involved. *Blood, water, and will*, Ingram used to say. The three cornerstones of any ritual.

I have always been a willful child.





I let the water act as a reagent, carrying my blood along the sand to Mom and Taka. My mind slips like silver along the crests of the waves and the three of us mix together. Bits of me seep into my hunter and my mother. We pool our resources, so to speak. Taka's pain wakes us up. The roofies pumping through Mom's system keep us calm. As the ocean spreads my blood, sensitives and aesthetes across the continent tremble in disquiet dreams.

I stand on unsteady legs, a palm-sized hole in the back of my head. In hindsight, Taka and I really should have come up with a Plan B. Lacking better ideas, I improvise and grab Albert's pickaxe.

It's heavy and rusty and sharp, and it makes a quiet slooping sound when I use it to puncture the lid of the trunk.

I'm a little disappointed by what comes out. I was hoping for some sort of face-melting cosmic power. You know, like at the end of *Raiders*? Instead, a wisp of dusty knowledge puffs out. Still, Father's mouth-hand lunges for the ancient thought before it dissipates into the fog. He stumbles into the water, ruining his expensive suit as he chases his inheritance.

For his part, Taka's not doing too bad. He's tied off the stump of his arm and managed to get Mom out of the water. The part of me now inside their minds acts like a psychic receiver. We know each other now. All three of us. Which, okay, yeah, is a little uncomfortable. Especially when I realize Mom will remember (in detail) what we've been doing in Taka's hotel room the past couple of nights. But we're not going to worry about that right now.

Right now, we watch as Father falls to his knees. The trunk memory has congealed into a kind of viscous tendril that loops around Father's neck and burrows into his nostril. Whatever the thing is, it's weak and sickly and not long for this world.

Taka and Mom reach my body. I've gone into shock, and maybe a coma. Most people in my situation would be dead by now, but, as we've already established, I am a unique individual. I feel like I could sleep forever. If it weren't for the Thothes inside Mom and Taka, I'd be out like a light.

Taka manages to sling me over his good shoulder and Mom helps balance us both.

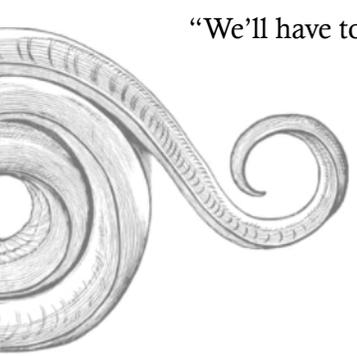
Father, meanwhile, splashes around like an idiot. He cries in joy and shouts prayers to his dead gods. *Iä. Iä.*

The three of us share a mental glance: It's well past midnight and Father's not following the rules.

Mom calls to him from the shore. "Roger," she says. "You should run now."

Further out, where the waves break, pallid, gray lumps rise from the sea. Lumps that are almost men, but not quite. Gills hang from their faces like lank hair. Their mouths are full of teeth that are as long as a man's hand and as thin as needles. The children of the Pacific scent the interloper, and they begin to close in.

"We'll have to take care of the body dumps," Taka says.





“That can wait,” Mom says.

Our little trinity retreats. On the way back, I speak up from inside their heads.

“Mom,” I say. “This is Taka.”

It’s not how most people would introduce their new boyfriends to their mothers.

---

**In his** life, Josh has only ever had three career ambitions: astronaut, Superman and writer. Since he’s no good at math and (as far as his parents will admit) not from Krypton, he’s going with Option Three. He blogs (occasionally) at: <http://www.phantasypunk.com>.





The pipes gurgled loudly enough to drown out the proprietor's unfortunate taste in zydeco, but, from the smells that wafted into the dining room from the kitchen, I could tell we were in the right place.

## DINNER AT MAJAK'S

By Nghi Vo

WHILE LUMINA'S ON 43<sup>rd</sup> street does a cow eye pâté to die for and Tragers has a whole section on its dinner menu devoted to Batrachian cuisine, every foodie knows that you need to head to under the overpass and down Randolph Street for the real experience. Between King Street and Marshall Street, you'll find the eight blocks that are technically part of Midtown, but which the residents themselves and the expat community at large, call "Little Innsmouth."

Last Thursday, I took my dining companion to Majak's Diner, a snug little place on the corner of Randolph and Noir, which the locals pronounce "noor." To be perfectly honest, Majak's is more than snug and we found ourselves wedged into one of four vinyl booths set against a cracked plaster wall. The pipes gurgled loudly enough to drown out the proprietor's unfortunate taste in zydeco, but, from the smells that wafted into the dining room from the kitchen, I could tell we were in the right place.

As we sipped our excellent complimentary Shaggai tea, we could hear the proprietor shouting something in his native Batrakhos and I smiled.

"It sounds like the Mi-Go is very fresh tonight," I explained to my companion.

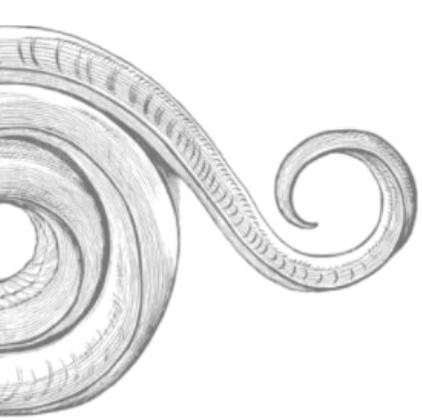
The server was a young teenage girl "of repulsive aspect," as the Batrachian saying goes. She offered us a single menu to share between us. There was the usual fare that you would find at any food court, including fried Tindalos balls and dholeburgers, but the specials menu did not disappoint.

"Do you think that's real shantak?" my dining companion asked. "I thought that selling shantak was illegal in the United States."

"It's probably just chicken," I told him reassuringly. "I've heard they do marvelous things with sauces here."

When the teenager returned, we placed our orders and, as an afterthought, ordered a dozen Tindalos balls to share as we waited.

I could tell from the first bite that these Tindalos balls had been made in the old-fashioned way, with the liver in the center cut very recently from a yearling hound and then rolled in a mixture of cornmeal, goat's milk and salt before being deep-fried in virgin olive oil. The result is a buttery, rich treat that practically melts in the mouth, with the slightly bitter, but wholly delicious flavor of the liver providing a lingering aftertaste. It was served with a creamy yogurt sauce, redolent with parsely and horseradish.



We were finishing off the Tindalos balls when our food arrived. The service at Majak's is definitely no frills (the server looked like she had just gotten back from school), but you cannot beat it for speed.

Thanks to my little bit of innocent eavesdropping earlier, I knew that my Mi-Go ceviche would at least be fresh. Even better than that, it was still lightly chilled from the waters of the lake. The pink segments glistened under their coating of just-squeezed lime juice and I wished all over again that you could properly capture Mi-Go dishes on film. Of course you can't, so, instead, I dug in with good will. If you have never had fresh Mi-Go ceviche, which is fusion cuisine only in the sense that there was an established Batrachian colony in Chile for most of the 1800s, you *must* take yourself to Majak's. The texture of the Mi-Go itself was slightly rubbery and amazingly rich, with a flavor profile that can perhaps best be described as a cross between porcini mushrooms and slightly rank catfish.

My companion had indeed ordered the barbecued shantak feet and, though they were certainly not as large as the feet of elephants, they were still larger than that of the average chicken.

"Emu," I said with confidence. "There are a number of emu farms just outside the city limits, you know."

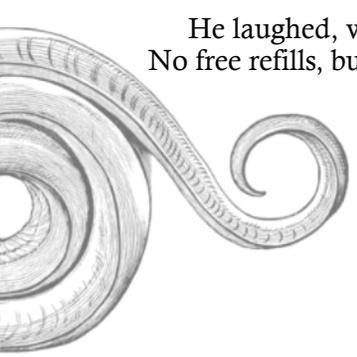
Shantak, of course, has been banned by the United Nations for some years. That doesn't stop enterprising restaurateurs from tossing the name onto the menu, though what it means varies from establishment to establishment. At Majak's, the shantak feet were sitting in a bath of a sweet-savory sauce made from shoggoth butter and simmered until it was nearly burnt. The caramelized scent of the long pair of shantak feet was undercut by the sharp tang of rosemary, singed just enough to give it that burnt-twig smell. Unlike the imitations in most places, the nails had not been clipped and my companion had to eat carefully to keep them from scraping his face.

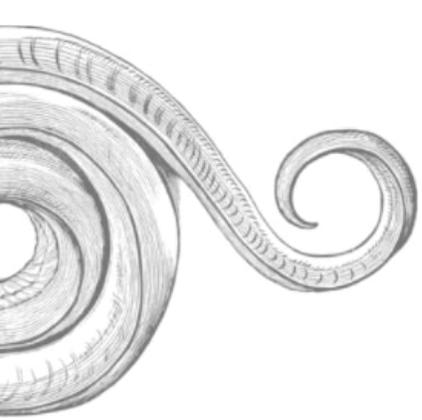
I traded my companion bite for bite. I found the shantak feet to be almost overpowering, though not in the way that I expected. The sauce was as strong as I thought it would be, with the sharp bite of dried chili pepper flakes, but it was the meat underneath that was exceptional. The texture was coarse, but a long cook time caused it to fall apart in my mouth. The taste was as rich as duck, but darker, with the slight aftertaste of raw mushroom that accompanies so many of the meats traditionally used in Batrachian cuisine. I closed my eyes to savor the burst of flavor on my tongue, and also to enjoy the surge of strange color and eerie light that filled my sightless gaze. There were whispers in my ear, too, sibilant things too terrible to be true. Then I swallowed, smiled, and returned to my own meal. As I mentioned when I dined at Zerena's Nest in Chicago, shantak does strange things to people who are unused to it and so, I cheerfully stuck to my ceviche.

"It's good," my companion said after he finished his first foot. He hesitated, eying the second, and I rolled my eyes.

"You're going to eat it," I teased. "If not today, then tomorrow."

He laughed, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief, and I ordered a second Shaggai tea as he finished. No free refills, but when the ceviche is this fresh, I wasn't going to complain.





We sat and chatted, and just when I was ready to head home, the proprietor came up to our table to ask if we had enjoyed the meal.

Majak himself is a short man, with eyes that bulge from his head and a wide mouth that opens and closes with a brisk, clicking sound. The florescent lights in the diner do him a disservice, giving him a cold and dead cast, but I suppose they do that to everyone.

My dining companion mentioned how much he liked the shantak, something that excited Majak a great deal. With one faintly greenish hand on my dining companion's shoulder, Majak urged him up. Looking over the check, I half-heard something about free samples or a new sauce blend, and then my companion was stumbling past some chairs on his way to the back. I heard him say something and then there was a startled shout.

I had to wait for some time at the counter before our teenaged server appeared to take my card; it seemed that there was some kind of ruckus in the kitchen. Before I left, she informed me that I should come back on Thursday, when they were going to be rolling out a traditional Batrachian-Basque dish that is essentially a shoggoth marmitako — that is, a shoggoth's eye stew served over potatoes, pimentos and onions.

I promised her I would. As the racket from the kitchen increased, I stepped into the crisp fall night and headed home to write my review.

---

**Nghi Vo** currently lives by an inland sea. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Expanded Horizons* and *Alien Skin*. Her current interests include old gods, new gods, origami, alchemy, revenge tragedies, and the Ottoman Empire. She can be contacted at [bridgeofbirds@gmail.com](mailto:bridgeofbirds@gmail.com).



## OUR COVER ARTIST: BERNIE GONZALEZ

When Silvia asked me to put together a cover for *Innsmouth Magazine*, she was kind enough to give me free rein. For an artist, that freedom is as much welcome as it is overwhelming. A blank page can be intimidating. But when it comes to Lovecraft, I've always had one image in my mind.

After being exposed to Lovecraft in high school, I instantly gravitated to "At the Mountains of Madness." I desperately wanted to be among the brave band of men venturing into the Antarctic on a scientific expedition, hiking through icy caverns in search of the unknown. And while most of Lovecraft's stories lend themselves to imaginative and alien visuals, the white desolation of the Antarctic is almost as unfamiliar.

I instantly remembered watching the 1957 Hammer film, *The Abominable Snowman*. Directed by Val Guest and featuring Peter Cushing, the movie features a similar expedition in search of the title's legendary creature. The documentary filming style, highlighted by amazing panoramic shots of the Himalayas, creates a sense of realism to balance out the fantasy. John Carpenter did something similar in *The Thing*. While essentially a remake of Howard Hawks' *The Thing from Another World* (based on the 1938 novella "Who Goes There?" by John W. Campbell), Carpenter's interpretation contains some stark images of the Antarctic that are almost as menacing as the extraterrestrial Thing.

All of those visuals informed my idea for the cover: a solitary figure in the middle of a frozen landscape looking upon a mysterious structure of Lovecraftian origin.

## AVAILABLE NOW: *COLLECTED ISSUES 5-7*

This e-book collects issues five through seven of *Innsmouth Magazine*, compiling a tasty buffet of Weird fiction. On the menu, we have the sword-and-sorcery adventure, "The Song of Tussagaroth," the disturbing historical secrets of "On The Generation of Insects", and the hidden land of the "Black Sand". Have a nibble. Read a story. But be wary: Horror lurks in every morsel.

Stories by W.H. Pugmire, Don Webb, Paul Jessup, and many others.

Available for the Kindle today. Only \$3.99.

