

A shark is shown swimming vertically in a dark, deep-sea environment. The water is dark blue/black and filled with small, white, star-like particles, giving it a cosmic or 'starry' appearance. The shark is oriented vertically, with its head pointing downwards and its tail at the top. The shark's body is light grey/white with darker, mottled patterns on its side. Its fins are visible, and its mouth is slightly open, showing some teeth. The overall mood is mysterious and slightly ominous, fitting the 'spooky' theme of the magazine.

LITERARY MAGAZINE • ISSUE NO.3 • OCTOBER 2023

LIT SHARK

magazine

THE
SPOOKY
(TEETH)
EDITION

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO



CONTENT

Dear readers, we always want to support you and give you the information you need to have the best reading experience possible. Please note that Issue 3 is our spooky/Halloween issue for the year, and true to the horror genre, there are horror elements in this collection, including violence, blood, gore, death, mental health issues, supernatural elements, illusions to child loss, and animal death. There are multiple illusions to sexual activity and more expletives than usual. Thank you again for your support. We hope you will enjoy our third issue.

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LIT SHARK *magazine*

THE SPOOKY (TEETH) EDITION

SOMETHING TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

The stones lay lumpish and cold under my bare feet.

I thought longingly of the black shoes on the beach.

A **wave** drew back, like a hand, then advanced and
touched my foot.

The drench seemed to come off the sea floor itself,
where blind white fish ferried themselves by their own light
through the great polar cold.

I saw **sharks' teeth and whales' earbones** littered about
down like gravestone.

I waited, as if the sea could **make my decision** for me.

A **second wave** collapsed over my feet, lipped
with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles
with a **mortal ache**.

My flesh winched, in cowardice, from **such a death**.

—Sylvia Plath
excerpt from *The Bell Jar*

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Hi readers, writers, and shark fans!

I am so incredibly excited for Issue 3 of Lit Shark Magazine: The Spooky (TEETH) Edition. This one is so different from what we've produced so far, and I think it's something really special and fun.

Lit Shark's core team (AKA: The Shiver) is full of horror fans and lovers of all things Halloween and fall-time, so we knew from the very beginning that we wanted to have a spooky issue of Lit Shark Magazine each year that could not only showcase that but give our community a place to send those spookier, creepier, crawler pieces that often have a harder time finding a home.

We also knew that a key part of our mission was going to be debunking myths around sharks, removing the social stigma applied to them (largely through the entertainment industry, per our previous issue!), and reminding our community of the difference between fun fiction and important truth. As we said earlier, we LOVE campy horror, which includes movies like Jaws, Sharknado, and The Meg, but we go into these remembering these are for entertainment purposes, not facts of life.

It's fair to say that most of us KNOW that, but studies have shown that the viewing of movies like these has negatively impacted the relationship humans have with sharks, in the wild and even in conservation and theme parks. We're more likely to be rude to them or disrupt them in viewing spaces, if not overtly mean; we're much less likely to assist them in rescue or to provide them funding; and we will do anything from flee the scene to attack them in the wild—not even because of their teeth and familiar fin or being an apex predator, but because of the message we've been sent about them being agentic (a creature said to have inherently evil traits, with the motivation to cause harm).

So! For our horror issue, we've featured a few pieces that DO include some rambunctious, if not straight-up villainous, sharks, but most of the issue is centered more around ghost stories, spooky poems, and dark retellings! We want our community to have the space to let off some steam and enjoy those same campy stories that we enjoy, but we wanted to spend time with scary stories and poems in this issue, as well.

Just remember: please take the pieces about sharks with a MASSIVE grain of salt! They are for fun, they are entertainment, and they are not factual. The sharks you'll meet in these stories are a far cry from those you'd meet in the wild, but they are happy to be here just the same.

Just like our earlier issues, I deeply hope that you feel the passion contained in these pages that I felt while reading these writers' works—and which I also poured in myself while formulating it.

Now it's time to get off the soapbox! Let's all get comfy with our favorite fall drinks and comfy things (and Halloween candy, obviously), and let's dive in . . .

Happy Halloween! Until Issue 4,
McKenzie
Editor-in-Chief and Fellow Shark Fan
October 2023

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**ONE:
A WAVE**

BETH MATHISON

RED TIDE

"There is blood in the water," she said, standing at the edge of the pier.

"Hilarious," he responded, still fiddling with his phone. He sat on the worn wooden bench, shielding his screen so he could read it. "Ugh. I can never find the settings on how to change my camera. It's maddening. Why do they make it so hard?"

"I'm not kidding. There is blood in the water," she repeated.

Skipping a beat, he finally looked up at her, then stood.

He looked over the edge. "That sure looks like blood. I don't think I've ever seen blood in the ocean before. Except for in movies. Scary movies where something is after someone and it ends up bad for one of them. Any way you think about it, something bad happens. Do you really think that's blood?"

But she had moved down the pier towards shore, looking at the long lines of red through the water.

"Do you really think that's BLOOD?" he was shouting now, still at the end of the pier.

The pier shook slightly.

Not violently, but enough that the worn wooden planks moved.

They both grabbed the splintered railing, looking at each other, and not moving.

The waves calming, the soft sound of surf hitting the shore.

A gull cried in the distance. The pier moved again.

And then they were both moving, almost running on the wood planks worn down by sun and salt water. Down the pier, towards shore.

"We're IN the movie!" he shouted. "It's going to end badly for us!"

LYNETTE ESPOSITO

ALL SAINTS NIGHT ON THE RIVERBANK

The river sneaks along the shore,
a slick silver ghost—
its cold wet skin scraping pebbles
from the rich black dirt
that holds the yellow grass.
Silence in the indigo night
folds over
shadows playing under the harvest moon
like unknown figures witching
the water to let go its secrets.

They met at the base of the pier, where it met the sandy shore,
gasping for breath.

The pier shook again, accompanied by a muffled thump.

"It's a shark," he stated. "It's something big. I know it. A whale.
A giant squid. It could even be a kraken. Do Kraken even come in
this close to shore? I don't even know."

"Kraken are not a thing," she said. "Except in the movies or a
sports team."

"But we are IN a movie, remember?"

They inched closer to the edge, looking down to where the
water met the beach.

The shaking and thumping continued.

Shielding their eyes from the sun, they squinted and tilted their
heads in unison.

"Huh," she said. "You don't see that every day."

A shipping box thumped against the piling in time with the
waves, its contents working their way out of the box with each wave.
Every time the container thumped, the pier shook slightly.

"I think those are Red Hot Gummy Gobs," he said.

The bright candy, wrapped in individual paper bags, was
slowly leaking red into the water. Lines of red filled the water
around their pier.

"Hot Red Gummy Gobs are so good," she said.

"A local favorite, for sure. They're all natural, you know. Beet
juice and all."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" he asked.

"I thought it was blood. We both ran," she answered, taking his
hand. "Let's see if we can move that mess onto shore." She pecked
him on the cheek.

"Now this a movie I want to be in," he said, smiling.

They made their way down to the water, hand in hand.

"Kraken," she said, smiling. "Classic."

KATIE HUDSON

THE CREEKSIDE LEGEND

In a small house by the creek bed, every Sunday evening, the Patrick family would gather for dinner together. It was the same every time, David and Anna hosted, cooking a dinner fit for kings in their small log cabin home. Just as dinner was put on the table, Jen and her husband Roy would come in, their neighbors of the last twelve years, but this time, with an old friend.

"You must be Martin," David greeted, "heard you were coming down from Richmond for the week, sure is nice to meet you."

Martin smiled, shaking the man's hand. "Come down as often as I can, it's nice and quiet, a good break from the city."

"You've got that right." Martin is welcomed into the home without question, given a plate and dinner, with as many helpings as wanted. The five sit around the table in conversation once the meal is done, the men discussing the upcoming deer season, David telling Martin to come back down for it. "I've been seeing this big twelve point out in my field every night, you should see it Martin, biggest I've seen in a few years." David leans back in his chair as Anna places a pie down on the table.

"David," she starts cutting the fresh apple pie, the sweet aroma filling the air. "Would you go and get some milk from the icehouse?"

"Oh, but sweetheart, do we really need milk?"

Jen starts laughing, "still scared of the dark?" She turns to her husband, "I don't guess you will go get it either, will you, Roy?"

He shakes his head, "guess we're going without milk."

Martin smiles, "I'll go get it, just point me in the right direction."

Anna gestures toward the creek, "just across the little footbridge, thank you, Martin."

"Of course, I'll be right back." He grabs a lantern from the porch, heading a few steps away from the house toward the creek, the footbridge just ahead. "Not bad at all," he mutters, reaching the little bridge to cross the water.

He raises the flickering lantern into the darkness, his eyes adjusting to see a figure on the other side of the creek. "Hello?" He raises the lantern more, squinting his eyes to see the figure of a man. "Trying to scare me, David?" He laughs, but then his eyes adjust completely to see that the figure is without a head.

He blinks, his heart rate picking up as he runs back to the cabin, slamming the door shut once he is safely inside. "Do you prank visitors often?" He asks the group, hoping they start laughing; they don't.

"What are you talking about?" Anna asks him, putting slices of pie on dessert plates.

"There, there was a man over there." He puts the lantern down on the kitchen table. "I swear to you, there was a man on the other side of that bridge, and he didn't have a head."

Their eyes widen, "you mean it?" David asks him.

Martin nods, "I'm not scared of a thing, but there was a headless man across your creek, I swear it to you."

Anna hands him a slice of apple pie. "Roy was right, we don't need milk."

They eat in silence this time, and as Martin leaves the little cabin with Jen and Roy he spares a glance back at the creek, looking away before he can see the figure again.

*

My father smiles, laughing at how scared he sees I am now. "My uncle used to tell me that story, said he would never go out to the icehouse after that when he visited."

"It's a real story?" I asked.

LAUREN K. NIXON

“Sure is, happened years ago, before I was even born, but one thing about that story hasn’t changed. Martin saw a man without a head that night.” He hands me a marshmallow to roast over the fire, “don’t worry though, there is nothing to be scared of.”

I nod, sparing a glance at the creek in my own backyard.

SCATA WATER

There’s a dance at the hall, the music flowing out into the windless night. I am twenty-one and still haven’t learned how to play well with others. The rest of them went straight after dinner, eager, since we can’t drink at the guesthouse. I volunteered to wash the dishes, so I could have some time apart. By the time I set out, twilight has fallen (it is never truly night, not here, not now, so close to summer’s zenith). The sky is awash with fading orange, giving way to deepening teal. It feels like another world.

It’s not far, barely eight minutes from door-to-door. As I pass through the garden, the honeysuckle scent briefly transporting me home to my grandparents’ garden, I am powerfully homesick. The aroma takes up residence in my clothes, like an old friend, as I stroll down the garden and onto the rocky sand. East Road runs along the bay of Uyeasound, the island of Uyea a dark, lumpen mass to my right, ruled by otters and seabirds who make their homes among the ruined crofts. It protects the bay from the rage of the North Atlantic, enough for salmon farms and bright, wind-buffed gardens nestling beside the white-walled homes.

The sea is slumbering tonight, teasing the bladderwracked shore with gentle laps, singing softly to itself of older times, of raiding Danes and herring fleets and smallpox. I am no stranger to these stories; they hold no fear for me tonight.

I pass the open maw of Greenwell’s Böd, then duck as an aggravated skua is startled out of it, shooting past me like a spectre, screaming; rage made form. I quicken my pace. I’ve seen what those beaks can do. I am fortunate. The aggrieved party settles as soon as I cross the lane, plucking its feathers back into order with an air of ruffled arrogance. By the time I reach the end of the fishing cottages and the wall of the tiny harbour, I can take my time again.

My head is full of the things I'll do tomorrow, one of our rare days off. I'm thinking of heading to Lund, to see the standing stone and the Viking church and the ruined house everyone swears up and down is haunted. (I'll see a pod of orcas, too, and Liam will throw me – the easy target – into the sea, not expecting immediate revenge). I can hear the music from the hall now; someone is playing S-Club and I grimace at the dissonance in this place of marsh and salt and wide-open sky.

This stretch of road is a spit between the sea to my right and Scata Water to my left, where freshwater mixes with storm-born salt-wash. The scent of peat warring with decaying seaweed, just across the road. The sea has been kind, of late, and the grass on the bank is tall, almost to my waist. It is still water, deep and black, and I do not like it, even in the day.

It's entirely irrational, I know: on the far side of the hall there is a bigger stretch of freshwater, Easter Loch, and that's fine. Scata Water – barely a puddle compared to its neighbours – is eerie in ways I cannot explain.

I am a third of the way along when I hear it: a small sound, almost a sigh.

I consign it to the cry of a sea bird – I know they nest in the grass along the bank – or some small mammal, snuffling around the water. There are otters further north, scuttling sinuously through flotsam and seaweed as thick and heavy as wet cloth.

The second time I hear it, it's louder, somewhere to my left, and this time it's more of a moan.

Probably, I should run, but I stop, listening hard in the stillness.

Ahead, there's the music from the hall; to my right, the quiet rhythm of small waves; to my left . . . nothing. Nothing, because behind me there are footfalls.

Now, I have been here long enough that I know the sounds of the island. If someone had been behind me, I would have heard them before – and there are no houses, no paths after the fishing cottages, which are empty this week. Renovations, before the tourist season starts.

I do not turn, because I don't want to see the absence of a person behind me. I set off again, a little swifter than before, measuring the distance to the tiny car park in front of Uyeasound Hall in quickening breaths.

She is keeping pace with me.

And it is a she, I am sure of it. I can see her in my mind's eye, all dark hair and sightless eyes, bloated skin stained by the peat.

The pool reaches its widest point just before the hall and for a moment I let my eyes slide left. There are footprints on the water. Little patches of double oval ripples, two steps behind me.

She sobs as we reach the road, but still, I do not turn.

I'm sorry, I whisper, before breaking into a jog across the gravel car park, dodging between salt-flecked cars. I duck inside the hall and make a beeline to the bar, where I can put a wall between me and the wraith.

*

Later, someone tells us about the woman who drowned and the husband who held her under, and none of us know if it is true.

For the first time since I arrived, I stay with the group until morning.

TWO:
WHERE BLIND WHITE FISH
FERRIED

LARRY SCHUG

MOONLIGHT IN A COYOTE'S EYE

When my soul goes the way of all souls,
The journey on which it leaves my body behind,
I would like you to strap the husk of what once was me
To the back of an unbridled burro,
Set it loose to wander a nameless canyon at Ghost Ranch,
Hopefully to be attacked by pack of coyotes,
Though I want the mule to escape, this not yet being its turn.
I desire my body to be torn apart and eaten
In order that I might have a voice
Worthy of howling at the moon with new brothers and sisters.
I want my skeleton to shine awhile beneath a full yellow moon
Rising from behind the silhouette of a dark mesa
Desert mice chewing my bones to dust and wind having its way.
I hope for Georgia O'Keefe, in another go round,
to capture the light in a coyote's eye, a painting with no name.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

ON BODY DOUBLING

Fall's first rain & LEGO freckling the table—
my daughter holds up the beginning

of an owl: only the torso & one wing.

She quips, *'Oh look! I can't fly or see! Or smell
or eat or sing—'*

& I imagine the truth of it: a night

after being mauled, too much time spent inside
someone's poem. I sing for her, I taste

the fruit & freshest kill, I look the night
in the eye & give chase—

My daughter continues—headless—& adds another wing.

PATRICK DRUGGAN

BOYS GAMES

We were running through the trees
playing tig. I was young enough
to be startled, when I saw it,
thinking it was a bear, and frightened.
Johnny pished himself.

It hadn't started to rot.
There was no smell.
Its wounds drying
brown in the sun.
Throbbing shiny blackness,
in the warm air,
through the thickening light
crawling into holes
that shouldn't be there,
just the quiet of the Mass,
the flies laying eggs,
the oppressive heat,
the trace of iron.

Propped up amongst the branches,
as if standing, or maybe sitting,
high above the winter flood.
Peter says, *look away, it drowned,*

and I can't. I see the slash marks,
the guts, spilled,
not reaching the ground,
the nose gone,
the noose tight,
the front paws cut off, the back too.
An indelible pigment on memory
amongst its green leaves.

I asked him on his death bed
if what we'd saw that day,
over fifty years before, was real
Yes,
and no more.

JANET BOWDAN

"BEAVER ATTACKS SWIMMER"

the headline our local paper went with
over the fold: who wouldn't
read on, especially since just last Sunday
we'd gone out on Lake Warner
in our canoe, my in-laws in their kayaks,
we'd seen the water erupt
and hoped it was beavers
maybe even otters
though when we got closer
we realized they were carp
enormous, invasive, big enough
and multiple enough to overturn a kayak
if they worked together
in some kind of carpnado plot
but even just bumping into each other
if they were in the wrong place
would upset a paddleboarder into the water.
We thought we preferred beavers to carp
is what I'm getting at. The paper said
the beaver tested positive for rabies
but the swimmer was recovering,
the carp still wrestling each other for supremacy
and lake domination though they'll need to compete
with a big snapping turtle and at least one heron.

WAITING FOR YOU

Kano woke with blood in his eyes, his rage was so great.

Wrongly imprisoned by a *benevolent* monarch.

He spat at the term. Simpering coward. He was ashamed to call the king his father.

Now that he was awake, he had plans, sure his ancestors were turning over in their ancient burial places to know what a mockery their successor had made of their society.

Kano inhaled long and deep enough to saturate his lungs with precious, saline-tinged H₂O. Fresh and rejuvenating. It was a taste he remembered well.

If he were not a water-breathing creature, the powerful prince of Kaimana, his sleep chamber would have been a watery grave like that of the passengers he had extinguished.

Kano stretched his arms now as far as he could, which was not much. That he could move his body at all beneath where his father had interred him, was a small victory in itself.

How long had he slept? How many ships had he been *deprived* of demolishing?

His last wreck had been inspired, memorable.

He'd shifted to one of his many forms, his most preferable to effect maximal damage the most efficiently. He'd risen from the murky depths of the sea, a blood moon reflecting dark orange off its surface. He'd wrapped his many tentacles around the ship before squeezing it in an unrelenting embrace. Finally, he'd released the vessel and let it sink beneath the water, the damaged-beyond-recognition hull seeming to sizzle and disintegrate in the burnished glow.

Even now he could hear the blood-curdling screams his actions had wrought and he smiled to remember the carnage,

pleasure expanding his heart.

His father had decreed a hundred-year imprisonment, which was but the blink of an eye for a long-lived Kaimanan. Still, had that much time lapsed already? It felt like only yesterday when he was put to sleep and buried below the ship he had destroyed.

A humane sentence. Civilized. What was so *humane* or *civilized* about humans?

Taking lives was not something that he had not done many times before. It was not something that his ancestors had not done many times before him.

In this, he was much like his brethren—sharks, the Orca, the Kraken and the Ottoia. They killed humans, in far greater numbers than him and much more indiscriminately. It was their nature. Not good or evil, just what they were. Just what they did.

At least he killed with a purpose, the human offenders' deaths justified. His sense of right and wrong satisfied. It wasn't revenge, it was virtuous.

Land dwellers, specifically humans, were the dregs of the planet, perhaps the entire universe. They destroyed themselves, other creatures and Earth with their wars, hunting and meat consumption. They killed mammals and other marine life as indiscriminately with their whaling, oil spills, commercial fishing and their pollution of the oceans and seas.

With the exception of a compassionate and conscious minority, the human race was a greedy and selfish breed bent on destruction. Reprobates that deserved nothing less than the annihilation they courted. If Kano contributed to the cause then so be it.

The king, however, had ordered a stop to the wholesale destruction, the taking of human lives. His father was much more enlightened than previous monarchs. He was much more forgiving than his father before him. The king believed that it was time for change, to coexist, or at the very least, not destroy the land dwellers. Balance had to be forged or all—ocean, sea and land dwellers—would perish.

Kano's mistake had been thinking himself exempt from the

king's decree.

In handing down his punishment, his father had proven otherwise, choosing to make an example of Kano. The king wanted to show their people that no one was above the law and all who did not follow the new guiding principles of the Kaimanan—that all life was valuable—would be punished.

The voice that had awakened him was definitely female, but it was not his mother.

Kano strained to hear her now, just one word, one thought. She was far away but her spirit was strong—probably a rare, gifted human—and it called to him, rousing a longing for something he had not known he needed or even wanted . . . a mate.

My Delia.

She, however, was not alone. She had a male in her life, a male to whom her heart already belonged.

Her mate.

Kano would rectify this.

First the king. Then this Dy-lan.

*

Cordelia Farrell woke with a scream on her lips, thrashing the bedcovers, in a cold sweat.

It had been a long time since she'd had such an intense vision.

The image of the man was at once vivid and indistinct, as if he teetered at the opposite end of a short tunnel lit by strobe lights, just out of reach.

Did she *want* to reach him?

A stranger, not her husband, as diametrically different from her spouse as a slaving, rabid beast was to a healthy human.

As much as the stranger reminded her of some of her most sought-after merman sculptures—unsettling and visceral, the critics called them, as far away from the Disney fantasy as she could get—her dream morphed from disturbing to nightmarish in the span of a breath.

One minute Cordelia was in the tunnel, unwilling to move forward, unable to retreat. The next minute she was spinning in a vortex, tossed around so violently, she thought all her bones would break or she would throw up, whichever mercifully came first. When she finally stopped spinning it was to a bloody kaleidoscope culminating with Dylan murdering their newborn son.

He had snatched the bawling infant from her arms after she'd delivered him, a baby with her caramel skin and her husband's blond hair and blue eyes.

Weak and bleeding, the afterbirth yet delivered, Cordelia crawled to her husband, helplessly watching as he wound he umbilical cord around the baby's neck, pulling both ends in opposite directions until the infant's cries tapered off to pitiful whimpers and then nothing. When all was silent, Dylan handed the baby back to her with two words: "Not mine."

Shocked, Cordelia held the lifeless bundle, her little boy's head lolling at a grotesque angle, neck obviously broken, his small tongue peeking through his blue parted lips as if he were trying to take one more breath.

"Baby, baby, calm down. You're safe." Non-dream Dylan was there, gathering her in his arms, kissing her forehead.

She couldn't let him go today. She knew she wouldn't see him again.

She'd never shared this facet of her life, that she had premonitions. It wasn't exactly first-date conversation or even we're-married-now-let's-share-the-rest-of-our-lives conversation. She didn't know if she'd ever want to share that side of herself with him, though she suspected he'd accept it like he did everything else about her because he was that supportive and loving.

"Do you really have to go diving today?"

Dylan quirked a brow. "Where's this coming from?"

She shrugged.

How to explain when she had never begrudge him his passion before, in fact encouraged it though she disliked the pastime for herself? How to tell him without telling him?

Being quirky and a free spirit was one thing, but a kooky

woman who had premonitions was quite another.

She glanced at the flowered print sundress hanging outside the closet door as if to distance herself from the bloodshed in her dream. It was the perfect match to the navy-and-light-blue classic board shorts her husband was wearing.

Couldn't get more stereotypical newlywed than that. Except for the whole infanticide dream. Kinda put a crimp in the whole starting a life together optimism.

Without responding to his concern, she slid out of bed on her way to the verandah only to have her husband hook an arm around her trim waist to pull her in for a proper hug and kiss.

"So, do you think we made a little Farrell last night?"

Curious, she gave him the side-eye.

Dylan had never hidden the fact he didn't want to start a family right away. But last night when she'd suggested they not use a condom, he hadn't argued. He knew she wasn't on any other birth control and was fine being the responsible partner. He didn't want her putting anything in her body that made her uncomfortable or was otherwise injurious.

Though he hadn't used a condom during last night's marathon session of honeymoon sex, he had pulled out at the last minute. Knowing this method wasn't very effective—about as effective as the rhythm method—made Cordelia wonder what Dylan's end game was.

Was he now ready to have a baby? And if so, was it just to please her? She didn't want him compromising his principles, but shouldn't she be glad that he was willing to for her?

Cordelia put her hand over Dylan's resting on her still flat belly, closed her eyes and swallowed against the rising bile at the vision of their baby's tongue lolling from his mouth. Was that a warning that they *shouldn't* have a baby? Or that their baby would die horribly, prematurely, something like SIDS? Would she miscarry instead or would Dylan ask her to have an abortion?

"Time will tell," she said, purposefully vague.

She'd been having prophetic dreams for as long as she could remember. They weren't always literal, many open to

interpretation, but like her gut, she trusted them.

She didn't know what the baby and Dylan's diving had in common, but would have loved for him to cancel the trip, stay with her in their stateroom, wrapped in each other's arms for the day, like newlyweds should.

Would that keep him safe or just postpone the inevitable?

*

It was the perfect day for a wreck dive: sunny, clear and mild.

The water was so pure with the morning sun sparkling off the calm ripples, Dylan could see the RMS Rhone wreckage just peering down past the surface.

He knew Cori and the other snorkelers on board the *Morning Star* would enjoy all the colorful fish, coral and other sea life. He and one other diver on the cat, however, would be going deeper, at least eighty feet, to swim through and explore.

He wasn't worried about leaving his wife with the rest of the snorkelers. Cori made friends easily and enjoyed engaging in pursuits separate from Dylan's.

It was her independent and spontaneous spirit that had attracted him from the beginning.

Today, however, Cori seemed hesitant to part.

She wrapped her arms around his waist from behind but since he had on his shorty wetsuit already, he missed the skin to skin contact. "I'll miss you."

"I'll be back before you know it."

"I know you, Diego."

He laughed at the nickname, twisting in her embrace to return her hug. "If it eases your mind, I'll stick close."

Cori looked toward the cat's stern where Dylan's diving partner, Clive waited. She waved at him and he waved back. "I don't want you to disappoint your buddy."

"You're more important to me than my buddy."

"I know." She leaned in and tenderly kissed him on the lips. "Go. Have fun."

Dylan wavered for only a moment before he returned her kiss. "I love you."

"Love you too."

Once in the water, Dylan and Clive went through the five-point descent before smoothly drifting down and swimming toward the wreck.

It felt eerie knowing what had happened and how the passengers had died during a routine journey when a freak hurricane erupted and sank the ship.

Dylan shook off the unnerving vibe, however, determined not to let Cori's unease rub off on him. He had never felt more at home or comfortable anywhere on earth than when he was in the water doing what he loved.

Dylan had tried to describe to Cori the feelings of tranquility and weightlessness when he dived. Though she loved swimming and other water sports, she didn't have the same passion for diving as did Dylan. She had stopped short of the open water dive that would have garnered her certification and nothing Dylan said could convince her to finish her lessons or that she'd enjoy the pastime as much as he did.

Dylan and Clive now swam around the stern, the shallowest part of the wreck at about forty feet, passing the propeller area and both rubbing the lucky porthole three times.

Scores of aquatic life abounded and Dylan stared in wonder at the stingrays, turtles, green morays and large schools of fish they passed en route through the wreck. The feeling of amazement never got old when he went diving and probably never would. There was always something new to experience, marvelous marine life and other sights to behold.

After about thirty minutes, Clive gave him the signal that he was going down so they both headed to the bow, the deeper and more intact part of the wreck at about eighty feet.

They swam around and then through the algae- and coral-encrusted hull.

The further inside they went the more creeped out Dylan felt.

The frame of the wreck looked like a ribcage and made it seem as if he was swimming inside a corpse—not even a human body, but an alien body—rather than an inanimate object that had taken more than a hundred people to their deaths.

He had caught the stories about the wreck being haunted and some divers claiming to have heard the screams of the dead passengers or feeling the touch of ghostly hands.

Dylan had put it down to decompression sickness, but now he wasn't so sure.

He saw Clive giving him the end the dive signal, and checked his watch, surprised to discover so much time had elapsed.

Dylan responded with a thumbs-up when he saw Clive's eyes go saucer-wide.

He knew something was behind him but before he could react, several long black tentacles enfolded him.

Dylan's first thought was this must be what it felt like in the grip of a huge anaconda, except that there were several appendages instead of one coiling tight around his body and smothering him in their embrace.

The more he struggled, the tighter the tentacles got around him and the further they pulled him. Away from life as he knew it, away from Cori and their baby.

He knew then that his wife was pregnant with their son, could see the baby boy clear as day and grieved for the child he would never have a chance to see grow up.

The creature squeezed, inhibiting all movement, as if the thought of Cori's and Dylan's baby enraged it and it thought to terminate the source of his displeasure.

As if it was jealous. Of Dylan or the baby? Or both?

My *Delia*.

Dylan struggled to breathe, each inhalation a losing fight for survival.

No.

Yessss, Dy-lan. Mine.

The tentacles constricted until Dylan heard and felt his bones break, every last one of them shattered.

Dylan thought there was nothing more the creature could do to him, that it was finished with his body, but he was wrong.

He felt the internal attack on his organs and blood, a complete incursion until he no longer owned his flesh or bones.

They were becoming one.

Except Dylan knew he would not be around to see the final product.

The last thing he saw through a haze of unbearable agony before he was completely absorbed by the creature, was his buddy swimming toward him and one of the tentacles that held Dylan snaking out to knock Clive away.

He must have traveled twenty feet which seemed an impossible feat under water. That's how powerful and fast the creature was.

Dylan's vision dimmed from red to gray and before it finally went black, he wondered if Clive would make it to the surface to tell everyone what had happened.

But who would believe him?

*

This was the third head count the crew had taken and they were still coming up short.

Cordelia didn't know what Clive's husband Dan was thinking, but she was worried.

Though she knew Dylan and Clive were responsible and experienced divers, it wasn't impossible that they had lost track of time or even their bearings. The likelihood of either occurring without some external forces causing the deviation, however, was infinitesimal.

Which brought Cordelia back to her worst-case scenario: Something had happened to Dylan and it had something to do with her earlier dream.

"I'm sure they'll be up any minute," Dan said.

He didn't sound confident and Cordelia didn't blame him.

Then she noticed the bubbles at the cat's stern and both she

and Dan uttered sighs of relief until only one diver burst through the surface and at an entirely too fast rate to be safe.

Something had happened down there!

Cordelia, Dan and several other passengers and crew rushed to the back of the cat to help the diver onboard.

Cordelia noticed the diver's ginger hair right away and knew he wasn't Dylan before they got off his cracked scuba mask.

Clive snatched the regulator from his mouth, convulsively gasping and coughing while his partner Dan held the other man's head in his lap and tried to soothe him.

The first mate, a trained EMT, rushed over to administer oxygen first aid.

In the background, Cordelia heard the captain calling in to shore, requesting an ambulance for one, possibly two near-drowning victims.

She knelt beside Clive. "Where's Dylan?" Her voice hadn't wobbled and she gave herself props for sounding incredibly calm under the circumstances.

For several long minutes Clive's mouth moved without saying anything then he just blurted, "He's gone."

"What do you *mean* he's *gone*?" There went her calm. "What happened? Did a shark get him?" Cordelia looked back at where Clive had first surfaced, reluctantly searching for a body or body parts, or blood. She didn't know whether she was relieved or disappointed at not seeing either.

Cordelia grabbed the front of Clive's wetsuit. "Where's my husband?"

By this time all the passengers were huddled around her, Dan and Clive and when the first mate tried to put an oxygen mask over Clive's mouth and nose, Cordelia caught her wrist.

"I gave him the end the dive signal and he gave me a thumb's up. Then this . . . something oozed up from the hull of the ship. It was like . . . a viscous black liquid or smoke or . . . I don't know!" Clive grabbed his hair with both hands. "These . . . tentacles . . . lots of tentacles . . . they got him . . . He-he disappeared. I tried to reach him. I tried . . ."

"Are you saying either an octopus or an oil slick took my husband? Are there even octopus big enough to do that in these waters? What do you mean an *octopus* took Dylan?"

"He's delirious. It's the bends talking," the first mate said, trying again to put the oxygen mask over Clive's face.

This time Cordelia let her.

"We need to get him to shore," Dan said.

"We need to find my husband!"

The captain's wife put her arm around Cordelia.

She knew she was hysterical, and the memory of her dream along with the ghost stories and historical accounts the crew had shared about the wreck on the way to the site, swirled inside Cordelia's head, making her nauseous. Or was that already the baby doing the latter?

The captain's young daughter spotted the bubbles first and pointed toward the water. "I think that's him! I see him!"

Dylan's wheat-blond head broke the surface a second later and he swam over to the cat, movements controlled and graceful, like nothing was wrong, not panicked like Clive had been.

"Dylan!" Cordelia rushed over as he climbed up the stairs.

He had already removed his scuba mask and regulator and his smile made her heart sing, the same way it had the very first time they met in college more than a decade ago.

She flung herself at him, sinking into his embrace as his strong arms came around her. He held her for a while before drawing back to put a hand on her belly and smile.

"My Delia."

THREE:
SHARKS' TEETH
& WHALES' EARBONES

ANNIE SULLIVAN

SHARK TOOTH HUNTING

Crumbled dirt falls through clamped fingers
As I search for you.
Stones roll away.
Bones are unearthed.
But you are elusive.

Your jagged little points hide
Like unpressed diamonds
Amidst this valley of once ocean-filled expanse

Then, as my fingers sink in
As smooth as shell
You are there

JANET BOWDAN

THE SHARK LEAVES A SHARK-MOUTH-SHAPED WOUND

We are having dinner indoors! with friends
all fully or half vaxxed, the boys playing outside
and one friend somehow brings up *Happy Days*,
the origin of jumping the shark; he mimics the writers'
room as they try to come up with a fresh idea
after umpteen seasons of 1950s era nostalgia
saying, *Hey, I know, let's have—a shark! And Fonzie
in his leather jacket, he can, I don't know—jump
the shark!*

Does it seem too ridiculous for life to throw stuff
at people this way? So absurd it takes a team of writers
after 10 seasons to come up with these ideas? Like,
who'd come up with a pandemic in the 21st century?

Possibly at that moment the phone
rings, though we're talking and there's pie for dessert.
So we get my dad's message afterwards—
my mother "in hospital but improving some"—
he left it then and supplemented with an email
including medical info, Latin names and
translations, and the phone number
at the hospital. Which you'd think would be
enough for one week: my mother telling me

I don't have to visit her *every* day, and my telling her,
I'm in the neighborhood anyway to check on Dawn's cat
while Dawn's visiting family in South Carolina,
and Blair saying, what *is* this?
Of course you visit your mother in the hospital!

But then this morning we get a text from Dawn
that her brother was knocked off his sailboard yesterday
maybe it hit the shark or maybe the shark hit it
to knock him off, but he climbed back on
and she's a little in shock after applying pressure
to his leg to stop the bleeding and what could
have happened if he had not been able to somehow
miraculously get himself back to shore.

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN

DOESTHE DOG DIE.COM

“‘Monster’ is a relative term.
To a canary, a cat is a monster.
We’re just used to being the cat.”
—*Jurassic World*

This site has saved me more times than it should,
but still, I must know: do they die at the end even if

they were the villain?

A childhood game of *Never Have I Ever* marked me
as the odd one when I couldn’t see

the shark or the crocodile or the velociraptor
as the villain, but as

an apex predator doing its job. A violent puzzle piece
in the ecological food chain. The tear & the stitch

in the sail. How they laughed
when I cried over those deaths. Though I’m aware

of the Trolley problem, the blood still
haunts. I remember the dog from *The Road Virus*

Heads North & Secret Window, Secret Garden, the horse
torn wide like canvas in *The Walking Dead*—but

I also needed to know about *The Meg*, its mistaken whale, & later
the Tyrannosaurus Rex turned prey. *Jaws*’ grand finale

that belonged in a haunted elevator scene. That swarm
of bees who could have enjoyed bright red monarda

in another life. Old Yeller & Cujo & Max, who deserved to know

what was coming for them—and why—the understanding
sinking into their eyes, teeth bared against the moment

of being written out of the script.

ANNIE SULLIVAN

ONE BITE

One hook. That's all it took. It's what my mother always said.

But one bite wasn't supposed to hurt. Not when there's free tuna floating at the end of it.

But it did hurt.

The moment my mouth sunk into the meaty flesh of the immobilized fish, the metal ground its way through my gills and into my skin. Pain rippled through me as I thrashed out of reflex. But the hook snared deeper, tearing through sensitive slits.

I roared, sending out a sea of bubbles.

I jerked my head away, but the hook smiled its jagged grin and came with me.

I coughed and choked, trying to pull away, but the hook fought back. It twisted deeper with every turn I took, burrowing into me like an eel slithering side to side into its hole.

I couldn't let it take me though. Images of my mother birthing me, me eating my favorite type of turtle, and me floating through the deepest caverns I could find swam through my mind. I couldn't leave that all behind.

With all the strength I had, I slammed my tail side to side, wrenching my gills and head back. But the hook didn't give. And as my strength drained, it ripped me toward the surface.

No. This couldn't be happening. Not over one measly tuna.

I fought. I flounced. I tore away. But I was only delaying the inevitable. We both knew that. And yet, I still couldn't give in. It wasn't in my nature.

When my tail and fins were too weak to continue, my teeth tore against the wire cutting into my mouth, grinding into its steely

shell with no effect as each winded gasp of air flitted through my gills. Again and again I tried, but each bite came slower and slower. And I got closer and closer toward The Boat. The one we all know brings aliens. Brings danger.

As I neared the rippling sunlight glaring off the white-tipped waves, I could just make out their shapes. Aliens. Every one of them. And not a fin to be seen. Except mine. That's what they'd come for. It's what they always come for.

Their fear and excitement told me so. It leaked into the water faster than the oil from their engine. It oozed around me, suffocating me with its heavily hormonal stench.

And then nothing.

No smells.

No waves.

No water.

Just nothing as my body heaved free of the refreshing ocean that was my home and landed hard on a platform.

Instantly, a heat I'd never known surrounded me, pulsing against my skin, threatening to break through, to burst my heart with each beat. And the aliens weren't far behind.

Poking, prodding, sampling.

I choked on the stagnant water they forced across my gills to keep me alive as they tortured me.

I clamped my eye slits closed, hoping that when I opened them again I'd be alone. But no. Every time they were still there.

How long could this go on? How long would I have to lie here, my deep ocean just out of sight?

With one burning pain, my fin seared with a fiery pain. And then they yanked my water, my source of life away. I took one last hot breath as the final droplets slide free from my gills, but before the slits on my eyes inched closed, I was sliding once more.

Coolness surrounded me as I was reborn into the water. I choked in a breath. And then two.

Home. I was home.

I lazed there for a moment. Could this be real? I swam in circles. Every fin was accounted for. I'd survived.

KEN GOLDMAN

SHARK'S TOOTH

And as soon as that realization sunk in, I swam as fast and as hard as I could, leaving the boat behind.

But with every slice of my fin through the water, I realized something was wrong.

I wasn't alone.

Something shiny and hard was clunking against my dorsal fin. The aliens had attached something to my back. What it was, I couldn't say. It didn't hurt exactly. It was just there. Watching. Waiting. Reporting back to them.

I tried to turn, to bite it off, but I couldn't get close to it.

All I could do was just keep going. I was luckier than most after all. At least I'd kept my fins.

And as I returned to my favorite caverns in the deep, I couldn't worry about what they'd put on me. There was nothing I could do about it. So instead, I just swished my tail extra slow, enjoying the view as though it were my first time swimming wild and free.

Because for the first time, I did know what it felt like to be free.

Benjamin Crabb enjoyed sweating, and today the sweat on his forehead made him feel especially alive. The salty air that swirled off Key West complemented the moisture beneath his shirt, making Benjamin feel forty years younger. To see him preparing the complex rigging of the Sonia's Smile was to believe that age was only a state of mind. The triangular shark's tooth around his neck glittered in the sun upon its golden chain as he stepped onto the flying bridge.

"Nella! The tanks! Would you check the hoses for me? And the pressure? And—"

"—And the six cold ones? Not to worry, Dad. Done, done, and done!"

Benjamin peeked into the cooler just to be sure. There would be one hell of a reason to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday if he found the golden treasure he sought today. How many years had he searched for it? How often had he failed? He knew only that it was out there somewhere in the Atlantic, just about seventy nautical miles southeast of the Saddlebunch Keys.

He knew because forty-five years ago, he had left it there.

He checked that the fuel supply of his twin Volvo diesels read 'full' and wiped the glass of the fathometer and radar reflector clean. His thirty-four foot trawler would not fare well if one of those freighters en route to the Gulf Stream crossed the Sonia's path.

Benjamin felt uncomfortable knowing the Coast Guard closely monitored the area surrounding the Keys, and getting around those maritime salvage laws was always tricky. But his age had worked in his favor the last time the USCG boys had stopped

him. Three officers had smiled at the old man in the scuba gear, and one had said something under his breath about Jacques Cousteau being alive and well in Florida. Benjamin had simply smiled back at the young officer.

Behind him on Duval Street the sign to Crabb's Bait and Tackle Shop swung and squealed on its rusted hinges. Benjamin knew how much Nella hated that sound and pictured his daughter gritting her teeth with each swing. He turned to watch her through the store's huge bay window.

Nella seemed too absorbed in her *Cosmopolitan* to be giving much thought to the sign. She looked up at the old man and shrugged. The store had been open for over an hour and there had not been a single customer. She stepped out onto the pier and rolled up her Cosmo into a megaphone.

"Better you should be giving more thought to selling these stinking worms than going out on another one of your excursions. What is it this time? The search for Atlantis? Or maybe Jimmy Hoffa?"

The old man smiled as he watched her. His daughter seemed such a strong woman, much like her mother had been. At thirty-six, clearly Nella did not belong near the smell of any raw fish that wasn't sushi. Yet he had never heard her complain once.

"Already found Hoffa! He's in that barrel next to the blues. Makes for a good chum line!"

Benjamin's smile flickered, but only for a moment. With any luck, by next month the store sign would have another name upon it. Nella might soon be reading her *Cosmopolitan* far removed from the smell of fish parts. Of course, Nella knew nothing of this yet, but that was hardly important.

What was important waited for Benjamin Crabb somewhere deep in the Atlantic. It had been waiting for a very long time.

"Well, wherever you're headed this time, you sure picked a great day for it. Don't know why you'd want to bake in the sun out there when you can celebrate your birthday basking right here under your favorite squeaking sign."

Nella stepped aboard the Sonia, shielding her eyes from the bright sunlight that hit her deck. "Honest, Dad. I worry about you alone in the middle of the ocean, looking for God knows what.

Unless, of course, you got something going with the marlin I don't know about."

"We're just good friends, so never mind the rumors." Benjamin's expression turned serious. He stepped off the bridge, brushed a golden curl from his daughter's forehead and cupped her face in his hands. "Nell', hear me out, will you? This time's going to be different. I can feel it. I'm going to take care of you and little Matt. You know that, don't you? This time when I return, you're going to have it all . . . everything . . . every damned thing you ever—"

Nella placed a finger to her father's lips. "Listen, you old coot. I've already got all the worms I can eat. What more could a girl want?" She kissed his cheek and stepped off the boat. "Okay, Popeye. Beer's in the cooler. Tanks are on board and on 'full'. Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high. Shall I wait dinner or will you be dining with the dolphins?"

"Wait dinner!" Benjamin called out, releasing his line. "You might want to chill some champagne too!" The 55 horses inside each of the diesels kicked in with a roar. "Here's to swimmin' with bowlegged women!"

Nella stood on the pier as Benjamin steered his way out of the slip. She did not wave goodbye as the Sonia's Smile headed for the open sea.

*

Few places are more quiet than upon a calm sea, but Benjamin Crabb knew of one such place. He thought of that place often when he was alone. With the Sonia's engine purring at 25 knots and the La Concha Holiday Inn slipping below the horizon behind him, this moment seemed the appropriate time to think of it. Benjamin could not say whether it was the tune he hummed that had brought the thought, or the thought that had brought the tune to mind. But he hummed it with a determination that made the thought all the more vivid.

The tune formed itself as a wordless hum upon his lips, yet his mind sang the words note for note . . .

"To-morrow shall be, to-morrow shall see, the world only

knows how to-morrow shall belong . . . to us!“

Benjamin's eyes seemed to widen with each note. His lips slowly tightened as he hummed so that his mouth seemed curled in an odd smirk.

“ . . . This day we must wait, this night must abate, but to-morrow shall see, to-morrow shall be . . . ”

As he hummed, he instinctively caressed the shark's tooth that dangled around his neck. It had remained there, close to his chest, for the better part of the last fifty years.

. . . It even dangled around his neck that day many years ago when a young officer dropped a large chest into the Atlantic from his seventeen foot chartered skiff, a very large chest, containing riches beyond his wildest imaginings, beyond anyone's wildest dreams . . .

Benjamin cut off the Sonia's engine and listened from the console as the water lapped against her side. He checked the compass, released the anchor, and reached into the cooler for a cold beer. In a moment he would work. He lay flat on his back upon the deck mat. As he drank, some beer dripped down his chin, but its coolness soothed him. The sun burned into his skin, and Benjamin closed his eyes to await the comforting sweat that would cover his body. The words pounded in his brain.

*“ . . . But to-morrow shall **be**, to-morrow shall **see**, that to-morrow belongs . . .*

*

*. . . to us! **To us!**”* young Officer Klaus Reichmann sang under his breath as he began his morning inspections of the camps. Mornings were always quiet. Distasteful, to be sure, this business of clean-up, yet a job not without certain rewards. The pliers in Reichmann's coat pocket would help in the attainment of those rewards.

Last night's rainfall would make this a messy business today. The resulting mud-coated pile of remains had been given a certain sameness that made the job somewhat less - could the term be applied here?—distracting. Reichmann's work moved quickly enough while he inspected the older males and females. But the younger women had the tendency to impede the officer's efficiency. There was still something so affecting in their faces . . .

in their sweet young, dead faces. But it was not their faces in which Officer Reichmann took so keen an interest.

It was their mouths.

He knew what they called him, and the thought made the task now, while not pleasant, at least tolerable. “There walks The Shark,” and “The bite of the shark is always lethal,” he would hear them whisper. The stories they told throughout the camps, while not altogether true of the young officer, had done nothing to hurt a reputation in which he took pride.

True, as a youth he had taken the tooth, which he now wore on a golden chain around his neck, from the maw of a tiger shark. No need to admit that he had found the creature washed up on a lonely Baltic shore and half-devoured by the gulls.

How appropriate that the tales they told of The Shark had so much to do with teeth. For there were other tales that were true. One had only to observe the dried blood upon Reichmann's pliers to learn how true they were.

So many with their mouths open . . . So wide open . . .

Dark mud clung to the young officer's boots as he inspected the muddied corpses. He wondered if their last words had been screams.

Reichmann reached into his coat pocket and felt the cold steel of his pliers. He studied the half dozen piles of muddied flesh. Today it would be difficult to distinguish the old from the young, the males from the females.

There were many piles of older ones today, and they yielded the most treasures for the simplest efforts. The younger gums, being stronger, had a tendency to resist the pliers, and often the teeth came out only when the gums came with them. This made the business of separating the tooth itself from its golden interior much more tedious, and often the younger ones possessed healthy teeth that had required no need of repair, teeth which yielded no treasures.

“Come. . . come . . . Out with you! No need to be so stubborn!”

One had to search to be certain. It was much like the process of finding pearls. One had to crack many oysters to find even a single pearl.

The Shark had come prepared to crack many such oysters today, and to crack them first. A sharp eye could detect a small

golden glimmer even amid the most badly decayed molars. Some of his bounty he would report to the Offizier. He would hand him the small leather pouch and smile.

As for the rest . . . The fruits of his past efforts could be found locked in a secret chest with the initials K.R. beneath the floorboards of his bunker, safe and secure from the prying eyes of the other officers.

Mud . . . so much damned mud . . .

Someday he would melt his gold into coins. Or perhaps he would create some bracelets and baubles for the right woman when there would be time to think of such matters. Today he must provide for that day. Tomorrow would provide time enough for the rest.

“ . . . Tomorrow shall be . . . »

Reichmann hummed a verse of the song as he stepped forward. He did not cease humming as he moved through the rotting piles. His thumb and forefinger extended into the mouth of the skeletal woman at his feet.

“Mrs. Goldstein, you are not looking so well this morning. And is this your husband beside you? I cannot tell with all this mud. “

The Shark showed his teeth as he smiled . . .

*

Benjamin Crabb awoke covered in sweat. The late afternoon sun had turned the color of burnt gold, as had the color of the old man's skin. Without checking his watch, Benjamin knew the time had come to get to work.

“Tomorrow will be ours, my sweet Nella. Just as I promised,” he spoke aloud, as he watched the waves heave below him, as if each wave contained that promise. He opened the cooler and popped the top off a Heineken. He raised the can toward the sky. “And to you, my Sonia, and to the dreams we might have shared.”

He finished the beer without it leaving his lips. He held the empty can to his cheek for a moment, savoring its coolness, then allowed it to drop to his side as he sat upon the mat. Perhaps just a moment longer. To reflect.

Benjamin reached into the cooler again. Another beer would

bring the memories quickly. He caressed the can even as he drank. The memories came . . .

. . . of his Sonia's smile, the most radiant smile Officer Klaus Reichmann had ever seen. The kind of smile meant to melt the soul as well as the heart. The kind of smile that could melt even the soul of a shark.

But that would not be necessary. The Shark was dead, as dead as those who lay in the muddied heaps of the camps. Or so the rumors had stated. Some had said the young officer had smiled as he pointed the revolver into his mouth. Others claimed his smile had remained even after he had pulled the trigger.

Reichmann himself had often smiled hearing the story of his death. He thought of it on the day he had plunged into the Atlantic, the day he had followed a large chest as it sank to the bottom. His golden treasure would wait here for him—if necessary, for years—hidden on the ocean's floor.

But it would not be Klaus Reichmann who would reclaim it. Nor would Klaus Reichmann be returning to shore on that day.

As the rumors had stated, The Shark was dead. The shark's tooth was not. From that day onward it would hang from the neck of Benjamin Crabb. Sonia had never so much as heard the name of Officer Klaus Reichmann. Benjamin had sworn to himself that she never would.

“I love you, Benjamin. I shall always love you. And shall I tell you why?”

Benjamin smiled across forty-five years with the smile that had once belonged to a young German officer.

“There is no need. I already know. It is for my strudel and cheese. I am one of your few lovers who does not give you gas.”

“No, Benjamin,” Sonia answered, unable to restrain her smile. “It is because you are one of my many lovers who makes me laugh. And as for your strudel . . .”

The soul of Klaus Reichmann had died, but the heart of Benjamin Crabb lived. It had been given life by a smile that now traveled across the years back to him.

*

"... To the dreams we might have shared," Benjamin whispered. He tossed the empty beer can over the side, and went below to get into his wetsuit. He imagined how ridiculous he must look struggling with the heavy air tank at his back. Nella had once told him he had looked like an aging hunchback trying to maintain his balance.

Behind the amused grin of his daughter lived the soul of her mother. The smile did not die with her. Nor had the dream died of reclaiming the treasure that the young Officer Reichmann had left behind so many years ago somewhere in these depths as a gift from the past to the future.

The past does not die, thought Benjamin as he clutched the shark's tooth in his fist. As he had done so often he studied the chart he had marked and penciled in the day's diving location. He checked the hose assembly, bit hard on the mouthpiece and secured his face mask. Still grinning from behind it, Benjamin Crabb plunged into the sea to reclaim his gift.

The water seemed especially clear today, for there were other times when he could not see bottom until he was practically standing upon it. Today the Atlantic treated Benjamin to an underwater panorama, making the search a much simpler task. If his treasure were anywhere near, today he would surely find it. Nella had filled the tanks, and should another dive be necessary, he would have enough for over one and a half hours. The water that lay south of the Keys could be especially deep.

This was an unusually long plunge, and despite the water's clarity, Benjamin did not see bottom for several minutes. A school of rainbow darters cleared a path for him as he descended. How easy to become distracted surrounded by such beauty, but better if he were not. One had to be alert for the job at hand.

And one had to be alert for danger. The ocean's floor contained as much menace as it did beauty. One often had to choose blindness to ignore its beauty. Distraction would not do. He reached for the flashlight in his pouch and snapped it on.

The faces of the young women . . . the faces . . . hard to concentrate . . . hard to be efficient . . .

Benjamin's foot touched bottom. A swirl of mud encircled him.

Is that your husband, Mrs. Goldstein? . . . So much mud . . .

Where to look? Benjamin's eyes searched the floor of swirlingsand. The light's beams sent a nearby school of pencil-shaped minnows skittering out of its path while a bluestripe drifted directly into it. Benjamin turned slowly, extending the flashlight. Formless shapes moved in and out of its track as he studied the sandy bottom. He could see the Sonia's danforth anchor as a shimmering blur resting upon a darkened pile of sand, while a curious rosefish explored it.

Foolish old man! Why are you here? The thought always came at this time. This was like searching for a lost coin in the Atlantic. And he was devoting a lifetime to the search. Foolish. . . Insane! . . . Perhaps it would be best to leave his treasure as a gift for the fish that swam at his feet.

Over forty-five years . . . Buried . . . Lost . . . Or perhaps found by someone else . . . Foolish old man . . . !

Yet there was something different this time, something that was not like the other times. Something out of place.

The anchor! The darkened pile of sand upon which it rested! Quickly, Benjamin spun around and directed the light's beam at the Sonia's anchor. He could not make out anything but a darkened blur beneath it. He rushed toward it in an awkward motion that was neither running nor swimming, leaving a train of air bubbles and sand in his wake. The anchor rested on strangely colored sand indeed. Benjamin pushed the anchor aside and clawed at the seaweed and brine like an over-anxious child attacking the bothersome gift-wrapping that contained a precious reward.

His fingers scraped metal. Again he tore at the seaweed, ripping off clumps as he clawed. Benjamin's eyes widened. Beneath the seaweed his fingers traced the outline of a chest. He scratched at it like a cat.

The initials above the combination lock read "K.R."

Young Officer Klaus Reichmann lived again. The Shark lived again. Benjamin Crabb smiled for both of them. He smiled for Nella and for Sonia.

. . . And for the young girls, the old men and women, the rotting remains of flesh gone to dust and blown away, except for . . .

. . . except for what waited inside the rusted chest that lay

on the floor of the Atlantic at Benjamin Crabb's feet! He flung his arms around the chest in a lover's embrace.

*Open it! Open it **now**! Just one look!*

Benjamin tore at the cheap lock, but it would not budge in spite of the thick rust that coated it. He pounded it with the butt of his flashlight, but still it would not yield.

Open! Open, damn you!

He raised his foot in an aborted attempt to kick the lock and fell backward upon the Sonia's anchor that lay in the sand behind him. The metal prong tore through the neoprene wet suit along his forearm, tearing the flesh beneath. A long rivulet of blood smeared the sea water around him. The old man paid no attention to it. He had only the chest to consider.

The anchor! Of course! The anchor!

Benjamin strained to lift the anchor with both arms curled in front of his chest, and brought it down heavily upon the chest's lock. The rusted lock cracked in two and the halves fell like rose petals to the ocean floor, disappearing among the surrounding flora. Benjamin tugged at the lid, gritting his teeth against the resistance of five decades. Gouts of blood swirled from his arm, but that could be attended to later. He grasped the top with both hands and dug his feet into the sand as he strained. The lid groaned open, producing a wall of air bubbles that floated through the vapors of blood that rose from Benjamin's arm.

The old man could not see clearly what lay inside, but he had waited long enough. He cupped his hands and plunged both of them deep inside the chest. Something sharp pricked his palm. He filled both hands and brought them close to his face mask to study his golden treasure. From behind his mask Benjamin's face turned white.

Impossible! Impossible! This can't be. . . !

His hands were filled with small mounds of human teeth. Some were rotted black. Others were wrapped in graying flesh. Still others contained long pointed roots.

Teeth ! Impossi . . . !

[“Come . . . come . . . Out with you . . . No need to be so stubborn!”]

He threw them aside and again plunged his hands deep into

the chest, upturning perhaps thousands of teeth. The chest was filled with them.

Benjamin's hands clawed through the pile, ignoring the pain caused by the teeth that tore at them. He shoved both arms deep into the pile, to his elbows. The teeth ripped the festering arm wound even wider, some embedding themselves inside it. Benjamin ignored the pain.

His hands touched something solid on the bottom of the chest. He tugged at the object that lay beneath the pile and pulled it out of the chest. Several sharp teeth clung to the loose flesh in his arm as he withdrew his hands. He held the object in front of his face to see it clearly.

Benjamin's mouth piece did not stop him from screaming.

In his hand he held Klaus Reichmann's pliers. Forty-five years beneath the sea had not washed the tool clean.

How easy to become distracted . . . how easy surrounded by such beauty . . . and by such—

Benjamin spun around. His entire arm dripped with blood. A dim memory formed in Benjamin's brain. Something about blood . . . something about blood and . . . and about what is attracted to blood.

How easy to become distracted . . . !

He spun around again and realized he still held the pliers. He dropped them and extended his flashlight in front of him. Dark figures, many of them, drifted into the beam. Benjamin quickly turned to look behind him, and flashed his light upon even more dark figures. The old man squinted, trying to bring them into focus. He looked up and saw more dark shadows above him, drawing nearer.

He saw them on all sides.

Something about blood and what is attracted to blood . . . how easy to become distracted . . . How easy . . . Something about what is attracted to blood . . .

Benjamin Crabb felt his free hand move instinctively toward the tooth that hung around his neck. The dark shadows seemed everywhere, and he knew what the figures were even before his light beam caught the reflections of their teeth. There were many teeth.

A ridiculous thought struck Benjamin. A trick of the eyes perhaps, or some insane sort of underwater mirage. What he saw simply was impossible.

These sharks!—Their teeth! Something is wrong with their teeth!

He was still screaming when the first one tore the flesh from his leg below the knee, and he screamed as the second severed his hand to the bone. It still held the light as he watched it sink to the sandy bottom.

Impossible! Impossible!

Even in the dark waters surrounded by his spilling blood, Benjamin Crabb could see what was so different about the sharks that drew nearer as they surrounded him.

Each shark had teeth of solid gold.

FOUR:
A SECOND WAVE

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

WITCHY HALLOWEEN

Inside this late October 31st night,
this poem turns into a pumpkin.
Animation, something has gone
devilishly wrong with my imagery.
I take the lid off the pumpkin's headlight,
and the pink candles burn bright.
Demons cry, crawl, split, fly outside—
escape through the pumpkin's eyes.
I'm mixed in fear with this scary, strange creation.
Outside, quietly tapping Hazel, the witch's
broomstick against my windowpane rattles.
She says, "Nothing seems to rhyme anymore,
Nothing seems to make any sense,
but the night is young.
Give me back my magical bag of tricks.
As Robert Frost said:
'But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.'"

LYNN WHITE

HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY

It was hardly a gingerbread house.
We knew that.
Only the roof was gingerbread colour.
And the old woman living there
was no more a witch
than the raindrops
hanging
from the trees
were really diamonds.
We knew that.
Even though
she said that they were.
And she gave us candy bars.
Surely no witch would be so kind
to children who were not lost.

But later
we watched them dig up her garden
and smelled the flesh
and saw the bones.
Now we know.
We knew nothing
before.

And after
nature reclaimed it's space
so the house stands empty
and no one else remembers
an old woman
still
only
the raindrops remain
frozen in time
hard
as diamonds
soft
as tears.
Still
we don't know
why.

THEY TOOK YOUR HOUSE

You can come stay with me
I don't live that far away

Seeing the fence that cuts
 across our driveway is so final
just a field of cows
 not that they really need the place
where your house stood
 it's haunted anyway
even with the bones and linoleum gone
 the well cemented shut
gravel drive covered over
 cicadas mimicking copperheads
rattlesnakes strung out

in this heat
 fire's coming

I can hear us playing Fairy Winkles
 smell you frying bacon
feel the stickiness of chocolate
 ice cream on my chin
remember the cold like Christmas
 you kissing us
reciting the Lord's Prayer over eggs
 calling our dog
He's not coming because there's a pack
 of chows down the street
still we're searching

still I'm searching to put it all back
Are you searching
 for me?
I am

LYNN WHITE

THE EMPTY HOUSE

It fascinated us as children,
the empty house in the countryside
where we walked the neighbour's dog.
Why was it empty?
Who had lived there?
We imagined secret passages
leading to priest holes,
walled up dead bodies
and buried treasure.
No one knew.
But we knew
that the dog was reluctant to go near
and we had heard that dogs were sensitive
to the spirit world.
So we knew
it was haunted.
That ghosts lived there,
spirits of the past.
We dared each other to enter
through the broken window.
Maybe we broke it first,
but I don't remember that.
In the end we all went in,
leaving the dog outside.
But there was nothing.
Just a house.
Empty.
Ordinary.

Not spooky.
Just empty.
I passed it today,
all these years later.
There's no entering now.
Police tapes surround it.
Maybe the dog knew
that the ghosts were of the future,
not the past.

SANDRA NOEL

WHEN THE HOUSE IS EMPTY

but for the breath in the floorboards,
I open the cupboard at the bottom of the stairs.

A faint whiff of boot polish and rows of sloping shelves
missing their point

In the gloom something moves.
A shape teeters, rises a hitch.

A vase, ornate, striking.

Splinters blue-shiver on blackened lino.

SANDRA NOEL

MILO REFUSES TO MOVE IN

She offers up his favourite fish,
runs a slow hand of apology down his back.

He bolts from her new garden
curls on the mat in next door's hall.

Tomorrow she will hear the gossip;
the weird occurrences in her home

she won't believe until a year later
when she will also run into the woods.

DAVE GREGG

BUKOWSKI'S GRAVE

Crammed inside a red Ford
with several friendly freaks
I did not know we toured
Los Angeles along the coast
stopped at a cemetery for
no good reason but laughs
asked the balding caretaker
who was dead in the graveyard
“*Everyone*” his response and
giggling we chugged wine
followed him up a steep knoll
to a non-descript marker
littered with shattered glass
and packs of stale smokes
several books scattered about
the marker read “*Don’t try*”
which we most assuredly did not

ROBERT FROST

IN A DISUSED GRAVEYARD

The living come with grassy tread
To read the gravestones on the hill;
The graveyard draws the living still,
But never any more the dead.

The verses in it say and say:
“The ones who living come today
To read the stones and go away
Tomorrow dead will come to stay.”

So sure of death the marbles rhyme,
Yet can’t help marking all the time
How no one dead will seem to come.
What is it men are shrinking from?

It would be easy to be clever
And tell the stones: Men hate to die
And have stopped dying now forever.
I think they would believe the lie.

DAVE GREGG

REUNION

My name is Todd Stuart and I presently stand in the edge of a barren field in the middle of the night. Odd? Not really. This was inevitable; a child could see it. Even children must know it's been ten years since they died.

Who died? Only the greatest band ever. Ten years pass and every hit they cut and every set they sung is played over and over on headsets and computer screens across the planet. Play lists ignored for a decade are resurrected and the only one getting rich is the record company.

A decade ago a Beechcraft jet carrying the rock group plunged into a cotton field outside Memphis, Tennessee. It wasn't just a crash it was a Las Vegas spectacle, an avian Cirque Soleil show. The plane dropped from the sky at 300 miles an hour slamming into and skidding across ten glorious acres of prime cotton resulting in a rain storm of burning cotton. Mobs of media arrived taping the firefighter battle against the raging flames. They also filmed the skewered corpses of six band members splattered over the terrain. It was horror. The music world was stunned.

And then forgot.

But not me. For me, it was the beginning of the nightmare.

The *Slidells'* penultimate anthem is "Rise Again" and it was a platinum record hit that owned the Top 40. Other record companies delayed their releases in deference to its dominance. Angela and I were already rabid fans of the band but after "Rise Again" it changed. We became inseparable, spending every hour together much of that time devoted to following the *Slidells* across the country attending shows at arenas, stadiums and festivals. It seemed nothing could sabotage our relationship, which is the reason I waited for Madame Kipling, a famed mentalist in the city.

Many call her a charlatan, most not even that charitable, but she is my last hope. I've already spent a sizeable fortune on cadres of doctors and psychiatrists.

What's another two hundred dollars?

It began with a phone call from Angela.

Ordinarily phone calls from lovers aren't that upsetting.

Did I mention Angela was dead?

Something else I failed to mention—

I killed her.

The mentalist is a vivacious woman of forty years, too young to possess any real wisdom but already in possession of my two hundred dollars. We share a blue leather sofa in a brightly lit office.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Stuart?"

"This isn't what I expected," I admit.

"What's on your mind?"

"Two nights ago I received another call. Unlisted number. Like before. The caller says nothing. Then I hear music. It's the *Slidells*.

Then I hear her voice."

"Whose voice?"

"Angela's'."

"Your late girlfriend."

"Yes."

"How is that possible?" Madame Kipling asks.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

The psychic shrugged. "What does she say?"

"Nothing at first. She sings along with the music. She knows it by heart."

This meeting is more casual than I expected, like having coffee on an internet date. She's dressed in a black business suit and white scarf. I expected a crystal ball and a gypsy outfit.

"You are sure it is this band? The band you love?"

"Loved. Absolutely."

"This is a painful question, Mr. Stuart. When was the last time you heard this particular song with Angela?"

It was a difficult question, but I knew the answer even as the pain mustered in my heart.

"That would be the night she died. The night—I killed her."

If I expected to shock her I was disappointed. She knew the story.

Who didn't?

"Mr. Stuart, this tragedy, the concert, the drive home are well documented. Your blood alcohol content, the unfortunate collision with the barrier—"

"She was decapitated? Did you know that?" I asked softly.

That rattled her up a bit.

I continued. "I hit an off ramp sign so hard it sliced through both front and back windshields. The city later admitted it was unsafe to begin with but then they don't encourage you to drive into them at 85 miles an hour."

Madame Kipling pursed her lips. "I didn't know."

"The sign said 'slow.'"

She lowered her head.

"The sign decapitated Angela. I was trapped in the seat next to her for two hours until they found us. The CD was damaged in the wreck so it played the same song over and over

"The song you hear on the phone."

"Yes."

"And you are sure this is your late girlfriend? On the phone?"

I stared at her. "You mean have I considered her friends and family and every crackpot cum sadist who realizes the anniversary is approaching? Or anyone capable of such cruelty? It's been ten years. Two accidents define my life. The other is the plane crash, when the band died."

"Perhaps because of the upcoming anniversary you are embracing this in your subconscious Mr. Stuart? Some repressed pocket of pain?"

"It's Angela," I insist. "How that is possible I don't know. What I do know is I am this close to a chewing a bullet and I'm not sure it could hurt any worse."

Her expression was sympathy if sympathy was

interchangeable with pity. I needed an explanation.

She offered the classic textbook response. I buried the event in my subconscious for ten years and would continue to do so if I didn't "exhume" it through direct confrontation. I needed to "get" it out there, Madame Kipling explained and I realized she was repeating what every doctor and therapist had already told me at a slightly lesser fee.

And that was why on the 10th anniversary of the tragic air crash of the *Slidells'* last flight, I followed the instructions in Angela's phone call and why I found myself in a chilly field south of Memphis. To confront what my mind denied, to accept a horrible accident of my making and to end the pain.

And to stop the phone calls, I could take no more.

I had plenty of company in the field at first. I recognized dozens of fans, groupies, and roadies and even former wives of the band I had spent so many tours with. But the crowd thinned as the temperature dropped. Even at its peak the group numbered less than an off day at Graceland. Around midnight, the fog rolled in.

The phone rang. I was so startled I dropped the damn thing.

"Where are you, Todd?"

"Here as invited, instructed, Angela, where are you?"

"I'm here, lover," and she emerged from a ribbon of fog—the girl I loved, the girl I killed. My instinct was to flee. Go now. But my legs weren't getting the memo. All I could do was stare in horror as she drew near me.

She was carrying her head under one arm.

I shrieked and fell to the ground.

She halted ten feet away. "What now, Todd?"

"You aren't alive!" I screamed.

"Jesus, Todd," she laughed. "You are such a drama queen." The eyes in the head she carried rolled in their sockets.

"Why are you calling me? Haven't I suffered enough?"

A hideous laugh rang out from the head she carried. She raised it up, studying it, and gently lowered it onto her shoulders. Backwards!

"Oops," she offered a sick giggle, turning the head around

quickly. "That was awkward."

"Angela, for love of God, why are you torturing me?"

"Todd, you don't have to scream. I'm headless, not deaf. It's simple. I'm doing you a favor!"

"A what?"

"Look around you." The macabre figure of my beloved swept one arm toward the field. I saw nothing at first, but suddenly moonlight pierced the clouds and the fog abruptly retreated. There was movement of some kind! A motion of sorts—I knew I was mad now, the ground seemed to MOVE!

"What is happening—" I wept.

"Haven't you heard, Todd?"

The landscape mutated and I learned firsthand what Dante saw. My pitiful sobs filled the air, mournful accompaniment to the unfolding horror as scattered body parts of the *Slidells* band members slowly sprouted from the earth and began marching across it. Legs scampered across the field in search of torsos; arms pursued hands creating a Dali-esque collage of decaying body parts.

Was there ever such horror?

"Angela, help me!"

She laughed. "Help you, Todd? Like you helped me?"

She was amused by my absorption in this moonlit nightmare and began singing.

"You haven't heard, have you, Todd?"

"Heard what? What are you talking about? Why do you keep saying that?" My mouth was agape as I watched a bearded head wearing a perplexed grin rolled in front of me, pony tail flapping.

Angela pointed toward the craven assembly of dead, now swaying awkwardly across the field stumbling in halted steps for lack of movement in ten years or a missing arm or leg.

"Angela? What is this madness?"

"Why, Todd," she cooed, eyelids fluttering, "The band's getting back together!"

The savage crease between her head and torso released a sudden stream of blood. I fell backwards, waving off the terrible

spectacle.

"Todd," Angela sang, repeating my name, "They are playing our song." Indeed, the strains of "Rise Again" filled the air. The undead horde gyrated in step, rocking spasmodically to it. Angela raised her right arm, holding a lighter which she struggled to ignite, losing a forefinger in the process.

The authorities found me hours later, babbling beneath a magnolia tree. They assumed I was drugged, drunk or insane. The arresting officer told me later he never saw anyone so happy to be taken into custody; that I was ashen, shaking violently despite the warm night, and warbling an old song he knew once but had forgotten the name of.

FIVE:
A MORTAL ACHE

BILL DEARMOND

ALL SAINT'S EVE

*“Do you believe in destiny? That even
the powers of time can be altered
for a single purpose?”*

—Bram Stoker in *Dracula*

At seven o'clock of All Saints Eve, on the very stroke of the bell's seventh peal, with the Traveler's closing of the heavy oak door of The Widecombe Inn, these events begin.

Unforeseen circumstances that had ended in financial disaster had delayed his business at the inn after the Martyr's Mass and the Litany of the Saints concluded. It had not been a fruitful trip and the Traveler was in a hurry to return to the warmth of his home and beloved family. Thus, he began his journey across the moor hours later than he had planned. It should have been a simple trip—six miles to town and the same distance to return—something he normally accomplished easily given the regularity of his visits. But tonight, he would have to cross the moor after dusk, aided only by a lantern and a beneficent full moon.

Of course he had often heard the stories of ghostly haints in the night still lying in wait these many years to vex a solitary sojourner caught in the miasma of reeds and thorns. But it was a horse path, well worn and oft traveled until the last final turn toward his home. He wasn't afraid of ghosts in the night, for he was a practical man, not given to the superstitions of the lesser learned. No, he didn't fear the unknown but he did the *known* vermin who lurked in the shadows waiting for any lost pilgrim like himself. And he was surely an easy prey, for he had no weapon but his wits, and they were now surely in short supply.

He had often furthered the illusion of a bogeyman lurk-

ing in the wilderness to frighten his children into staying close to the house in the hours before darkness. He had placed in their imaginations foul night-monsters, evil demonical hunters with blood lust which become haunted beasts with the rapidly fading twilight. Specters that glide silently through the forest, waiting patiently as the fire burns low, then slithering up to the door to tap, tap, tap ever so gently with a bony finger. Then scurrying up the wall like a giant rat and over the thatched roof, while you sit huddled in the corner scarcely able to breathe. So beware, he would caution them, keep the fire stoked, stay close, say your prayers, and no harm will come to you.

Now, as the Traveler entered the marshland, passing the last settlement before the empty stretch to his own home, he made his way down the gloomy road, the overhanging trees blocking out the last vestige of the dying sun, creating a wan glimmer that revealed no point of diffusion, erasing all sense of shadow, the horizon a one-dimensional painting devoid of depth.

Then, before his eyes, a thin mist, as if the exhaling breath of the cold earth, began to slowly rise, escaping from the bowed heads of the slowly waving reeds. Soon the intensity made him feel like he had been engulfed by clouds. As he raised his eyes upward, he could barely discern the full moon, escaping briefly in and out of the deep black sky.

The entrance to the heath was inhospitable to most life, allowing only gnarled trees and sparse land vegetation with a thick covering of peat, on arid, acidic soil. Crowberry, moss, bracken, and bramble were the only things that survived the wind, fog, and cold. Except, he laughed, for a wayward Traveler, and maybe a hellhound or two, a snarling pack of hungry, giant, red-eyed monstrosities unleashed from the nether regions.

As if his thought had conjured the image, he heard a faint wail, a joyless, soulless moan, somewhere down the trail ahead of him. As he paused to discern the direction of the sound, it was as if a cacophony of whispers surrounded him, a menacing malevolence invading his spirit, wrapping him in a rising terror that held him in its icy grasp.

And just as suddenly as the menace had taken possession of him, pounding his heart, tingling the flesh on his arms, just

as quickly did it subside, leaving in its wake a shade not unlike possession, making his soul as restless as his feet. If he did not will himself forward, he would surely remain rooted to the marsh, another dead tree upon which the carrion would roost.

After a calm respite, he gathered his senses and hurried his way down the passage with a new sense of urgency, chasing the setting sun, until the darkness and the creeping roots and vines reached out to grab his sandals, clutching at the hem of his robe, causing him to stumble as one who had partaken of too much mead.

Soon he came to the entrance of the bridge that crossed the Grover's Creek. Usually he would think very little about entering the old bridge when he made his way across it during the daytime as it had enough gaps in the siding to allow enough light to guide his way. But tonight with the sun almost set it was giving off a dull bluish glow and this gave him pause. It could be the wood was old, planks rotted away and fallen into the creek below, and the rusty fasteners creaked and moaned from the fasteners liked whispers of a language he couldn't fathom. Or that the upper rafters creaked and moaned and swayed in the wind like a drunken pastor. Or it could be that he had just learned of a legend of a supposed ghost who hung herself on the bridge and that it had been called Emily's Bridge. But of course he didn't believe in ghosts, of haunts, or spooks, now did he?

Even so, it all gave the Traveler a sense of unease, he still passed it off as the wind howling through and rattling the unsafe structure. But he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever it was, if anything in the shelter, was watching him each time he made this journey, especially tonight. There was something peculiar about this night of Halloween.

Whether it were any of these things or just his disappointment that the church had turned down his business proposal that would have meant an upswing in his families' fortunes that had discouraged and disappointed him, or maybe it was the sudden October chill that had descended upon the marsh as the sun set he couldn't figure but whatever the initiative the Traveler felt compelled to enter and hurry across the gapped spaces of the flooring of the bridges and hastily exit out the other side of the bridge.

He paused thinking he had been foolish to have been so afraid of a place that had been so apart of his regular sojourns.

But then, faintly, the Traveler sensed before he heard the approach of horses behind him approaching the other side of the bridge. For an instant, fearing the ambush of highwaymen, he considered hiding in the thicket to allow these unknown pursuers to pass. Necessity won over trepidation, for the Traveler had an uneasy feeling that he must escape this quagmire quickly before his sensitivities admitted a fear that he was not alone on the bog.

As he peered into the darkness, the tramp of horses grew louder. He questioned how they could be approaching so rapidly without benefit of torches to light their way. He stood in the middle of the lane and raised his lantern, moving it side to side, signaling his distress. He could hear the harnesses clanking and see dust rising from the road. Suddenly, a cart drawn by two roans appeared right before his eyes. In that brief moment he knew that, even if the driver saw him, he wouldn't be able to reign up before crushing him. As he dove for the side of the lane, he caught a glimpse of two black-hooded figures on the front seat. Fearing the trampling that was to come, the Traveler rolled into a fetal position covering his head. But, to his astonishment, there was no pain, only the rush of a cold wind. Looking up from the dirt at the receding image, he caught a glimpse of someone in the cart whose wrists were tied to either side of a crossbeam. For an instant the prisoner's eyes, gleaming iridescent blue in the moonlight, caught his, as though he were staring directly into the Traveler's soul. And, as suddenly as the incident began, it ceased, vanishing into the night wind, leaving the Traveler in darkness, his lantern shattered in the dust.

In the faint starlight, he lost all sense of direction. It was as if the earth had turned backwards, leaving him without orientation. He quickly searched his pouch for his compass and vial of matches. Striking one on the lid, he stared in bewilderment at the compass in his hand. First, it moved west, then east, then west again, like some new visitor unsure of which door to enter. Then it began to twirl counterclockwise as if he were standing in the middle of a magnetic vortex, until it fell off its pivot just as a gust of wind blew out the light.

Alone in the gloom, he felt the collective memory of why the ancients feared the black unknown, valuing fire above all riches. In time, his eyes adjusted to the pale moonlight, and he set forth along the forest path. Soon he realized that the way grew narrower and more overgrown, until suddenly the pathway virtually disappeared, leaving him surrounded by bare trees whose branches seemingly reached out to snatch him up. Sounds engulfed him, the source of which he did not allow his mind to envision.

The unearthly whispering returned, almost like some unseen forces were plotting against his helplessness. From the brush behind him he heard the incoherent mumbling in a strange tongue that seemed vaguely familiar. His head being turned back, he stumbled in the undergrowth; looking forward again he discerned a soft blue light flickering up ahead.

"Hello!" he called. "Is someone there?"

As if acknowledging his plea, the light rose up, then down.

"I've lost my way. Can you lead me back to the main path?"

Again, the motion up and down, seeming to acquiesce to his request.

The Traveler hesitated as a chill ran down his back. Who would be out on the moor alone in the dead of night? Why, someone like me, of course. But why won't he respond back? Even more chilling was the fact that the beacon's glow was not the warm amber color of a flame, but a cool blue.

His mind began to run wild in his overactive imagination. He was familiar with the legend of the ignis fatuus or corpse candles. Those ghost lights that appeared to lost souls, menacingly leading the lone night visitor off into the bracken. Whether it be Will the Smith, so evil he was turned away from the Gates of Heaven, provided a single coal by the devil to lure rovers to their doom, or drunken Jacky Lantern, who was given the ember in a turnip to light his way through the twilight land into which his soul had been condemned. Appropriate, he thought, since this is the season of that myth.

"If you can hear and understand me, move the lantern side to side," he called.

Slowly, the glow moved left, then right. The Traveler accepted this as a sign supported by an intelligence, and cautious-

ly moved toward it, following the lamp deeper into the bog. At the entrance to a small clearing the light halted, evidently waiting for the Traveler to catch up. As he got within a few paces of the glow he noticed that it was not contained in any vessel. It was about three feet in length, three feet off the ground. It seemed to elongate and flicker with a brilliant blue-white center and a darker blue outer umbra. It preceded him into the heart of the glade, grew in size while decreasing in intensity, until it faintly, but fully, illuminated an object.

The Traveler entered a dell covered with a few scrubs and thorn bushes surrounding a dwarf tree. Dangling from one limb was a rusting execution cage used to hang thieves, murderers, blasphemers, and highwaymen. From the basket he heard a low, wild moan, a mournful wail that held within it the collected fears of every child who could not awaken from a nightmare, a howl from every man who looked upon death on the battlefield and could never turn away.

Suddenly the cry ceased, and the Traveler was struck by the utter silence that descended upon him. It was as though the air had solidified, the atmosphere grown so thick that he felt he was being crushed. Before he could turn and flee this haunted place, he heard a voice within the cage ask, "Traveler, may I have the acquaintance of your name?"

The utter simplicity of the request and the naturalness of the voice made him pause. It was as normal as if someone had approached him at the inn with a proposition.

"David Ellington of Buxton Farm."

"Well, David Ellington from Buxton Farm, what finds you lost and moored on this moor?"

The Traveler thought he heard a slight chuckle emerge from this play on words.

"I was late leaving Widecombe, after seven. I had no fear because this is All Saints Day and I am graced by their protection."

"It *was* All Saints Day. What time do you think it is now? How long have you wandered in the wilderness? Five hours? Six?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then could it not be past midnight? A new day? November 2nd, All Souls Day? Do you know what that celebrates?"

The Traveler hesitated, realizing that he was seemingly on the edge of a trap. He could taste his fear, but he could not swallow it. "Yes. It recognizes all those who have died but have spent the last year in Purgatory, waiting to be cleansed of their sins before being admitted into Heaven."

"So, are you a good Christian then, David Ellington? One of the brethren?"

"I know the scriptures. But my wife, Elizabeth, and I and our two sons live a simple, isolated life in the woods."

"On Buxton Farm?"

"We go to the village for important dates: Candlemas, Easter, certainly Christmas."

"You know the Book?"

"We respect the Spirit, but we interpret the Word in our understanding of it."

"Ah, a Progressive! Do you not fear the Wrath of God?"

"We leave Him alone and He returns the favor."

"And the Devil?"

"Nothing stirs as evil as the greed of man."

"Well said, David Ellington. You should remember that. Then would you not be obliged to do an indulgence? Would you not give a Christian charity and ease the suffering of a man? Would you not emulate the Good Samaritan?"

"So you, too, know the scriptures?"

"Let's just say, I'm intimately familiar with their origins. Would you not allow me to partake of your water bag?"

The Traveler moved a step forward, then caution made him take two back. "Why were you left hanging in that pen? You must have done something purely evil to have been subjected to this form of execution? Are you a thief? A traitor or a murderer perhaps? It's for sure you are a blasphemer. And why are you not already dead? It's not common for a prisoner to be left to starve and perish. And why this clearing in the middle of the marsh? Why not on the main way, where your rotting corpse can serve as a deterrent to other miscreants?"

"You ask many good questions, David Ellington. Consider the possible answers. Why would I be left where no one would find me? What does someone who left me here have to hide? That even

my bones must be banished?”

This seemed to make some perverse sense to the Traveler. Indeed, the purpose of such punishment is intimidation.

“They hung me here without a trial because I’m not guilty of the charges they manufactured against me. This is their form of justice. How can I prove to you my innocence?”

“You can’t. You would say anything to be released. The law says you must pay for your transgression, whatever it was, and so you must.”

“Could you not at least give me a drink of water? Extend my life another day? It’s been so long.”

“That’s the reason for your predicament. You are *supposed* to perish from hunger and thirst.”

“So, I cannot convince you? Appeal to your ‘Christian’ soul?”

“I do not wish this slow death on you, but I will not supersede the law.”

“Then...I will tell you the truth.”

A long pause ensued during which the Traveler felt the Hanged Man was concocting yet another story.

“My name is Will Nevison. Yes, I was a highwayman, as you call us. I waylaid the courier for Lord Beaumont and took his purse of forty gold coins.”

“Did you kill the courier?”

“No. But when caught, I refused to tell them where I hid the money. That’s why they left me here. Every day, at sunset, they ride back to see if I’ve changed my mind. If I’m willing to trade the money for my freedom. But I don’t trust them. If I tell them where it is, they will still let me die. It’s been so long; I’ve grown so weak. You are my last hope. I will tell you.”

“What does that mean?”

“If you leave me your water pouch, I’ll tell you where to find the gold. I could survive another day or so with water. But you must swear an oath on your Christian honor to return and free me.”

“So you want me to become a criminal as well?” His mind began a war with his soul. He desperately needed the money. And there was no one around. He could get the gold and still leave the man to die. What was an oath to a thief? “How can I trust you?” asked the Traveler. “You are an admitted thief, and you’ve already

lied to me at least once. What assurance do I have that your story is true? That there really is a bag of gold stowed somewhere?”

“I can prove it because I have one of the coins. I hid it in the lining of my vest.”

“Let me see it.”

After a rustling and the sound of a rip, the Traveler could barely make out something glinting slightly in the Hanged Man’s gloved hand. “I can’t tell what it is in this light. It could just be a shiny button for all I know. Toss it down to me.”

“It seems we do not trust each other. What would keep you from running away with it?”

“Why would I settle for only one coin when you promise me more?”

The Hanged Man chuckled. “A coin in the hand is worth 39 hidden in the bush, eh?”

A long pause ensued, during which fate would alter his journey. The Traveler asked, “How do we make this exchange?”

“There is a ladder in the brush to your left. They used it to haul me up here.”

After a brief search the Traveler located the crude ladder, placed it on the branch well away from the cage and ascended slowly, each step bringing him closer to his destiny. He placed his hand on the branch to steady himself and looked at his antagonist closely for the first time. The man had truly suffered. He reminded the Traveler of the scarecrow in his field, ragged with rotting clothes flapping in the breeze. He’s too thin and weak to be a threat to me, thought the Traveler.

He pulled the water bag off his shoulder and tossed it through an opening into the cage.

“Now, show me the coin,” he demanded.

Even as he said this, a cold chill ran down his spine. He searched his memory for some forgotten scrap of history before it surfaced, tingling him with fear. Wasn’t William Nevins the name of a killer executed many years ago?

The thought passed out of his head as the vision of a golden future steadied his will. A hand encased in tattered leather was extended through the bars. The Traveler could barely detect something in it. He struck one of his matches and held it out close

to the gloved hand. The gold coin glittered like the sun. To reach it the Traveler had to turn the cage toward himself. As he snatched the coin, the flickering flame revealed the Prisoner's face. The Traveler jumped back with a shout, startled, almost losing his balance. What he saw was a vision from hell, a mask of bones, dripping flesh, with only sockets where eyes should be. It was the creature of his wildest nightmare.

Before he could begin a hasty descent to the protection of the ground, a bony arm reached out and ragged fingers clutched his wrist. Despite his avid struggles, he was trapped in a steely grasp of a black void. He felt a skeletal hand close around his throat, and momentarily he was blinded by a brilliant yellow flash, as if the night had suddenly exploded into day. He closed his eyes against the glare. In his head he could feel his heart pounding faster, like the beating of ancient drums. The whispering filled his ears again, and he could feel his consciousness expanding, and he was floating in space.

Then nothing.

Darkness and calm returned.

He heard laughter below him. Opening his eyes, he was terrified to find that he was now trapped in the cage. A figure below sparked a match and held it up to his face. To the Traveler's horror, he was staring into his own reflection. But how could that be? Something was wrong with his hands. He reached up to his face with jagged ivory bones and nothing was there. No feeling, no sensation. Yet, he remained fully aware that he was still alive. He screamed again and again from a throat that could make no audible sound.

"Thank you my friend," called the Freed Man. "I told you to remember what you said: 'there's nothing more evil than the greed of man.' Except, perhaps, me."

Somehow the Trapped Man was able to make his thoughts discernable. "But, for the love of God, you can't just leave me here."

The Freed Man looked up with a sneer. "But I have no love of God, nor for you. But, I will have it for your lovely wife Elizabeth, David Ellington of Buxton Farm with two young boys."

"My wife will never believe you are me. You may possess my image, but you don't have my memories, my disposition, my soul.

She will see through your illusion immediately."

The Freed Man bent over, found a large rock and slammed it against his head. He reacted to the blow with curiosity. "Ouch! I'd forgotten what feeling is like."

He pulled up the edge of his robe and tore a strip off the hem, wrapping it around his bloody head. "I'll just tell her I was attacked by highwaymen on my way home, my memory is foggy, and I'm not exactly myself. All of which, ironically, is true."

The Emerging David Ellington gathered the Traveler's possessions and glided out of the clearing, whistling to keep the ghosts away.

"What am I to do now?" wailed the Traveler

David Ellington glanced back over his shoulder and tossed off, "You have a gold coin, don't you? And a year to All Souls Eve is not so long to wait for a chance at resurrection."

*

The sound of boots rustling through the undergrowth gradually fades away. The Traveler, now wearing a dead man's bones, sits and stares from his perch, and waits . . . and waits . . . and waits . . . for the next greedy nightwalker to pass his way.

*"There is something at work in
my soul, which I do not understand."*

—Mary W. Shelley

SHADOW BOXER

A slippery-fat noodle is suspended in space between his chopstick and his mouth, glistening like a dancer—like the girl he used to watch on Friday nights at Big Al's on Broadway. He snuck past security once so he could meet—*was it Leila?*—her at the dressing room. He remembers her stage name for sure: “Dusky Dawn” was printed on gaudy stock card over her dressing mirror. Even though the management frowned on fraternization with customers, Leila let Owen take her out to a cheap eatery where they shared a bowl of ramen together. Being half-Japanese, Leila was often asked by men if she knew any dirty words in that language. She taught Owen one of the few words she knew, but Owen had never heard, *umami*. Leila said that it was a flavor, more savory than salty, with a subtle sweetness to it. He had made a dumb joke about it suggesting that she was his *mami*, at which she crinkled her nose in mock disgust and punched his shoulder, laughing. “You’re a ballsy dude, you know that?” she had said.

This memory makes eating noodles alone in his lonely kitchen bearable. For a little while, he can forget painful experiences, like a month ago when Leila's mohawked boyfriend got wind of Owen's lunch dates with Leila. The asshole had grabbed Owen by the lapels, lifted him off the chair and onto his feet, and then bitch-slapped him in front of her, plus a crowd of Monday morning financial district workers. No one intervened; the guy grabbed Leila's arm and led her out of the place. Owen's cheek was still stinging, but he felt only the pain of humiliation and began looking around without purpose, avoiding contact with all of the eyes now trained on him. Owen could almost hear their thoughts: *why hadn't he stood up for himself?* No one had actually voiced disdain at his non-action, but it felt as if they all knew how he had given the lie to what Leila had previously declared about his

courage. Absurdly, his eye trained on the billboard hanging above the liquor store across the street—it was a promotional poster for a film, showing the profiles of Pat Morita and Ralph Macchio against a black background with a logo beneath them of a karate-kicking figure silhouetted and superimposed over the rising sun, sequel to a popular martial arts movie from two years ago.

Leaving the dimly-lit noodle shop, Owen squinted and blinked in the afternoon sun and thought about how much he wanted to get good and drunk just then. But instead, he called an AA buddy, Darrin, who talked him through his rough patch. The buddy said they should keep in touch, but neither made the first move and Owen decided not to pursue it. Darrin probably had his own problems anyway.

Owen sighs and swallows and looks at the clock above the table: 9 PM, time to hustle. He slurps the last of his broth and tries to forget the embarrassing encounter with the belligerent boyfriend, but the memory is swiftly replaced by what occurred today; the very thing he has tried to suppress keeps resurfacing. He still has the shakes. Before he realizes it, his mind has gone back in time, to earlier this evening.

After his last class of the day, Owen Pang returned to where he often parked, a darkened curb between two cold islands of light, right in front of a beige stucco house hedged around with rose bushes. He was thinking of dinner, something that he could consume quickly. His car had bad wheel bearings so he didn't dare drive any further than the short distance to and from college to his tiny apartment on Ocean Boulevard. Living right above the K-Ocean route, it made sense to commute to work so he could save up for repair costs. But if he was going to make the transfer bus at the Powell Street station, he had to hurry or he'd be a half hour late for his shift. These mundane thoughts were nearly erased by what he had witnessed as he was leaving campus. He had seen someone's eyes going black like a shark's. Fearing something evil, he had fled the scene.

Owen buries this thought with a shudder. He yawns and submerges the melamine bowl into a steel sink filled with gray

water and defeated soap bubbles, trying not to think of the tiredness in his body or of the school work he still has to catch up on—the thick physical geography textbook bulking out his green Jansport backpack isn't easy reading at two in the morning. He needs to be alert—he has the graveyard shift for the entire semester. One of the job perks of his post is that he has plenty of quiet to himself—to work out his thoughts and do his homework—during his three breaks, one half-hour and two fifteen-minute ones on either side of the meal break.

On Nob Hill where he works, reports of burglaries in the area have been making its rich residents nervous. Eagle Security, the company who hired Owen doesn't want to give the condo association any reason to end this lucrative relationship. The last thing the security management wants is to lose the account because the night watchman wouldn't take the job seriously enough to make his rounds. (Owen is sure one of the two doormen is feeding rumors to Eagle Security personnel about Owen's punctuality and thoroughness on the job. Luis has it in for Owen for not loaning the guy a fiver way back.) Of late, his supervisor has been making more courtesy calls to The Hanford Towers on Jones Street, citing corporate policy on accountability and quality assurance. Owen thinks it is because Mr. Grinnell wants to keep close tabs on him. This is by far the best post Owen has had—no, the best job he's ever had, period.

On the 30 Stockton bus toward Broadway, Owen thinks about the working class neighborhood that surrounds the City College of San Francisco where he's enrolled. He was the night clerk at the liquor store on Monterey, just a block north of the college. The perk of getting to listen to the *Clash* on his Walkman when business was slow wasn't worth the risk of being held up at gun point by a meth head; once was one too many times for Owen, so he had quit that loser job a month before he got hired by Eagle—but not before he purchased a small-caliber pistol for protection. Afraid of its power, Owen stashed the gun away for fear of hurting himself or others. It was on the side-street called Foerster—around the corner from the liquor store—where he'd had the weird

experience with whoever or whatever it was. He wasn't even sure what had actually happened—some kind of fuzzing over of reality, or just an overactive imagination brought on by fatigue?

In that neighborhood, student traffic made parking a precious commodity. Often residential tempers flared when students sometimes didn't park their cars correctly. At night, the streets belonged to the homeowners once again. Tolerance for illegally-parked cars decreased like the sunlight. Owen had just put his keys in the door of his beat-up Escort, when he clearly heard the word, *idiot*, spoken in his direction. He looked up and saw the owner of the stucco house, who stared at Owen with a blank face like unmarked slate. If the man had simply yelled an insult, Owen could have dismissed him as a rude jerk, but there was no anger either in the statement or the look the man had given.

The old guy, a sixty-something, was just standing there, illuminated by the exterior lighting of the house, watering the roses around his house, one hand holding a garden hose and the other hanging slackly. But his head and neck were turned awkwardly away from his activity and his sight-line clearly went through Owen. This seemed odd, but not exceptionally weird. He turned back to his roses as Owen stared back, nonplussed. The damage was done. The old man's singular utterance stung more than any of the slaps he'd received from Leila's boyfriend. Trying to see it from the other man's perspective didn't help. Surely, this wasn't the first time the man had had his driveway partially blocked by college student. Although Owen could understand that kind of frustration, he didn't think it warranted name-calling. Owen's family had heard enough racial baiting to know the deep hurtful power of words.

But even if there was a racial angle to this, Owen was disturbed more deeply by the look the man had given him, or rather the *non-look*. It was like the old man's eyes had been used as a telescope by someone else. Owen's grandfather, Li, used to tell the story of the time he had met a ghost (or demon) on the wharfs. It was clothed in the body of a Swedish sailor and was trying to get Li to come up to the deck of a ship. Li said that he could see no white

in the Swede's eyes and had turned tail and run straight home.

Owen didn't think that this was the explanation for the home owner's lack of expression. Sure, it was vaguely creepy, but supernatural? It was probably more a case of the man entering a stage of dementia. He was sure he had seen this guy before. He might even have seen the man speak conspiratorially with another white neighbor, laughing among themselves as an old Chinese woman shambled by, laden with bags that dripped, its contents undulating underneath white butcher paper. Had they been looking her way as they had laughed? It burned Owen to recall their callous glee at the old woman's expense, almost as much as being called an idiot.

Then the old man went back to watering his plants as if Owen wasn't even there. This infuriated Owen who started honking the car horn; when he got the man's attention, he flipped him off and yelled, "Fucking faggot." Owen watched for a response. The old man seemed not to register Owen's epithet. But then the man's eyes clouded over and grew pitch black. A malevolent smile carved his face, opening slightly at first, then wider, then impossibly wide, like a ventriloquist dummy's mouth expressing mock surprise. Inside the maw was dense blackness like the inside of a coal chute. Seeing this, Owen peeled away. When he checked his rear-view mirror, the man must have gone inside, for there was no one on the lawn anymore.

The bus finally gets to the Jones Street stop where Owen gets off and walks a few blocks south to the Towers. The guard he's relieving, Ken, who's in his last semester of law school, begins jawing with him. Owen doesn't say much in reply, he hates to get Ken started on anything because the discussion always gets politicized. After Ken takes the bar, he'll go into practice and then his shift will be up for grabs. Owen plans on applying for it, maybe shift his school schedule around so he can take morning classes instead.

Each hour, he walks the halls of all fourteen floors, checking that the fire doors are secure, and then logs an entry on the metal clipboard: *nothing to report*. He's gotten this down to a

twenty five minute jaunt. He spends the rest of the hour hanging out in the mezzanine break room where there's always leftover pizza and cold beer in the fridge, left by Ken or the nice doorman, Raul. Owen eats some of the pizza but avoids the beer. The way he figures it, he's getting paid to walk the entire property for three and a half hours and sit around for another five and a half. This set-up allows him to get his school work done on time. With great views of San Francisco all around in a nice, safe neighborhood and the best perk of all, time, it really is a great job. Why would he give it up?

He likes the feeling of watching over the old people at the Hanford Towers and thinks they like him too. Even though they're all retired doctors and financiers, people he would never hang out with in real life, they are generous to him, especially at Christmas time, when he gets all kinds of gift baskets or cash discreetly tucked inside greeting cards. In a way, they remind him of the family he was once a member of. His parents were sensible and modest, but they expressed their appreciation of his diligence as the eldest son carrying out his filial duty to his ancestors by volunteering to be his grandfather Li's personal caretaker. Even though there were plenty of siblings who could and would have taken on this humble role, they all knew of Li's fondness for Owen. How could he disappoint his grandfather? At New Year, Owen always brought the most lucky money to burn and always saved a portion of his allowance to buy Li his favorite treat, moon cakes. Accordingly, Owen received the best presents of all his siblings. For his sixteenth birthday, his parents bought him a Datsun pick-up truck with only five thousand miles on it. Those were happier times before the fire that killed Li.

On his seventh round of the night, Owen walks to the terraced garden patio of the outer mezzanine area which overhangs Clay Street. There he observes someone enter Rector Alley, but it's dark and he can only make out a human shape dressed in a heavy black coat, by the amber light of the sodium street lamps. The person progresses the tiny street below, which is lined with rowan and eucalyptus and snakes its way behind Hanford Towers, going northward where it stair-steps down to Washington Street.

The rooftops of surrounding row houses block Owen's view of the alley in places and he loses track of the figure. Walking onward, Owen hears a noise in the direction of Washington.

Then he sees the figure again, a man in black, hurrying toward the end of the alley. Perceiving Owen's eyes on his back, the man stops and looks up at the mezzanine where he waves to Owen as if in recognition. What appeared to be a black coat now seems to be—hair? No, it looks like writhing snakes—from this distance it's hard to say for sure, but the man seems to be growing taller, his eyes dark sockets. Owen's head begins to swim, then he suddenly passes out; when he revives, he looks down again—the man is gone. Checking his watch, he sees he's only been out fifteen minutes. Luis, the night doorman, radios him wanting to know why Owen missed his stop at the front desk during the past hour and Owen lies, says he thought he saw the burglar. When the cops arrive, they take his statement and secure the area. He's relieved to see policeman going up and down the alley looking for the burglar.

Next Sunday afternoon, Owen is at the drug store on Monterey where he sees the old man accompanied by a teenage girl. To Owen, he now seems harmless and small, not threatening. Owen decides to approach them. After introducing himself, he learns from the girl that this man is her grandfather, Albert. Owen says hello and asks him if he recalls their meeting from the other night, but the old man acts as if he's never seen Owen before. Albert's confused look reminds Owen of a time six years ago when he had put his plans on hold and begun caring for his grandfather full-time.

Owen had returned home with a carton of cigarettes for Li, but found him sitting on the floor, a quizzical look on his face, and a red bump on his forehead. When Owen put the carton on Li's lap, his grandfather looked up and said, "What are these?" "They're the cigarettes you wanted, Gramps."

"You know I don't smoke anymore. Take these damn things away. Are you trying to kill me?"

Owen reminded Li that he'd asked his grandson to buy the cigarettes an hour ago, but Li only looked more confused and up-

set. The doctors had told Owen that Li was in the early stages of Alzheimer's and would need closer supervision from that point onward.

His thoughts returning to the present, Owen sees the same look on Albert's face. The granddaughter tells Owen that he's upsetting Albert. After apologizing to them both, he turns and leaves and once again finds himself struggling with his thoughts. At a loss as to what to do next, he walks to a bar down the block, goes into the gloomy interior, and orders a black-and-tan. He'd been coasting all year, thinking he was finally freed from alcoholism. But with the shakes coming upon him again, he knows different. But right now, he just doesn't give a damn.

Through the haze of the fifth glass, Owen is thinking maybe it wasn't sleep deprivation that is causing him to see apparitions. He recalls the time when he and his old work buddies would go out to Big Al's and get thoroughly wasted. One night, he was so plastered he tried to stuff money into the dancer's butt crack. She immediately turned on Owen. Her whole face was a maw filled with rows of shark teeth. He fell backward from his bar stool and when he looked up, the stripper's face was normal again and still very angry. That was what got him started on going to AA meetings. He went faithfully at first, but after a few months, he told himself that he didn't need that crutch anymore.

Owen had gone back to school determined to win back love and respect from his family, but every time he tried to reach out, he was rebuffed. He had failed his one and only responsibility which was to shepherd Li into a graceful time of revered status and happy days. In particular, his father would not speak to Owen, nor his mother. His siblings did and they never shied away from reminding him that he was a failure.

Later that Sunday night, he lies on his bed with a cold compress on his throbbing forehead and thinks about his passing out the previous week, the time he saw the mystery man in Rector Alley. He wonders if these hallucinations are signs from his body that he needs help. He tries to call Leila, but gets an answering machine and decides to just hang up. He looks at the dirty clothes

that are piling up around his bed. Mixed in with all the detritus is his neglected homework and unread text books. His coursework is only lagging by a week, but he already feels a year behind.

He has a dream that night. A man is watering a rose bush. The roses on it bloom and out of the biggest one comes the stripper with a huge mouth for a face. If it wasn't for that unfortunate flaw, she'd be the most beautiful woman. She sticks her tongue out at Owen and he feels himself harden. The tongue becomes a snake which becomes a dark alleyway. On it walks the thief of Rector Alley, arms flailing like medusa serpents; then they grow still and fuse together into giant black wings, it/he flies up to the railing. An whispers, "...I know you. killer."

On the night that Owen's grandfather died from smoke inhalation, Owen had been drinking heavily. He had come to just in time to save himself and drag Li's lifeless body away from the flames, but the firemen were unable to resuscitate the old man. The cop who took his statement made him take a breathalyzer test which he failed. He had to go to jail and stand trial for involuntary manslaughter, of which he was acquitted thanks to the lawyer his father had hired. What came out in the proceedings was that Owen had given his grandfather the wrong dosage which put Li in a state of deep sedation. In the space of two months, he went from number one son to total and abject failure. He was disowned by his father and excommunicated from the clan. He was forbidden from burning incense before his ancestors. His relatives, the tong, even it seemed the entire Chinese community, had shunned him.

It is the following weekend, at night. Owen is still perplexed by the dark figure and decides to drive the Escort to Rector Alley—at this point he no longer worries about making it worse for the wear. Nothing happens, no one comes. He tries the next weekend and the next after that. On his fourth expedition, he makes contact. Along the alley, Owen sees the air whirling and solidifying, taking shape. The dark figure materializes and he is a man who looks just like Owen, lost in his own thoughts. Owen yells at him to stop, asks him why he keeps coming back to this place. The Owen-thing rushes at him and he tries to fend it off, slips and falls backward on

the steps at the end of the alley.

Owen comes to at the hospital. He is fine, but due to his length of stay, Eagle Security decides to let him go. He no longer has the focus or the drive for school work and because he can't afford tuition, even with financial aid, he drops out. With the savings he has accumulated, he doesn't have to live on the streets just yet, but all he can plan for is one day at a time. Instead of buying groceries, he buys malt liquor and lottery tickets. Eventually, he runs out of money for rent, so he does his best to hide from his landlord. He feels like a dust mote in a vortex.

It occurs to Owen that he should just get up and leave, but he feels anchored to the city, as if his ancestors will not release him. He tries to drive as far as he can with no direction in mind. Going north across the Golden Gate Bridge, the poor Escort blows a gasket after Owen tries to make it through the Waldo Tunnel. He is able to coast the car safely to the exit to Sausalito and then has to flag a ride back to the city, where he walks back to Ocean Avenue (good thing his key still works). Inside, he weeps like he never has before. Is there some sort of sorrow he is supposed to feel beyond what family has already exacted from him? Or could this out-of-control spin that he cannot escape—this shock to his system—could this all be evidence of impending madness? He drinks the last of his liquor and falls into another deep sleep.

Another week passes and he is now homeless. He goes back to the old Chinatown apartment building where he and his grandfather lived. His old place has been restored and there is a new family living there. They see Li's restless spirit from time to time. He thanks them for taking care of the place and uses the last bit of money on him to buy drugs in the hopes of overdosing. This way, Owen thinks, he can make a final sacrifice to appease his grandfather. He wants to find the shadow world and help lead his grandfather to the stony steps that lead to Heaven. Instead, he and his grandfather lose their way in the underworld. The grandfather becomes a serpent who tries to eat Owen.

Owen realizes his failure when he wakes up in an emergency room, critical care unit. He has almost leveled out

AFTER SCHOOL

because his blood toxicity is so elevated. His doctor is surprised that he's come to, after all the sleeping pills he had taken. He explains that he was found in a Chinatown alley way, completely passed out. His liver had failed him and his vital signs were very weak. He had lost consciousness and was in danger of becoming comatose. He knows now that he'll never be free of his past, his sins, his ghosts. He must accept that he'll never be free from alcohol either. He doesn't think he has the strength to keep going through with his fight.

After he is discharged, Owen returns to Ocean Avenue on foot. His old apartment has not yet been rented out and he sneaks his way to the back yard and checks the door to the upstairs unit. It is unlocked and undisturbed; the landlord still has not had the place cleaned out. He goes once again into his lonely little kitchen and reaches up into the cupboard where he draws out the .22 caliber he kept from his liquor-store job. As he thumbs the chamber open to check that it is full, two people approach his apartment from opposite directions. One is a woman in her twenties half-black, half-Japanese—she is knocking on doors, asking the whereabouts of Owen Pang. The other one, an old Chinese woman shambles along, laden with grocery bags full of slimy wet things. Her filmy eyes change from white to black for just a moment and then they look normal again. She bides her time; she knows she'll get to the apartment first.

Nancy thought the Hungarian goulash tasted funny. Not school cafeteria brackish, weird. She looked around at the others at her lunch table, but they were all just talking with half full mouths.

She swirled the mix with her spoon: same as ever—stringy meat chunks, boiled to death vegetables and greasy broth. She sniffed. Something, something herbal seemed to waft up from the institutional stew. She stopped eating it, finished the rest of her lunch, and dropped off her tray. Then, curious, she walked back into the serving area.

"Mrs. Cazacu, did you happen to put extra spices in the goulash?"

Agrapina Cazacu, the chief school cook for decades of students, smiled at her. "How sly of you to sense this. You are the first in years to detect it. Yes, every so often I add something special and see who notices. It takes a special—ability—to discern it." She glanced at the kitchen workers bustling nearby. "If you return here after school, I'll let you know what it is, and what it means about you. Please come back, you'll be interested in what I say."

Nancy hesitated, but she'd been bantering with Mrs. Cazacu for almost four years. "Okay."

The tall, slender girl turned from the short, stocky woman and went back to her classes. At 4 pm she skipped a meeting of the school newspaper staff and returned to the kitchen. Agrapina was alone.

"You didn't finish the goulash, did you dear."

"Ah, no, I wasn't sure about it. Not that all your food isn't good." Nancy pushed up a smile.

"Didn't think so. If you'd eaten all of it, well, never mind. Very few youngsters can taste dwarf wort, and the few that can sometimes have an extra talent."

"Dwarf wort?"

"Never mind. I'm permitted to use the kitchen facilities after school hours for a charity catering service I run. It's really useful for cooking for oppressed groups. Would you like a part time after school job, just a couple hours three times a week? I'd pay you forty dollars an hour, cash."

Nancy's single-parent mom waitressed to try and cover rent and food, an extra few hundred dollars a month would let them shop somewhere other than Dollar Universal. "What would I be doing?"

"Oh, just helping me cook, reading me recipes while I prepare the food, small chores. No clean up, I'll attend to that."

The winter daylight had dwindled away, and in the purple-blue fluorescent lighting Mrs. Cazacu looked different, less frumpy, more sternly regal. Nancy got that intuitive bad feeling that told her to turn it down, to walk away. "Ah, I don't think . . ."

"Please dear, just help me a little right now and you'll see what I do. I'll pay you for the two hours even if you don't take the job."

Eighty dollars immediately payable was too much to resist.

"Sure, Mrs. Cazacu, if you need me . . ."

"That's my girl. Call me Agrapina, please. Here, put on this apron."

Nancy held the apron in front of herself before tying it on. "What funny symbols it has on it."

"Just an abstract design I like. See my apron is similar." Agrapina unlocked a cabinet and took out a chef's knife roll bag and a black leather-covered book. She unrolled the bag and Nancy saw dozens of knives and instruments, not stainless steel, more like black iron and bronze.

"Ah, Mrs.—Agrapina, what did you mean about me and the dwarf wort?"

"I'll explain when we're done, dear, you'll better understand." She walked over to a locked stainless-steel refrigerator, unlocked it, and took out a large slab of meat and two big trays of herbs and vegetables. She laid everything out on a long service table. The meat looked blue-green, and Nancy didn't recognize most of the herbs and plants.

Agrapina stared at Nancy. "Now dear, here's the really important part. I need you to read from the cookbook while I

prepare the meal. The words are in my native Romanian, but are phonetically spelled out so you can easily read it aloud. Please read each page to me, and say absolutely nothing after finishing the page until after I have responded back to you. Take your time, if you make a pronunciation mistake you will have to repeat the whole page."

"But I don't understand any of this, Agrapina."

"Don't worry, the words speak for themselves. Shall we begin?"

Nancy took the book from Agrapina's outstretched hand. The cover was some kind of lizardy leather, scaly like a Gila monster. She opened it to the first page and silently read it. It seemed easy to say aloud. "There's a blank spot in the middle."

"Say your full name when you reach that spot."

"Why?" Nancy felt a fear trickle draining into her stomach.

"Please, just humor me, it's an easy enough way to earn your money."

Nancy narrowed her eyes. Agrapina was clearly unplugged, but seemed harmless. "Okay."

"When you're ready dear, please just start."

Nancy started in. When she said her name, it seemed like the lights flickered and she felt a little dizzy, but continued to the end of the page. Agrapina responded in a guttural tone, and as Nancy read on, used different words but the same tone for every response in the little book.

"Thank you dear, how do you feel?"

"Really different, spongy, like things are soaking into me."

"Wonderful. And you didn't pass out. Welcome to the sisterhood."

Nancy was disoriented. "Sisterhood?"

"Of witches, dear. You've just been initiated."

"But Agrapina, I never wanted to become..."

"And can turn away from us if you must. But as we work together, I think you'll want to stay. Our knowledge is wonderfully intoxicating."

Nancy could feel strange, delectable thoughts tumbling inside her. "But, what was that about the dwarf wort?"

"It's just a sensitizer. I could have used ghouls' gristle instead."

MARELLA

Despite the desperate attempts of the waves to cover her form, half of a young woman remained above the waters to survey the nearby beach as the sun escaped toward the horizon. The woman seemed to notice she was too exposed and quickly lowered herself until only the top half of her head was above the surface. She hoped anyone on the shore might mistake her for a rock, and she tried to stay perfectly still as the waves restlessly moved around her.

The shadows of a cluster of rocks behind her hid the second woman, who seemed to somehow stand in the water with one hand on one of the protruding boulders. The young woman's eyes adjusted to the growing darkness, however, and one of the last dying rays of sun caught the glittering scales of the second woman's familiar tail flicking in the water to keep the woman upright.

"Mother."

"Did you see, Marella?"

"It was so lovely."

With a gentle smile, her mother lifted her hand away from the rock to gesture toward her tail, which Marella had decided as a child was both blue and green. A gold chain was wrapped four times around it, dull now without the sun. The mother unwrapped half of the chain and used her nails to snap it. She attached the two broken ends together to form a new necklace and handed it to Marella.

"Do not tie that to your own tail until I tell you to."

For so long Marella had tried to picture what she would now have to do, but her mind could only take her to the idea of what dried sand might feel like.

"You know how we kill our brethren fish to survive?"

Marella nodded. "We must make it painless, and we must give thanks."

"The humans, they do neither. They drag our brethren fish to the land, they force them to suffocate in the burning air, they throw away remains from the fish's body much as we throw away broken shells. Sometimes they simply forget to eat the fish for they have too much food, and the fish's body rots in the sun."

Her daughter could not help but shudder, and the mother tried to hide a smile.

"I still want to see how they live, Mother."

"And as you are 20, it is your right to do so."

At this, Marella attempted to voice the first of many concerns their previous conversations had brought to the surface within.

"But must I kill to receive legs? Could I not simply borrow them?"

"No, Marella, no. Humans never simply give, nor lend, their legs."

Marella twisted one portion of the chains around her fingers and felt it bite into her weathered skin.

Her mother kissed the top of her head. "I know you are of a pure heart, and such a simple matter will not tarnish that. Do not fear."

Relief dimming the anxiety welling up within, Marella untwisted the chain around her fingers, marveling at the tiny indentations left behind as she did.

"What must I do?"

"First, wait until nightfall. That beach is quite popular as we approach the warmer winds. There are often men who wander near the shore late at night. They will have filled their bodies with special water that renders them nearly incoherent."

"Then, they want to die?" Marella sounded hopeful.

"Perhaps. From among these incoherent waterless creatures, you must pick the one with the strongest legs."

"How can I know?"

The mother reached down to her own tail and pulled the

remaining chain off. She clasped the chain around her waist like a belt, and there came a spark of light like the breaking of a volcano underwater as the tail split into two human legs. Within two struggling breaths, the mother had to push herself up on to the rocks as her gills folded into her sides and the lungs were left to make do with air from above the water.

Her daughter touched the legs, noting they felt as firm as the rocks her mother now clung to. Her fingers traced the veins running from the bottoms of the legs to where the chain now seared them to her mother's waist. If she studied the chain, she could see little spikes like those from an urchin prodding into the skin, coaxing the two halves to unite.

The mother undid the belt, and a flash of light brought her mother's tail back with the chain resting near the fin with a faint glitter. Marella watched the gills rise from her mother's sides again, as if greeting the coming of the moon overhead, and her mother stretched in the water with a luxurious sigh.

"Tonight, I will accompany you close to the shore and watch you, but you must do this on your own, as we all had to. They will have but a few breaths of life within once their heads are beneath the waters, but they are fighters, my darling. They will kick, they will scratch, they will be as a shark in the water. You must hold their legs as we hold to the rocks during terrible storms. You must not waver. They will still. Panic will paralyze them in the waters. You must wait but a few breaths after that, then you take your chain and wrap it around their legs. First the right, then the left. The chain will do the rest."

"And what of the remains?"

"Our brethren fish will do what they will. Do not worry."

Her mother looked toward the surface and found the moon was fighting for dominance in the sky from behind a gathering storm.

"We must hurry. Storms drive humans away from the shores."

Her mother pointed into the darkness along the beach. The moon escaped its prison of clouds long enough to illuminate the

shapes of two young men wildly singing and holding on to each other as they staggered toward the waves.

"See, they are inviting their own deaths," Marella's mother said, "but choose one. From what I can see, the one on the left seems to have stronger legs. I will draw the other away."

"Will you kill him?"

"We are not like them." Marella could feel the disdain chill her skin. "We kill only what we need to survive." Her mother moved closer to the shore. "Watch and do as I do."

Marella saw her mother lift herself out of the water so close to the shore, Marella worried the humans might simply grab her and drag her away. The two humans' laughter died as they stared, though Marella decided it was in wonder rather than fear. A smile played at the lips of one as the moon escaped the clouds to shine on her mother's body. Both began wandering toward her as if she pulled them with the chain.

Her mother snapped her fingers at the one on the left, and he shook his head, stepping out of a dream. He watched his friend continue toward her mother, who now held her hands out to him in wait for an embrace.

Her mother looked back at her just as the human reached her in the waves, and Marella remembered what she had to do.

As her mother had done, Marella lifted herself out of the water against every instinct she had and ensured the top half of her body was in full view of the remaining human. She watched his eyes relax into a state of euphoria, his mouth open as his lovely, strong legs carried him to her.

Like her mother, she held her arms open to him in wait for an embrace. She briefly glanced over at her mother, who patiently kept the human's friend's head above the water as held one another in the waves.

She had to be brave.

The human's skin felt laughably soft as he wrapped his arms around her. The warmth was unmistakable, too. For a moment, Marella allowed herself the joy of simply letting the human hold her. Then, she remembered what her mother had taught

her, and she began to pull the human into deeper waters. His legs stumbled across unseen rocks and life in the shallower areas as he struggled to keep up. His lips seemed desperate to reach her own, and she wondered what it would feel like. Were they as warm as his arms were? Warmth flooded her body upon touching her lips to his, momentarily knocking aside what she had to do. It was such pleasure, such deep wonder, to touch such unnatural warmth. She understood why her mother had no qualms kissing the other human despite her deep hatred of the species.

Thoughts of her mother dragged the goal back to the surface of her mind, and with a sigh of regret, she pulled herself away from him. She plunged into the water and for a moment watched the human's legs flail in the water in a weak attempt to keep his head above the water. Then, as her mother had told her, she caught hold of his legs and pulled until she saw the head dip just beneath the surface.

As her mother had said, the human thrashed as it tried to reach the air again. She held firm to the legs, however, and closed her eyes. Instead of watching the human slowly die, she pictured the glories the dry land would have for her. As the man pushed at her and tried to scratch her leathery skin, Marella tried to imagine what lay behind the beach, what the humans had done with the waterless lands beyond.

Finally, mercifully, the human's body stilled. Marella allowed herself a glance up and gave a cry of fear to see the human's eyes were wide with sheer terror. The mouth had fallen open; the body heaved as though trying to breathe the water.

"Stop." She grabbed the human's shoulders. "There is no air for you here."

Pity overwhelmed her. If only she could ease his fears as he died. She failed to understand why, but she pushed her lips against the human's again. The warmth was a fraction of what it once had been, but she enjoyed it all the same, and her fears subsided as her hands noted that the human's shoulders had relaxed. When she pulled away, the human's eyes were closed. The body now floated in the water as though it had melded with it, reminding Marella of

seaweed.

She wrapped the chains around his legs, and her head reached the surface just as light burned through the water. The man's powerful legs now beneath her kicked at the water, but not in the unified manner her tail could provide. Her gills had receded into her sides, and a new instinct craved the air above the water, but she was losing the war to stay above the waves.

Marella reached toward her mother, who still embraced the other human.

Her mother's body stiffened, and she lifted her human out of the water and pushed him back onto the shore. She swam to her daughter and carried her to the shore so she may lay beside the now-unconscious human.

Marella coughed up water that had once been her home and felt the dry sand scratching between her fingers.

"Come back when the moon is high and full, and I will join you on the land."

Marella shivered in the night air. "You . . . you will not . . . not come with me . . .?"

"Not yet. The dry land is one we must all first discover on our own."

Her daughter struggled to her feet and was overjoyed to see the muscles held her firmly upright even as her arms wildly waved through the air to find some sort of balance.

Her mother laughed in pure delight. "Enjoy what is yours."
And she disappeared beneath the waves.

BOTTLED UP

"Welcome to my bar, stranger. What can I get you today?"

A wizened finger pointed at a bottle behind Luke's head.

"You've got a good eye," the bartender murmured appreciatively as he took down the dusty bottle. "This is my finest vintage—old even when you were young, I bet." He chuckled. "I can't tell you from firsthand knowledge how well it's held up. More of a beer man myself. But I've had no complaints, either. Say when." He poured the golden liquid into a highball glass.

The old man clapped a hand over the top when an inch and a half of liquid filled the bottom of the glass.

"Sure that's all you want?"

The old man nodded, took a deep breath, and downed the liquor in one convulsive gulp.

A smile quirked Luke's lip. "Hits the spot, don't it?"

The stranger rose as if to go, then fell back onto the bar-stool with a gasp.

"Take it easy, ol' timer. You just knocked back quite a jolt. Give it a minute."

The old man nodded, placing his hands on the bar before him.

As they watched, the age spots faded from the tissue-paper skin, and the skin itself took on a healthier color and texture. The fingers plumped up, knuckles no longer twisted knots of bone.

The old man gasped, flexing his fingers, an expression of wonder on his face.

A few more minutes sitting at the bar, and his form had filled out. His hair was no longer sparse and gray, but now a sleek cap of dark waves. His back was no longer crooked—he sat tall and proud. His face was not that of a child, but that of a man in the

prime of his life.

Luke just watched the transformation, arms folded across his chest as the smile played on his lips. "Everything you hoped for?"

"Oh yes," the stranger breathed. "More. I haven't felt this way since I was a young man. It's truly a miracle."

Luke winced. "I wouldn't call it *that*, friend."

Reaching under the bar, he retrieved a sheet of paper and a pen. "Now, we get down to brass tacks. You just had a generous slug of my finest. In return, you sign this contract and we're all square."

The stranger frowned. "Contract? I knew nothing about a contract . . ."

Luke threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Did you think you'd get it for free? A healthy dose of the Elixir of Life for nothing more than a 'by your leave'?"

"I—I have money. I'll pay you anything you ask."

"I don't need any money. My trade is in souls." Luke's eyes became pools of black, staring into the stranger's very being. "In return for a new lease on life, I get your soul when the contract is complete." He leaned on the bar. "It's too late to back out now. You should have asked for the price before you drank."

The man gulped. "And there's nothing I can do to amend the mistake?"

"Oh, it wasn't a mistake, friend. You came here looking for one thing. You pointed right at the bottle. Someone had told you about my wares. Now, if you want to hunt *that* fellow down and have a word, that's your right, but your soul is mine—either when the contract is over, or right now."

Luke reached down behind the bar again, and this time the object he lay on the bar wasn't so civilized. "What's it going to be?" he asked, hand resting on the handle of the ax.

"I'll sign," whispered the customer meekly, picking up the pen.

"Good choice." Luke returned the ax to its place. "Now don't be so glum. I'd say you got a good fifty years back. You return to the bar when that time is up, and we'll conclude our business.

PRICE TO PAY

Until then, live it up. The contract includes a guarantee of warranty. Nothing will kill you until the fifty years is up. I don't renege on my promises, and I don't enter into any faulty contracts. Go live your new life. Though, I would suggest that you do it somewhere else. Otherwise, people might get suspicious. You can't die, but that doesn't mean people couldn't make your life miserable."

The man bit his lip and signed the contract. He slid it back across the bar.

"Pleasure doing business with you, sir." Luke folded the contract and slipped it into the pocket of his apron. "Feel free to send your friends my way—or, even better, your enemies. I'll be here waiting."

The stranger slipped off his stool and stumbled toward the door.

Luke watched him go with a smirk. "They never learn. As long as human beings are as gullible as chickens, I'll never be at a loss for customers."

He opened the safe under the bar and added the contract to the pile within it.

"I had better visit the Fountain again, though . . . the bottle's getting a bit low."

"Don't you think you've had enough?" Kamal Hedaya steeled himself for the outburst as his identical twin, Khaled lifted a half-empty tumbler to drain the amber liquid inside.

Khaled slammed the empty glass down on the bar. "Another one."

The bartender came over and filled up his glass, either unaware of the tension between the brothers, or deciding to ignore it.

Kamal couldn't ignore Khaled's self-destructive behavior, however, not when his brother was doing his best to flout everything their parents believed in, everything Kamal believed in.

He clasped Khaled's wrist to prevent him lifting the glass to his mouth.

"If you had any idea how much I need this, you'd let go."

"When has drinking solved anything?"

"You're such a party pooper. Who invited you anyway?"

"The same people who invited you."

"No accounting for taste."

Kamal scrubbed a hand down his face. "I don't want to see you destroy yourself."

"Christ, you're such a drama king!"

"You're not the only one who's ever suffered a setback. Dust yourself off and get back on the horse."

"Ever the voice of reason," Khaled mumbled before grinding out his next words. "I don't need platitudes from my pious older brother."

Kamal shook his head as the captain's voice abruptly sounded over the ship's PA system warning of an unexpected storm and instructing all passengers to get to their cabins below deck and

stay there until further notice.

Khaled said, "What the fuck?" at the same time Kamal said, "That was sudden."

The bartender started closing up shop without another word.

"Guess there's no last call, huh?"

"C'mon, let's get to our cabin." Kamal glanced out the portholes and noticed rain already coming down in sheets. He started to feel like a passenger on the S.S. Minnow.

Khaled hummed the theme from *Gilligan's Island* and finally downed his drink.

Kamal laughed at their twin connection. No matter their disagreements, they'd always counted on their bond to get them through. From their war-torn home in Aleppo before their family found refuge in America, to their early days assimilating to their new surroundings.

Despite speaking English the boys' accents earned them a lot of teasing from their peers in their early days in this country. Though they had their bond, Khaled still took things hard. He'd always had a low opinion of himself and searched for approval from those whom weren't necessarily trustworthy.

"Khal?" Kamal paused at the sliding glass door.

"I'll meet you in a few."

Kamal nodded, didn't want to argue anymore. He had to trust that his brother would do the sensible thing. A gamble to be sure, but what else could he do?

*

Khaled waited until the bartender and Kamal left, then went out onto the upper deck at the bow of the boat to experience the wonder.

Rough seas wasn't the word, the yacht rocking and rolling with at least ten-foot waves washing over the lower deck. The skies darkened to an angry grey when no more than an hour ago they had been sunny and clear with calm seas.

Funny how the weather, like his fortune, had changed on a dime.

Khaled had come at the invitation of his roommate and friend Ivan, not just to enjoy a Spring Break getaway to the Greek Isles—a phatter getaway than Cancun, Florida or even New Orleans—but to show off his skills as a rapper and garner exposure for his original jams.

He'd been excited, ready to make a splash in the industry like his idol DJ Khaled.

"You know your namesake is a devout Muslim."

Leave it to Kamal to point *that* out. Everything always came back to spirituality and belief in Allah for Kamal. Sometimes Khaled just wanted to admit that he wasn't spiritual and he didn't believe in Allah but he didn't want to give his parents and Kamal a stroke. He might as well say he was an atheist. He was definitely a heathen, didn't believe any of the stories in the Qur'an or Bible, all fables as far as he was concerned.

It was easy for Kamal to be so smug when he had it all. He was intelligent, he had his faith in Allah, he was clairvoyant and he was the favorite son. Khaled had nothing without his music.

So choking during his set, forgetting the words to his own song, tongue so tied he couldn't even freestyle, had been a pretty fucking big deal.

Kamal tried to reassure him his lapse hadn't been that bad and he'd get another chance to audition for industry people even bigger than the individuals on the boat.

Khaled loved his brother, truly, but sometimes he wished Kamal would go away with all his Mary Poppins optimism and virtue and leave him be.

Khaled tilted his head back and closed his eyes, enjoyed the pounding rain and wind against his face, as if they could beat away the memory of the fiasco.

The boat violently jerked and Khaled opened his eyes and grabbed the railing to keep from being tossed overboard. Shit was getting real.

He caught sight of a waterspout in the distance,

mesmerized.

The closest phenomenon he'd seen to it was a dust devil on the school playground when he and his family still lived in Syria. That had been exciting for a kid of nine, but this waterspout was as awe-inspiring as an EF5 tornado.

When the waterspout suddenly changed direction, accelerating toward the yacht, Khaled's heartbeat sped in concert. He knew he should go back inside and downstairs to his and Kamal's cabin, but he was too fascinated and the longer he stood watching, the more it looked like . . . there was a man inside the expanding funnel!

What the—?

Khaled backed up but before he could get downstairs, the waterspout was on him, turbulent vortex spinning him around and knocking him on his ass. He sat on the deck as the rain thrashed him, staring into what he thought were the shadowy giant's silver-gray eyes. Then the yacht drastically listed to one side and Khaled slid twenty feet into a row of deck chairs before he went headfirst into the wall behind them and everything went black.

*

Khaled woke in a hospital bed surrounded by Kamal and two strangers—one a man and the other a woman dressed in a white coat whom Khaled assumed was a doctor.

"Thank Allah, you're awake!" Kamal sat forward in his chair and clasped Khaled's hand.

The woman introduced herself only after taking his vitals. "I'm Dr. Sehgal, and you're a lucky young man. Getting struck by lightning could have caused much more physical damage. As it is, you have a concussion."

"Now you need to go out and purchase a lottery ticket," the stranger said and proffered his hand when Khaled frowned. "Tariq Moreno."

"Mr. Moreno found you unconscious and unresponsive," Kamal muttered.

Had Mr. Moreno deprived his brother of being the hero and that's why Kamal sounded so peeved or did something else have his brother's shorts in a wad?

"Just Tariq. I feel like we're all family now." He grinned

"Thanks for saving me . . . Tariq." Khaled looked to Dr. Sehgal. "When can I leave?"

"We'd like to keep you overnight for observation. Tomorrow seems like a plan."

Khaled nodded and turned to Kamal. "Mom and Baba?"

"I was going to call them again when we could confirm you're okay."

"I'll leave you gentleman to it." Dr. Sehgal bowed her head and backed out of the room.

Tariq stayed like he belonged, taking the seat on the side of the bed opposite Kamal.

He was a good-looking brother, bald with striking features and a well-groomed mustache and beard. Other than the fact he reminded Khaled of the late Kobe Bryant, he seemed familiar for another reason. Obviously he had been a passenger on the yacht, but it was a pretty big vessel and not everyone had come with his group. Was he a friend of Ivan? His roommate had a lot of friends and he and his family were rich and well-connected. Tariq seemed like he traveled in that type of illustrious circle.

He seemed well-heeled and non-threatening, so what caused Kamal's obvious dislike, besides the well-heeled part? Because Khaled knew how much his twin despised excess and believed money was the root of all evil.

Tariq abruptly leaned forward in his seat, hands folded, forearms resting on his thighs. "What do you desire?"

"Who are you? Lucifer Morningstar?"

Tariq laughed. "Just someone interested in your future."

Kamal stood. "I think it's time you left *Mr.* Moreno."

Khaled watched as his twin fisted his hands at his sides like he was ready to punch Tariq. It was an incongruous thought. His brother was a pacifist and polite to a fault, so much so Khaled often referred to him as Gandhi, Jr.

Tariq smirked, seemed amused rather than threatened. He stood, reached into his jacket pocket, removed a business card and dropped it on Khaled's chest. "Give me a call when you get rid of your guard dog."

As if on cue, Kamal growled deep in his throat.

"And tell your mother I said hello."

Khaled caught Kamal by the back of his shirt as he went after Tariq.

Tariq left, mirth in his wake.

"That was weird." Khaled glanced up at his brother. "What's up with *you*?"

"Nothing." He glanced down at Khaled's hand. "You can let me go."

"You sure? I've never seen you like that." He almost said it was as if they had switched places—Kamal the impulsive hothead and Khaled tranquil and benevolent.

"There is something about that guy that brings out the worst in me."

"I should go congratulate him."

"That's not funny. And what was that swipe about Mom?"

"Beats me." Khaled was more interested in Tariq's question. He flipped the business card between his fingers before looking at the fancy black print—in English and Islamic calligraphy.

Agent.

No affiliation or company name. No physical or e-mail address. Just Tariq Moreno and a phone number.

Khaled held the card close to his chest.

What do you desire?

He'd be a fool not to give the man a call.

*

Mom pounced as soon as Kamal opened the front door to the family's home in Queens, throwing her arms around him in a strangle-hold when he walked into the living room.

He immersed himself in her familiar scent, a comforting

blend of cinnamon and orange blossom water. She'd probably just finished making his and Khaled's favorite dessert. It was a sweet specialty hailing from their home and since making them could be kind of tricky because of the crumbling semolina dough, most people settled for buying the Syrian cookies at pastry shops. He and Khaled had been lucky enough that their mother was a skilled baker and made them at home on the regular.

Kamal took a deep whiff just as his mother pulled away and playfully slapped his arm.

"What took you so long to get here, *ya mama*? And where is your brother?"

Kamal hooked an arm through his mother's as they walked to the kitchen. "Where is Baba?"

"Working an extra shift, as usual."

Kamal thoughtfully nodded. He and Khaled had often talked long into the nights as kids, strategizing ways they would get rich enough to pay back their parents for all their sacrifices raising them. Khaled counted on making an extravagant living with his music. Kamal was a little more realistic wanting to follow in their mother's footsteps in education. He enjoyed teaching as much as Mom did, loved it when the students he tutored had that *aha* moment from some gem of knowledge he imparted.

Kamal released his mother to wash his hands at the kitchen sink when he spotted the tray of *karabij halab* on the granite island.

Mom stood in front of the tray with her arms folded across her chest. "No cookies for you until you tell me what is going on."

"Khaled made a detour, but he'll be here shortly."

Mom crinkled her nose. "A detour? When he knows how worried we were about him? About both of you?"

"I'm fine. Your wayward son had a close call though."

"He seemed fine on FaceTime."

"He is." Fine enough to meet with Tariq Moreno, against Kamal's fervent wishes. Khaled wasn't going to tell him, but he didn't have to. Kamal knew what he was up to, had had a vision at the hospital and knew that associating with Mr. Moreno would

come of no good.

Mom put a hand on his cheek. "Something is bothering you, *ya mama*. Out with it."

"I'm worried about a new acquaintance of Kahled's. I think he might be a bad influence."

"Everyone can't be as perceptive as you. Your brother always did like to do things the hard way."

Except the hard way in this instance could prove more destructive than usual, if not fatal.

Kamal put his hand over Mom's, didn't want to overly worry her when he just had a *feeling*. Although his feelings had always served him well in the past.

He had tried to tell Khaled to stay away from Moreno, but intuition and hunches didn't work with Khaled. If he couldn't see it and touch it, he had no use for it. Much like the stories in the Qur'an and Bible that he did not believe in. Khaled didn't think Kamal knew about his agnosticism, but he knew his brother's heart like he knew his own.

Khaled came through the kitchen door as if he knew he was being talked about.

Mom greeted him with her customary effusiveness as Tariq Moreno entered the house behind him.

"I'd like you to meet someone." Khaled drew away and slid an arm around Mom's waist.

"No need for introductions." Tariq stepped forward with his typical smirk.

Mom recoiled and murmured one word: "*Ibris*."

Kamal frowned, the name's familiarity setting off alarm bells in his head.

Tariq tsked and shook his finger at her. "Is this any way to start a family reunion?"

"Please don't. They don't know."

"I know they don't. That's why I'm here, naughty girl. You broke your promise."

Kamal looked from Mom to Tariq and back again. "Mom, what's going on?"

"Do tell, Fatimah."

"You don't have the right to call me that."

"I have every right." Tariq moved closer, the aura around him dark and sinister. "I own you. I've been inside y—"

Kamal struck before he knew what he was doing. Afterward he shook the hand with which he had hit Tariq, standing astride the supine man as he leaned up on an elbow, laughing.

Khaled gave him a hand up. "What the hell is wrong with you, Tariq?"

"Why don't you ask Fatimah?"

"We're asking you," Kamal and Khaled chorused, closing ranks around their mother.

"Such dutiful and protective sons. However, I'm not leaving until I get what I came for."

Mom pushed by them to confront Tariq. "Take me instead."

"Mom, what are you doing?" Kamal's head spun with all he was seeing and the history unfolding before his mind's eye. He had felt Tariq's malevolence on the yacht and at the hospital but how could he convince Khaled that the man was up to no good without proof?

"We had a deal, Fatimah. I granted your fondest wish and gave you children when your infertile husband could not. But you knew your time with them was borrowed."

"You can't have them."

"I'm not greedy. One will do. The question is, which one are you willing to part with?"

Tears filled Mom's eyes as she looked from Kamal to Khaled. "Neither."

"I can choose for you, if you wish," Tariq said, caressing Mom's shoulders.

"Get your hands off her!" Kamal barked.

Tariq backed away, low chuckle reverberating throughout the house as his complexion suddenly turned from light-khaki to deep burnt-orange. Next came the glistening black horns bursting from the top of his head and his silver-gray eyes turning jet black. The *pièce de résistance*? He started growling,

jutting toward the high ceiling until he towered at least five feet above them.

"I am growing weary of these games." He grinned. "You see what I did there?"

Kamal gaped. He had struck a mythical powerful being who wanted to take him or his brother to Allah knew where. How had he ever thought to defeat this creature who wasn't mythical at all? He was all too real and demanding compliance. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around with Kamal and Khaled making demands?

He had so many questions but he knew no explanations would satisfy. His mother had bedded a supernatural being and produced him and Khaled. Which made them what?

"I'll go," Kamal rasped.

"No!" Mom grabbed his arm, trying to pull him back.

"It's either him or Khaled. I'm not picky. But I will take one."

"Mal, no." Khaled stepped forward. "I brought him into our lives. This is on me."

"How sweet. Inaccurate, but sweet." Tariq sneered. "On second thought, I think I will take you up on that offer."

Kamal almost breathed a sigh of relief, guilt infusing every fiber of his being before Tariq lifted and held him against his chest as they began to eddy.

Kamal felt them spinning impossibly fast, slipping away, becoming insubstantial, morphing from solid to gas. He glanced at Mom and Khaled from a billowing cloud as he and his true father become one.

The last thing he heard was Mom's soul-shredding shriek as his awareness shrank to a pinpoint. Down. To. Nothing.

*

Khaled sat on the kitchen floor, holding and rocking Mom's shuddering body as she uncontrollably cried.

He wondered if she would grieve so for him. "It should have been me," he blurted.

His mother didn't disagree, just continued weeping and shaking.

Khaled swallowed hard against the pain of loss constricting his chest.

Why wasn't it me?

SIX:
SUCH A DEATH

DEBORAH KERNER

IN THE SHEER OCEANS OF DESERT

the Southwest monsoon
sweeps the long hot desert summer
with torrential downpours, severe
thunderstorms
the strands of rain like long silken hair in the multiple
distances lightening so electric the air entwines leaving
people swaying in the urgent breezes haunted by visions
of ancient earth her anatomy, her inhabitants the
strangeness of human imprint

traveling north route 70 off route 25

leaving Silver City our home during a blue desert
season passing White Sands in the New Mexico
of our dreams completely surrounded by the
White Sands Missile Range my god.
it is the thousands of species of animals inhabiting
the park a large portion, invertebrates animals
without backbones the Apache Jumping Spider the
Bleached Skimmer Dragonfly the Burrowing Wolf
Spider Sand Scorpions and Tarantulas the Toothpick
Grasshoppers and the Walking Sticks the White-
lined Sphinx Moths

traveling the world, I couldn't find
them. a fossil trail of footprints
too huge ground sloths hunted by
humans the Last Glacial Maximum
some 21,000 years ago the white

sand dunes composed of gypsum
crystals.

black sheath planes frighteningly
sleek come off the missile range
nighthawk stealth bombers eerily
quiet too sleek for the desert. too
modern shaken, they look like
foreboding
deep black cracks tormenting the sky apparitional
aircraft designed to avoid detection

the Alamogordo doctor prescribed
emu oil Alamogordo, city of the
Chihuahuan Desert east of White
Sands bordered by the Sacramento
Mountains
to the west by the Holloman Air
Force Base why are militaries attracted
to deserts?
imagining nowhere?

Alamogordo known for the 1945 Trinity test the
first ever explosion of an atomic bomb memory
residue At 5:30 a.m. on July 16 1945 Los Alamos
scientists detonated a plutonium bomb
in the Jornada del Muerto desert—the Day of the Dead desert
filled with desert creatures and farmers and people and dogs
and horses
and homes and vegetable gardens, the
downwinders the innocence of another
desert my god. the air is so strange to
remember humans lived in this area for at
least 11,000 years living off its land

Roswell of fame nearby farther to the east a
little green man prominent while the city
scurries with countless ufology attractions
the Roswell incident of 1947 strangely 2 years after
Trinity the story of recovering metallic and rubber
debris from a military balloon. ah, that's what they
say but many think it was a flying saucer, yes and
the bodies of the dead extraterrestrials are in a
hangar somewhere in the usa.
Roswell, established in 1898 where the
construction of the El Paso and Northeastern
Railroad caused a stirring through the once
serene desert terrain in 1912 it became an early
model of a planned American community.
America what dreams linger

ALIEN EYES

What sci-fi writers had speculated turned out to be true. The Martians had retreated underground and adapted to life in labyrinthian cities when conditions on the surface of Mars became too harsh. Still, companies from Earth arrived to establish colonies on the planet to mine for minerals. The Martians tolerated them as long as the mining did not go so deep as to affect their lives.

A symbiotic relationship took hold. Earth acquired minerals, and the colonies did what they could to discourage poachers who came to kill Martians in order to harvest their eyes. None of the Martian organs were of use except for the eyes. Martian optic nerves and nerve fibers were remarkable in being able to connect to human brain tissue.

So it was on a summer afternoon in the year 2083, FBI Agent Jack Farrow came to visit a recipient of the alien eyes, Phillip Mayhugh. The two men sat in easy chairs in the living room of Phillip's house.

Farrow took the initiative to break the awkward silence between them. "You're a lucky man."

"I know. I'm grateful I could afford new eyes and have them implanted. My surgeon was able to restore what glaucoma had taken away."

"What I mean is, you're lucky the law for now only penalizes the poacher, not the recipient of the eyes or the surgeons. I'm curious, though. Aren't you bothered by the fact that a Martian died so you can see again?"

"I'm living with that on my mind every day and dealing with it. I must say, I'm a bit embarrassed by the question. But I don't believe curiosity brought you here. Can you get to the point?"

"Things have not gone well for two people who had the

same surgery. There are likely others we don't know about. After the implants healed, the patients went on a violent rampage. One bludgeoned her husband after what seemed to be an uneventful walk on the deck of a cruise ship. Just last week, following an apparent successful healing, the patient went berserk at a community pool. He attempted to strangle a man coming out of the water and then fought with the lifeguard who tried to intervene."

"And that had something to do with the new eyes?"

"The Martians themselves have suggested it. They say there was an evolutionary advantage in having eyes that not only sent images to the brain but also messages triggering an aggressive defense if certain predators were seen."

"I hardly know what to say about that. Are you telling me I might suddenly go crazy. It all seems absurd."

"Suddenly? I can't say. You may feel a slight uneasiness taking hold or it may be a full-blown panic. On the chance you're aware of it coming on, a prescription is being sent to you. Just a pill that will have the rapid effect of calming you, giving you time to call for some emergency assistance."

Phillip was, in fact, feeling more than a slight uneasiness already, oddly exacerbated by the agent's mentioning a pool. He was doing his best to suppress his agitation but felt it was about to get the better of him—as it had earlier, when the plumber was at work in his kitchen. "If you'll excuse me," he said, "I'll be right back."

Under the circumstances, the agent was apprehensive. He adjusted his position in the chair so that he might more easily pull his gun, if needed.

Phillip entered the kitchen and had to step over a broken glass as he approached the body of the plumber. Still very visible was the carving knife he had thrust into the plumber's neck, causing the man to quickly bleed out.

He remembered and understood now, too well, it was getting the glass of water from the refrigerator that had

triggered it all. He was carrying it when the gentle slosh of the water's surface got his attention. It triggered a vision of rippling water on a Martian lake. A creature emerged and wriggled onto the shore. Its head seemed all mouth with many, so many, sharp teeth chattering. The long fins along the creature's body started to unfold and took the form of legs. A Martian might have pulled a sword from a scabbard. Phillip did what he could, grabbing a knife from the kitchen counter. He thrust it into what he took to be the creature's throat.

Now, as Agent Farrow called out, "Mr. Mayhugh, are you all right?", Phillip's view of the kitchen rapidly alternated between an image of rippling water and the nightmarish toothy creature emerging from it.

In a panic, Phillip withdrew the knife from the plumber's neck and ran from the kitchen. He screamed as he did so, not in fear or pain, but as one might do if trying to unsettle an opponent.

Two bullets from the agent's gun should have stopped him, but it took a third to slow the momentum of Phillip's approach and drop him to the floor.

LAUREN K. NIXON

WE DON'T DRINK FROM THAT SPRING

We don't drink from that spring,
says the father, stooping to stay the child's hand.

It's a hot day, the sun baking the ground hard beneath our feet.
We can feel the heat of it through our flip-flops,
easing the ache of the miles we have already travelled.

There are hordes of walkers on the hill, scrambling over the rocks,
strolling through the bilberries and the heather,
making faces in the reflection of the pool where water bubbles up
through the rock,
cool, inviting—in my mind's mouth, it has the frost of mountain
streams.

I can almost feel the relief it would bring to slake my thirst,
but something about the expression on the man's face stops me.

I'm thirsty, Daddy, the child complains, voice tight in a whine of
genuine need.

The father turns them firmly away; *It's not long now, love—and*
we'll get an ice cream.

The promise and the warning sustains the child—and us.

A man behind us bends, lifts a handful of spring water to his mouth;
he smacks his lips noisily, then bends to collect more, offering it to
his wife.

Something makes us turn our faces away and hurry along the path.

In a week, in the paper, we see their faces under the headline
in blood red ink: *Holiday Couple Missing, Seven Days.*

PSYCHIC READING

Illuminated by only a single stand of white lights, the worn white sign in the front yard read *Psychic Readings*. Ruby Jean had driven by the turquoise clapboard cottage a dozen times over the years but had never once stopped, until now. Whenever she had considered stopping in the past, her ex-husband Doug had berated her for wanting to throw their money away on *Hocus Pocus*, as he referred to it. But now a single woman, it was her money, and she craved an adventure. The first vacation since her divorce and her first ever trip alone, she aimed to take advantage of the week-long retreat and do all the activities she could never do before. She'd already pre-paid for a helicopter ride and parasailing lessons. Who knows, she thought; maybe she'd even take a trip to the renowned alligator farm.

The lawn looked neglected in the darkness, but she'd negotiated bad lawns before. When the evening dew collected on her new sandals, making her feet squishy, she wondered if she'd made a mistake, stopping at night instead of waiting until daylight. But she persevered. To keep from sliding, she took short, choppy steps until she had made it up a set of crumbling stairs to an old-fashioned door with three window panes. A candle flickered within.

She couldn't find the doorbell, so she gently knocked. A yappy dog barked from inside and footsteps approached. Then an elderly woman with long, gray hair opened the door. She held a candle, and a cigarette dangled from her mouth. The old woman's worn face, marred by deep grooves, suggested either a difficult life or too many hours spent basking in the Florida sun.

"I'm Roxanne," she said, and motioned with her head for Ruby Jean to step inside.

Despite strong misgivings, Ruby Jean followed behind Roxanne as the psychic led her down a narrow hallway. They entered a darkly paneled, dusty room with a round wooden table situated in the center. More candles dimly illuminated the space, and in the center of the table, a shiny crystal ball shimmered, as if had a life of its own. A cloud of vapor encased it.

Ruby Jean gagged against the strong scent of Frankincense that permeated the air, and she flinched when a crow perched in the corner squawked. In the candlelit room, the psychic's black eyes peered out from under hooded lids.

Ruby Jean sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair at the table's end, wondering whether to stay or run.

Roxanne pushed a deck of cards towards her. "Shuffle them."

Ruby Jean did as instructed, and then pushed the cards back across the table.

One. Two. Three. Roxanne flipped over three cards and laid them horizontally. The strange cards were brightly colored, printed with designs of medieval characters, but the vapor that drifted throughout the room brought them in and out of Ruby's Jean's focus.

Roxanne studied them and then pointed to the first one and spoke in a smoker's voice. "You've been unlucky in love."

Ruby Jean said, "Yes. My husband deserted me after 22 years." When Roxanne didn't reply or commiserate with her, Ruby Jean wondered if the psychic would blame her for the demise of the marriage.

Roxanne only turned back to the cards and raised her eyebrows. "I see a man in your future, someone from your past."

Now this was what Ruby Jean had hoped to hear, predictions of love and riches in her future. Her heart fluttered at the prospect. She hadn't dated since her divorce.

But the psychic's demeanor became more serious, even darker. "You've had great tragedy in your lifetime."

Unsure whether this was a question or an observation, Ruby Jean pressed her hand to her throat. When the old woman's eyes met her own, Ruby Jean answered. "I lost my son, Timmy, three years ago. A ferry boat accident." Tears welled in her eyes. She

rarely spoke about Timmy. It hurt too much.

With no forewarning or attempt to comfort Ruby Jean, the old woman leaned over and croaked, “The death card! Danger. You must be careful.”

“Careful of what? What sort of danger?” The knot in her chest swelled into her throat, threatening to cut off her breath.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” Roxanne said. Then she reached across the table and clutched Ruby Jean’s hand and ran her yellowed nail across the palm. “You have lots of fears. You always have.”

The old woman was right. Ruby Jean feared dying alone, being homeless, and losing her daughter, Meg, now that Timmy was gone. She also had a morbid fear of drowning and had only ever waded knee deep in the ocean despite Doug’s insistence that she ride the waves with him. Her mind raced with questions, but the psychic didn’t seem one to soothe a client’s worries.

Ruby Jean shut her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, Roxanne leaned over the crystal ball.

A huge puff of new vapor arose from the ball, as if the cloud had come from within it. Roxanne waved her bony fingers over the ball and muttered odd words that sounded like some kind of spell, until a face appeared inside the crystal. From a distance, it looked like Ruby Jean’s grandmother.

“A relative from your past said not to worry. She’s looking over Timmy.”

“She’s with Timmy?” Ruby Jean asked. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

The old woman nodded. “She said you’ll all be together in good time.”

“When? Soon?”

Roxanne shrugged. “It’s not for me to say.” She muttered a little more about Ruby Jean’s career and family, and then she stood and almost pushed Ruby Jean down the hall and back to the front door. She held out her hand. “That’ll be \$60.”

Without even protesting, Ruby Jean pressed three crumpled bills into the psychic’s hand. Then she scampered down the wobbly steps, navigated the lawn and went straight back to her

rental car. Inside, she leaned her head against the steering wheel and steadied her breathing. Her itinerary—the helicopter rides and parasailing lessons—had both become potential sources of danger. She wanted nothing more than to cancel everything. She’d play it safe and spend her vacation lounging by the sea, sunbathing and wading in the shallow waters.

*

Thirty minutes later, Ruby Jean wheeled into the condo parking lot. She stumbled up the stairs and dragged her luggage behind her. For nearly two hours, she slumped in front of the TV, mindlessly flipping channels. Her mind raced—danger, death cards, and morbid fears. She opened a bottle of red wine and drank two generous glasses. Finally, she shuffled into the small bedroom where she curled up on top of the covers, not bothering to change into her nightgown.

At dawn, after a fitful sleep, she made a pot of coffee and sipped a cup on the small patio facing the parking lot. Flooded by old memories of tragedy and divorce, she attempted to shake them off with little success. The girlish excitement she’d felt on her flight down had vanished and been replaced by a vague sense of dread. Not wanting to tempt fate, she followed through and cancelled her helicopter ride and para-sailing lessons.

Still, the vacation needn’t be a complete write-off. She changed into her new Hawaiian print swimsuit and donned her floppy hat. She packed water and fruit in a cooler and crossed the road to the beach, stopping to check both ways before she crossed. She slid on a pair of Italian-framed sunglasses and settled into a blue lounge chair, shielded by a large canvas umbrella. She’d play it safe this trip and sunbathe. What was the worst that could happen? A bit of sunburn? Mild dehydration? When she’d had enough sun, she’d drive herself to her favorite seafood restaurant.

But families surrounded her. Children laughed and kneeled on the shore making sand castles. She barely suppressed a memory of Timmy at the same age. And in the lounge chairs next to hers, a middle-aged man leaned over and kissed a starry-eyed woman.

Ruby Jean's heart sank as she thought of past romantic trips with Doug, before the bad times. She'd made a mistake, coming back to their old haunts and hadn't realized the extent of her profound loneliness until after the psychic reading. In the three years since Timmy's death, she thought she'd restored normalcy to her life. But now, hit with a strong dose of reality, she took stock of her life: a dead-end job, a cramped efficiency apartment, and especially poor dating prospects for a woman her age. Next time, she'd pick a new destination, somewhere she'd never been.

Her head hurt. She was talking herself right into a depression. But hadn't the psychic predicted a man in her future? Maybe she'd meet the guy right here on the beach if she cheered up a little and didn't give off such a morose vibe. Pick yourself up, she chided herself. Show a little life!

Ruby Jean flung her beach hat aside and rushed into the foamy surf. The water invigorated her, and the gentle sea breeze, as it whipped around her blonde curls, almost cleared her head. She followed a group of children farther into the sea until she stood knee deep and had to dig her toes into the sand to brace herself against the thrashing waves that threatened to topple her. Just up ahead, a couple sharing an inner tube held hands and rocked in the waves.

This inspired Ruby Jean to push herself farther. She felt daring for the first time in years. She'd reinvent herself and to hell with Doug and his child bride. He didn't deserve her. She'd meet someone new, just like Roxanne had predicted. She could swim in the ocean or even take water skiing lessons. Taking the other swimmers' lead, she paddled out farther until she stood waist deep. Kids encircled her, splashing and laughing, and a man held his young daughter high up on his shoulders. She was the master of her own destiny, not Doug or some old fears. She waded out a little farther. She'd make a week of it despite the silly scare with the old psychic.

When she first heard the warning, she thought it was only a childish prank. But then, all the kids and families surrounding her squealed and struggled toward the shore. The warnings grew louder. "Shark! Shark!"

Disoriented, Ruby Jean had trouble comprehending the warning. She pushed herself toward shore, trying to flee the murky waters, but her feet felt as if they were pinned to the ocean floor and wouldn't move. She waved her arms and attempted to shout for help, but however hard she tried, her pleas caught in her throat.

Adults and children alike stood on shore, pointing at her. A whistle blew and two men rushed in her direction. Red water swirled around her as she bobbed up and down. When she gasped at the sight, water filled her lungs. She saw her severed torso and her head, her eyes wide open, floating away in the jaws of a large bull shark, but she couldn't make sense of it. How could she be looking down at her own torso when she was standing in the water where she'd swam only five minutes ago?

She told herself that she was only in shock, but she had the feeling of being hauled away, as if attached to a rope that dragged her and thrust from side to side, like some horrific roller coaster ride, faster and faster until the tourists looked like tiny dots on the beach and then one by one, slowly vanished.

An unbearable pain gripped her stomach and organs, as if she'd been sawed in half. She no longer knew if she were dead or alive. *Please God*, she silently begged. *Have mercy and restore me to peace.*

Gripped in the shark's jaws, she now had the sensation of being eaten alive. She tried kicking her legs, but felt only emptiness below her waist. Unable to move or to handle the pain any longer, she spotted a ferry in the distance, partially obscured by fog. Someone was bound to spot her. She just knew it.

And then, his face came in and out of focus until he leaned over and extended his hand. "Mom! Mom!" he called out.

At first, Ruby Jean assumed she was dreaming, but then the young man grasped her hand and pulled her to safety. Immediately, all of her life-long pain and fears disappeared. She remembered the psychic's prediction that she would meet a man, someone from her past, and a sense of peace and calm flooded her body. She gazed into Timmy's face and smiled, knowing she'd never be lonely or frightened again.

THE SKIN SHARK

I haven't touched my wife for weeks, but it doesn't mean that I no longer desire her. It's only because her skin has been closed down due to shark danger.

One morning, I noticed a tiny plaque sticking out of her shoulder. At first, I thought it might be some kind of spike or shard that had lodged in her skin. As I leaned closer, I could read the minuscule inscription on it, which warned of the danger. Sometimes, I even caught a glimpse of the beast itself: if I ventured too close to my wife, her skin would bulge as if a cyst had suddenly rosed beneath the surface, and with quick, jerky movements, it would slash towards me like a steamed mobile wart. The sharp triangular dorsal fin would tear her skin from the inside, leaving a bloody cut wherever it went—her hand, her leg, her belly, even her face adorned with a spiderweb of wounds. My spouse was slowly turning into a bloody map with roads that led nowhere, but she was hardly aware of it; what bothered her more was that I didn't touch her for weeks.

"I'm tired," I would say, or "I have a headache," and after many arguments and sulking, I would spread out my cards on the table: "It's all because of your goddamned skin shark!"

"Oh, that!" my wife would laugh, then survey me disdainfully. "What kind of a man are you? At the slightest sign of danger, you tuck your tail between your legs and cower trembling in to the corner? Don't you know that the great white shark doesn't consider humans as prey? That statistically, you're more likely to be electrocuted by a faulty Christmas tree light than be killed by a shark? That there's a greater chance of being killed by a fat wasp landing on your ice cream or a confused ant-eating bear? That you'll more likely suffocate from your own overgrown nose hair or

burst from being sneezed on by a snotty little bat before a shark gets to you?" As she listed these, the triangular dorsal fin would emerge from her face like a tiny razor blade and swiftly cut through the area below her eye, leaving a thin scar in the resilient tissue from which blood would trickle.

"I don't care about statistics; I'm sleeping on the couch!" I yelled, to which my wife would inform me that if I didn't join her in bed, I might as well move out.

It's nighttime, and by the bluish light of the moon, I keep staring at my sleeping wife. Her skin is calm and motionless, making it hard to believe that a deep-sea beast lurks somewhere beneath the surface, hiding in the tissues. Suddenly, I sense movement on her shoulder, near the sign warning of shark danger that still juts out like a toothpick—it's hard to believe it hasn't been dislodged despite changing clothes and showering.

I see two miniature people lying on my wife's shoulder, a boy and a girl. They are making love. As the two teenagers roll over each other, they create tiny creases in my wife's skin. It's as if I'm seeing ourselves from many years ago. Ecstasy freezes them in place, then the girl jumps up and stretches her slender body. Semen trickles down her thigh, glistening in the moonlight.

"Let's go for a swim!" she tells the boy.

"We can't!" the guy points to the board with the warning sign that sterns guard behind them.

"Oh, come on! We won't go far! Don't be such a wimp!"

So they dive into my wife's skin. It welcomes their young bodies. They playfully splash each other with epidermal cells. But suddenly, something pulls the girl down. I cover my mouth as I watch the mysterious force dragging the screaming girl into the depths, and soon, a large, dark bloodstain begins to spread on my wife's skin. Then a hand emerges. The boy swims over and grabs it, trying to pull her back, but then he realizes that the limb doesn't belong anywhere anymore. Throwing away the severed hand, he starts swimming towards the safe haven of my wife's shoulder, but the monster catches up to him and pulls the poor boy down right into the abyss. My wife's upper arm is within my reach, and I try to

save the guy, but as I touch my wife, she moans from the contact: "Make love to me," she murmurs half asleep.

"Tomorrow..." I manage to utter. "Maybe tomorrow..."

I realize that perhaps I can touch my wife without any problem if I first feed the shark well. In the evening, I place an oily sardine tin on the cabinet next to the bed. A seal would be better, but they don't sell those in cans. This will do as a defense.

"Ready, tiger?" my wife asks, lying seductively on the bed in black stockings. "Come on, get down here!"

"I thought of a little foreplay first," I mumble. The idea clearly appeals to her, but she hesitates when I open the sardine tin, and the smell of oily fish mixes with the scent of the lit scented candle.

"Just close your eyes and enjoy!" I mutter while individually placing the cold, oily fish on her body—her chest, her stomach, her thighs—trying to cover as much surface area as possible with the tiny sardines. They stare foolishly, motionless, at my wife.

"What's with this nonsense?" she snaps, but at that moment, her skin bulges below her left breast, and the small triangular dorsal fin tears through the tissue. Blood spills onto the white sheet. Then, the head of the monster bursts out, its mouth lined with sharp teeth, and it pulls a sardine into the depths.

"It works!" I shout happily, but my wife just shakes her head. "You think so? This is the lamest foreplay ever! I'm no longer in the mood!" With that, she leaps off the bed, brushing off the silver little fish, and leaves the sardine-scented bedroom.

It's time to get rid of the shark once and for all before it destroys our marriage for good—I decide. I offer a handsome sum to a shark hunter to help save my relationship. I bring the shabby, unwashed, and stinking-bearded man into our apartment and introduce him to my wife, who looks at me with a bewildered expression.

"Why did you bring this bum into our house?" she hisses, but I dismiss her. The shark hunter lights a cigar and stares in astonishment at my wife, whose face is covered in cuts everywhere, and even her arm is covered in a network of wounds caused by the

dorsal fin. And then he spots the beast: a small, protruding cyst-like lump sticking out from my wife's troubled eye. His cigar falls from his mouth.

"Damn it!" he roars. "I've never seen such a trophy specimen! We'll need a harpoon for this one!"

And off he goes, running to his car, then stumbling back into our living room with a one-and-a-half-meter harpoon gun slung over his shoulder, aimed straight at my wife. She starts screaming, and I try to restrain her, but as soon as I grab her arms, the dermal shark moves towards me.

"Quickly!" I scream, but the shark hunter is completely drunk, waving the harpoon gun erratically. I can see that he's going to miss, accidentally puncturing the armchair or the wall instead of hitting my wife. She screams, and I catch a glimpse of the shark head emerging from beneath her skin, attempting to bite one of my fingers. But then the shark hunter pulls the trigger, and the steel harpoon flies through the air like a spear.

Later, my wife sits at the kitchen table sipping coffee, looking offended. The one-and-a-half-meter harpoon still protrudes from her shoulder, but she seems completely oblivious to it. She knocks over a few plates with it as she gets up and tries to put the empty coffee cup in the sink. By the way the harpoon did hit the tiny shark skinbump dead-on; I'm certain that if I were to pull out the lance-like projectile from my wife, there would be a dead fish at the end of it. But every time I've tried so far, my wife has recoiled in disgust.

"I've had enough of you!" she finally declares. "First, you put dead fish on me, and now you shoot me with a harpoon. This could be the definition of a bad marriage! I don't have to endure all this crap!"

With that, she packs her things and moves out, but before leaving, she smashes everything on the shelves with the harpoon still sticking out of her shoulder. I watch from the window as she tries to get into a taxi with the lance protruding from her body, hitting the driver on the head in the process, causing him to curse and step on the gas.

Suddenly, I feel extremely uncomfortable in my own skin. According to Wikipedia, sharks respect size and strength, but I doubt that the monster living beneath my wife's skin has ever respected me; I certainly haven't deserved it. Statistics suggest that there's a greater chance of your marriage falling apart than being devoured by a shark. Statistics also suggest that you're more likely to completely devour yourself before any predator reaches you.

SEVEN:
MAKE MY DECISION

CATHERINE BROADWALL

APPRAISAL

Thumbing through an old diary,
I come upon the question: *Is grief*

a measure of goodness? The query
sucks my ribs in tight, and I

wonder: the value of the rubies
of grieving that drip from

my fingers in ropes. Reading on,
I see I meant funerals, the grieving

of a person that takes place
in their wake. *Is the grief poured*

over a person a measure of their
goodness? is what I meant.

But I like this other reading,
the question it poses: could all this

grief mean goodness? Refusal
to drown out the pet's shocking

death? Refusal to shut out the
world and its roiling, ever-present

loss? I imagine placing it on a
scale, this pocketful of grief

gems. Having some appraiser
raise it to her eye, say, *Don't you know*

what this is worth?! Like those
episodes where someone's thrift

store painting is a long-lost
masterpiece. I know this likely isn't

how God works, but
what a downy thought.

That an appraiser might gather
up all this blood and say,

Congratulations.
You kept your heart soft.

NADIA ARIOLI

A GHOST STORY

When I was little, my parents got my older sister her first Halloween costume. It was a pink dress with red sparkles and taffeta. It came with a red cone hat with an elastic chin strap that sat atop her golden head. My parents decided, last minute, that I too was old enough to go trick-or-treating. Perhaps I had begged enough. In a moment of genius only moms can muster and not having money for two costumes, my mother realized I had a green sweatshirt and a green pair of sweatpants. She cut out two large cardboard circles, spray-painted them the same shade of green, tied them together, and put them over me, besweatered, like a boardwalk sign.

At each neighbor's house, the parents handing out candy would say "Oh! What a pretty princess! And . . . a turtle? Are you a turtle?" And I would say "I'm a pea! We are sisters! She's a princess, and I am a pea! The princess and the pea!" I would have to say this at each and every house we visited.

Sometimes, I still feel like I'm faintly ridiculous and desperate to explain what I'm doing here, what I am supposed to be.

PETER A. WITT

HAPPENINGS ON A DARKENED STREET

Here's to plaid blankets, hot chocolate
with sticky marshmallows, as I sit
on the front porch enjoying a placid
starlit night, with the wayward moon
at half mast, and the imagined howl of
a haunting coyote somewhere
over my left shoulder.

Mockingbirds have gone quiet, mostly
from awe at the wonder of the milky way,
old dog curled at my feet, long ago fed
and walked, now dreaming of grey
squirrels, paws running after them
in a frantic, unrequited chase.

Neighbor slides by, quietly says hello,
without expecting an answer, I silently
wave, which is unseen in the darkness
of our unlighted street—I respond with awe
to the call of the long-eared owl who nests
in the pine tree branches which swaddle
my house in blackened slumber.

Sleep soon invades my heavy eyes,
dog is ready to claim territory on my
quilted bed, I'm anxious to see
if there are any squirrels and owls
in my late night dreams.

PATRICK DRUGGAN

LAST BUS HOME

I would pick up a half brick,
when I came to where the light failed,
where the road became night,
the mist filling the sand pit hollows
beyond the boortrees on my right

Surrounded by the bings
dredged up and pushed aside
this unseen steepness.
A place as dead as a battlefield.

Feeling my way through the memory of daylight,
the leafless hawthorns, coal against the darkness,
the adrenaline would chill my neck as hackles raised

I'd feel exposed,
the cold terror
as I walked alone,

at fifteen,
along the pit road
each winter night

like every woman feels
in every city,
under streetlight.

CANDY!

If Betty Lou Briggs had to choose her favorite holiday, it would have to be Halloween.

Even as a little girl, she had found Halloween magical. Choosing a costume was a special occasion, temporarily transforming her into someone—or something—entirely new.

As she grew older, the arrival of fall remained a glorious event. Pumpkins, mums, scarecrows and caramel apples—the bridge between the lazy summer heat and the winter’s chill. The entire season was colorful, brisk and unique among holidays.

Betty Lou couldn’t help but remember her own daughter Jenny enjoying the spell of Halloween. Each year they would get excited about choosing the perfect costume and carving the pumpkin. But Jenny was gone now. So was her husband, Tom. Betty Lou missed them both, of course, but fall remained was a special time each year, filled with warm, wonderful memories.

For days in advance of the actual day, Betty Lou decorated the porch of the Briggs home. Garlands of autumn leaves wound the banisters and colorful mums splashed across the porch. She converted the classic Victorian into an autumn charmer. Her home, perched on the corner of two main streets, was always the destination of many Halloween visitors.

For weeks, Betty Lou had been scouring for trick or treat candies. How lovely to hand out goodies to the little ghosts and fairies who rang her bell. Betty Lou now answered the ringing doorbell alone. But Jenny remained with her and Tom, no doubt, watched lovingly.

She found that one way to recapture treasured memories of the past was to buy and disburse candy from bygone years. Many such candies were still available if she looked hard enough.

Because the children receiving them were unfamiliar with such names as Turkish Taffy and Oh, Henry, the candy seemed special and exotic. Returning visitors were intrigued by these tasty treats, some calling Betty Lou the “candy queen.” Super heroes and ninja warriors alike felt honored to have received candy unlike most of their friends.

As always, when the big night arrived, the porch pumpkin was lit and Betty Lou was ready, a stash of candy bags at the ready. Bit-o-Honey and Chuckles were waiting to join the festivities. The porch light would remain on until the last butterscotch ball was gone.

This year, the evening was a busy one. The first little pirate was followed by a stream of ghouls, ballerinas, zombies and even a tandem horse which had difficulty navigating the front steps. Despite masks and costumes, many participants were recognizable, including one little cowboy who screamed, “Hi, Betty Lou. It’s me, Ricky. Trick or Treat.”

After a flurry of visitors, Betty Lou began to feel weary and was almost relieved to see the crowd beginning to thin. As she stopped to sip a cold glass of tea, she heard another faint knock.

She opened the door to find a tiny creature holding a large bag. Dressed as a troll, it appeared to be a boy about 3 years old. “Oh, my,” she whispered. “How cute . . . I mean scary.”

“Twick or tweet,” the troll smiled, showing his tiny teeth.

“Here you go.” She scooped up a handful of various candies and placed them in his bag.

The troll smiled broadly, eyeing the hearty treasure. “Wow!” Turning around on the porch, he held the bag out toward the dark. “Look, Daddy.”

A large man stepped out of the shadows and peered into the bag. He stuck a giant clamshell hand into the booty and lifted out a sampling of contents. He raised his eyes toward Betty Lou. “What is this stuff?” he barked. “What kind of treats are you giving these kids?”

She smiled uneasily. “Why, I always hand out traditional candies. The children enjoy them because they are different than

CAROL EDWARDS

DROP-OFF

I feel safer from high enough away,
no sand to scrape soft places
or fold in the arches of my feet,
no renegade waves to plow
headfirst into my precarious perch
that juts to meet the soothingly
violent surf because it's broody
and romantic
and close, so close, but far enough
to keep from soaking jeans and shoes
lest my skin be doomed to chafe raw
in the long traipse back to the car,

no kelp to brush bare ankles
and bring to mind vividly terrifying
anecdotes my cousins told
of people tangled with stinging jellyfish
or rabid monster eels, or sharks
in a bloodlust rage charging all the way to shore
over a split heel, a scraped toe,
no carnivorous fanged fish or beaked
cephalopod lurking just past the drop-off
craving taste of woman-flesh,
and no riptide to drag me by the knees
into an undertow and out to sea
where I'd either suffocate
crushed to the ocean floor

most of the Halloween goodies." Then to ease the rising tension, she said softly, "You must be new to the area. Well, welcome to the neighborhood."

"How dare you give this old, stale candy to my son. He is expecting M&Ms, Starbursts and stuff like everyone else." The man walked slowly toward Betty Lou.

She retreated slowly toward her house and felt a pang of fear. "I'm sorry for any misunderstanding. This is the only candy I have. It's . . . it's what I always give and is very popular."

"Some people dump their leftovers onto unsuspecting kids. That's just unfair." The father turned to see if his son was pleased with the candy. But the boy had left the porch and disappeared into the dark.

The man approached Betty Lou and stood a few feet away. He was breathing deeply and seemed a little frightening.

Betty Lou said calmly, "This is a night for the children. I'm sorry if you are upset." She reached into her basket of goodies and retrieved a Tootsie Pop, holding it toward the man. "Here's an extra treat. Consider it a welcome to the neighborhood token."

The man extended his giant hand toward the candy. Then he raised his arm to grab Betty Lou by the throat. The pressure of his strong grasp caught her off guard. His hand still on the throat, he backed her up against the front door. Continuing to squeeze, he felt her body weaken and then wilt. She slid gently to the floor.

The man turned silently away and left the porch, looking for his little troll. Together, they held hands and continued down the street.

Halloween was nearly over.

or dehydrate
in an endless saline waste, the sun
slow sucking moisture out, like I'm
a bastille and it must mercilessly
wrestle captives free
drop. by. drop.
until naught but a corpse remains
bones and bloated flesh
adrift on murky tides,
waves of blue despoiled by
iridescent oils coiled with
glaring polystyrene islands,
beaks and teeth exacting their pounds of flesh
for the debts of violence we owe.

MATT HENRY

THE SCENTS & THE SOUNDS

When I was five,
I had an unrelenting fever.

My late grandmother would sing
"You are my sunshine"
to me as I'd fall asleep in the hospital:

I remember the smell
of rubbing alcohol
and delirium.

Thirteen years later
from a different hospital,

the anesthesia half-way
wore off during the drive home
and nausea set in:

I remember the smell of
my shoulder's sterilized surgical site
and blood soaked gauze

listening to
Heavens on repeat,

trying not to vomit.

KACI SKILES LAWS

THE SCARIEST THING

Now,
I see the shadow
of my Italian greyhound's wagging tail

but then I remember
that she's been gone
since last summer.

Too many people
see my doppelgänger
this year

when help comes too late.

The scariest thing about our old farmhouse is not our ball that bounces all on its own down the linoleum hallway at night. It is not that when we ask our grandma about it, and she lies and says it is our dog, Roly, jumping on and off the porch, we know it's a lie.

The scariest thing is not the attic door that has almost an entire roll of duct tape covering its edges; it is not that the last time it was left open the light kept coming on even after the light bulb was removed. The scariest thing is not the lie about the reason why it was meticulously covered and forgotten, the lie that says if it is left alone the draft is too terrible, too cold.

The scariest thing is not the black widow hiding in the crevice of the brown car's window that never does drive very far. It is not the wolf spiders that if I turn over the rug in the hallway run in every direction, and I lose count of them. It is not the grasshoppers that won't let me walk an inch without covering me with their long bodies and sticky legs or the rat snake stretched across the second step of the porch with its jaw unhinged, eating a toad; it isn't that my grandma steps over it multiple times before she hears me call out to her.

The scariest thing is not the grease trap that almost swallows my sister whole in her faux fur coat. It is not that, my sister, at night can see holograms of connect-a-dots and clowns and trains that pass right through her and disappear on the other side.

It is not the family that came long before us who cut a hole into the middle of the living room floor and sacrificed goats, and God knows what else, to Satan. It is not the people who come after us, the man who stomps my grandma's little dog to death, or the woman screaming outside at night but no one can find her.

The scariest thing is not that some houses are born bad or

that long after the house is torn down the debris will go on living, rotting into soil, or will be burned and the smoke will seep into something else.

The scariest thing is that no one will remember the grace within those walls that once stood, that the house, no matter its final resting place, will keep every secret just like the ones who lived there, the ones that came to laugh and love and cry and die there.

KACI SKILES LAWS

ADVICE FOR GIRLS IN THE AFTERLIFE

Please don't date the next see-through guy you see,
just go to therapy; it'll save you so much grief.
Find a trauma informed therapist, one well versed
in codependency, narcissistic personality disorder,
C-PTSD, sheets. If they look at you
like they've just seen a ghost, run, *if you can*.
If not, no worries, disappearing is better for your heart
and wears less on your joints. Above all else
just take a nap or have a good cry or both.

P.S. I'm sorry you're dead. If you get too lonely
or bored, feel free to haunt my mother-in-law.
It could be fun. You deserve to be happy.
Fuck, you deserve designer sheets
and a whole god damn house all to yourself.

THANK YOU FOR READING

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the publications in which some of these works previously appeared. We appreciate your hard work in getting these pieces out into the world, and we're thrilled to have had the opportunity to share them again.

These entries are organized in the order in which they appear in Issue 3 of Lit Shark Magazine: The Spooky (TEETH) Edition:

"In a Disused Graveyard" by Robert Frost is available in the public domain.

"House in the Country" by Lynn White was first published in *Bewildering Stories*, Issue 991 (2023).

"The Empty House" by Lynn White was first published in *Secret Passages* from Pilcrow and Dagger (July 2018).

"Drop-Off" by Carol Edwards was first published in *Beyond the Sand and Sea* by Southern Arizona Press.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Thank you to all of our lovely, imaginative contributors in Issue 2! Here's more about each of them and where to find them.

EDWARD AHERN—he/him—Fiction

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over four hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and eight books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of eight review editors. You can find him on social media under various names: @bottomstripper on Twitter, @edwardahern1860 on Instagram, and /EdAhern73 on Facebook.

NADIA ARIOLI—Poetry

Nadia Arioli is the cofounder and editor in chief of Thimble Literary Magazine. A three-time nominee for Best of the Net, Arioli's poetry can be found in Cider Press Review, Rust + Moth, McNeese Review, Penn Review, Mom Egg, and elsewhere. Essays have been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize and can be found in Hunger Mountain, Heavy Feather Review, SOFTBLOW, and elsewhere. Artwork has appeared in Permafrost, Kissing Dynamite, Pithead Chapel, and Poetry Northwest. Arioli's forthcoming collections are with Dancing Girl Press and Fernwood Press.

MAGGIE BAYNE—she/her—Fiction

Maggie Bayne is a fiction writer who lives in upstate New York. Her life-long habit of writing has shifted to a more serious pursuit since retirement. A dedicated fan of the short story, she has found that a well-crafted adventure rarely needs more than 3,500 words to grab and satisfy the readers. She has had the following published: “The Blizzard” in *October Hill Magazine*, Winter 2022, Volume 6, Issue 4; “Rescuing Addie Stiles” in *Remington Review*, Spring 2023; and “Gourmet Delight” in *ASP Literary Journal* #9, July 8, 2023.

JANET BOWDAN—she/her—Poetry

Janet Bowdan’s poems have appeared in *APR*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *The Rewilding Anthology*, *Sequestum* and elsewhere. The editor of *Common Ground Review*, she teaches at Western New England University and lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with her husband, their son, a buttered-toast-thief of a cat and a book-nibbling chinchilla.

CATHERINE BROADWALL—she/her—Poetry

Catherine Broadwall is the author of *Water Spell* (Cornerstone Press, forthcoming 2025), *Fulgurite* (Cornerstone Press, 2023), *Shelter in Place* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2019), and other collections. Her writing has appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She was the winner of the 2019-2020 COG Poetry Award and a finalist for the 2021 Mississippi Review Prize in poetry. She is an assistant professor at DigiPen Institute of Technology, where she teaches creative writing and literature. Her website is www.catherinebroadwall.com.

BILL DeARMOND—he/him—Fiction

Dr. Bill DeArmond is Professor of Mass Communications and Film at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas.

PATRICK DRUGGAN—he/him—Poetry

Patrick grew up in Glasgow and went to university there. He is a scientist and has worked on diagnostic tests for cancers and infections on and off for the past 35 years. He is dyslexic. He learned to write poetry when no-one was looking. He has been published in *Dreich*, *Culture Matters*, *Black Nore*, the *Full Circle Anthology of Chester Poets*, and in Yaffle Press’ *Whirlagust IV*.

CAROL EDWARDS—she/her—Poetry

Carol Edwards is a northern California native transplanted to southern Arizona. She grew up reading fantasy and classic novels, climbing trees, and acquiring frequent grass stains. She currently enjoys a coffee addiction and raising her succulent army. Her favorite shark is the whale shark.

Her poetry has been published in numerous publications, both online and print, including *Space & Time*, *Uproar* literary blog, Southern Arizona Press, White Stag Publishing, *The Post Grad Journal*, *Written Tales Magazine*, and *The Wild Word*, and is forthcoming in Black Spot Books. Her debut poetry collection, *The World Eats Love*, released on April 25, 2023 from The Ravens Quoth Press. You can follow her on Instagram at @practicallypoetical, as well as Twitter/X and FB at @practicallypoet. Her website is www.practicallypoetical.wordpress.com.

LYNETTE ESPOSITO—she/her—Poetry

Lynette G. Esposito, MA Rutgers, has been published in *North of Oxford*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Front Porch*, *Deep Overstock*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Self*, *Fox Chase Review*, and others. She is mostly a poet but also a cat lover. She was married to Attilio J. Esposito and lives in Southern NJ.

KEN GOLDMAN—he/him—Fiction

Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an Active member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories have appeared in over 970 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over twenty due for publication in 2023. Since 1993 Ken’s tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written six books : three anthologies of short stories, *You Had Me at ARRGH!!* (Sam’s Dot Publishers), *Donny Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (A/A Productions) and *Star-Crossed* (Vampires 2); and a novella, *Desiree*, (Damnation Books). His first novel *Of a Feather* (Horrific Tales Publishing) was released in January 2014. *Sinkhole*, his second novel, was published by Bloodshot Books August 2017.

DAVE GREGG—he/him—Poetry and Fiction

Despite the implications of a multi-decade life one passion survives, poetry and prose. I've been writing for better or worse for nearly six decades, receiving awards from the San Diego Writers Guild, Showcase Society & Barnes & Noble. Currently a member of the Missouri State Poetry Society. I am grateful for the privilege of appearing in Lit Shark!

MATT HENRY—he/him—Poetry

2017 Graduate of Indiana University, Master of Arts in English. Likes ice hockey, guitar, writing/reading poetry, and video games. Dislikes cockroaches and dust mites.

SARAH HOZUMI—she/her—Fiction

Sarah Hozumi has lived near Tokyo for about 14 years and has loved almost every minute of it. To read short stories she's had published, and to read her blog mostly about all things Japan, please visit sarahhozumi.com. You can also follow her on Facebook at sarahjhozumi.

KATIE HUDSON—she/her—Fiction

Katie is a travel and fiction writer from Tennessee, currently based out of the Appalachia region but soon traveling and living in Rome, Italy.

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON—he/him—Poetry

Michael Lee Johnson is a song lyricist and an internationally published poet in 44 countries. and he has been nominated for six Pushcart Prize awards and six Best of the Net awards. He has published several poetry collections and anthologies, and he has created over 285 YouTube poetry videos as of April 2023.

DEBORAH KERNER—she/her—Poetry

Deborah Kerner is a poet and an artist living in Ojai, California. Her poems have appeared in many poetry journals such as *Rabid Oak*, *Mad Swirl*, and *Synchronized Chaos*. She shares a modest house with her husband, Richard, who is also an artist. She lived and taught in India. Over many years, her travels to

various places in the world have deepened an all-embracing vision of being alive on a radiant planet. Deborah and her husband facilitate week-long retreats for the Krishnamurti Center in Ojai, focusing on the potential for a transformation of human consciousness. A selection of Deborah's poems and art can be seen on her website: deborahkerner.com

ZOLTÁN KOMOR—he/him—Fiction

Zoltán Komor was born in June 14, 1986. He lives in Nyiregyhaza, Hungary. He writes surreal short stories and published in several literary magazines (*Horror*, *Sleaze and Trash*, *Drabblecast*, *The Phantom Drift*, *Gone Lawn*, *Bizarro Central*, *Bizarrocast*, *Thrice Fiction Magazine*, *The Missing Slate*, *The Gap-Toothed Madness*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Kafka Review*, etc.) His first English book, titled *Flamingos in the Ashtray: 25 Bizarro Short Stories*, was released by Burning Bulb Publishing in 2014, his second English book, titled *Tumour-djinn*, was released by MorbidbookS in the same year, and his third collection, *Turd Mummy*, was released by StrangeHouse Books in 2016. His latest novel, *The Radiator Boy and The Holly Country*, was published by Potter's Grove Press in 2021. Follow him on Instagram at @zoltankomor

KACI SKILES LAWS—she/her—Poetry

Kaci Skiles Laws is a closet cat-lady and creative writer who reads and writes voraciously in the quiet moments between motherhood and managing Crohn's Disease. She was a 2023 winner for Button Poetry's short form contest, and her short story Eugene was nominated for a pushcart prize in 2022 by Dead Skunk Mag. Her most recent poetry has appeared in 3Elements Review, River Teeth Journal, Blood Tree Literature, and elsewhere. Her most recent book is a horror collection called, "Whose Hand Was I Holding?" which is available on Amazon. <https://kaciskileslawsriter.wordpress.com/>

BETH MATHISON—she/her—Poetry

Beth Mathison has work published in *The Foliate Oak* (including the 2008 and 2009 annual "Best Of" print editions), 365Tomorrows.com, MysteryAuthors.com, *Drops of Crimson*, *Colored Chalk*, and

The Citron Review. Stories published with Untreed Reads include the *Mobsters for the Holidays*; *Criminally Hilarious Short Stories* (currently being made into an audio book) and the short story romance series, *Young at Heart*. Beth lives with her family in the Upper Midwest, and during the cold winter months, she dreams of snorkeling in the Riviera Maya.

GRACIE MCKEEVER—she/her—Fiction

A native New Yorker, Gracie C. McKeever has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience. She has since gone on to author several decidedly more grown-up novels, novellas and series, most of which can be found at Siren Publishing under multiple sub-genres beneath the erotic romance umbrella. Her work has also appeared in the anthologies *Sensuality: Caramel Flava II* and *Bold Strokes Books' In Our Words*. *Control Alt Delete* (scifi-horror) appeared in *Allegory Ezine's* Fall 2022 issue and is Gracie's first short story published outside of the erotic, romance or paranormal romance genres. Find her at <https://www.graciecmckeeper.com>

ALAN MEYROWITZ—he/him—Fiction

Alan Meyrowitz retired in 2005 after a career in computer research. His writing has appeared in *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Existere*, *Front Range Review*, *Jitter*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Lucid Rhythms*, *The Nassau Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Shark Reef*, *Shroud*, *The Storyteller*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, and others.

LAUREN K. NIXON—she/her—Poetry and Fiction

An ex-archaeologist who swapped the past for the present, Lauren K. Nixon is the author of numerous short stories, *The Fox and the Fool*, *Mayflies*, *The Last Human Getaway* and *The House of Vines*, along with poetry collections (including *Wild Daughter*, *Marry Your Chameleon* and *umbel.*). She has also written two plays – one even on purpose!

Her poems appear in *Rhubarb: Seconds*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *The Lake*, *Apricot Press*, *Dream Catcher*, *The Dawntreader*, *Reach*, and *The Black Nore Review*, along with several collections by *The Superstars*. When she's not writing, she can be found pootling

around the garden or library, researching weird stuff, making miniatures, annoying the cats, and playing board games.

You can find out more at her website: (www.laurenknixon.com)

SANDRA NOEL—she/her—Poetry

Sandra Noel is a poet from Jersey, Channel Islands. She enjoys writing about the ordinary in unusual ways, her passion for sea swimming and her love of nature often weaving its way through her work. Sandra has poems featured online and print magazines and anthologies. Over the past year she has been longlisted, short-listed and highly commended in various competitions. She has poems on buses in Guernsey from the Guernsey International Poetry Competition 2022 and 2023. Sandra is finalising her first collection which will be published by Yaffle Press in 2024.

KELLY PINER—she/her—Fiction

Kelly Piner is a Clinical Psychologist who in her free time, tends to feral cats and searches for Bigfoot in nearby forests. Her writing is inspired by Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*. Ms. Piner's short stories have appeared in *Litro Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *The Last Girl's Club/Wicked News*, *Rebellion Lit Review*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Drunken Pen Writing*, *Storgy Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Weirdbook*, *Written Tales*, and others. Her stories have also appeared in multiple anthologies.

RIE SHERIDAN ROSE—she/her—Poetry

Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. A lot. Her short stories appear in numerous anthologies, including *Nightmare Stalkers* and *Dream Walkers: Vols 1 and 2*, and *Killing It Softly*. She has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and lyrics for dozens of songs. Find more info on www.riewriter.com.

ROBERTO SABAS—he/him—Fiction

Roberto Sabas is an emerging author who has written fiction and poetry, following in the footsteps of his well-read father (who also wrote poetry, unpublished). His publications include short fiction and poems in anthologies by Devil's Party Press, the *News-Gazette*, *The Alchemist Review* (UIS), Champaign Urbana Poetry

Group (Crows On A Line), Weird Tales, and Pygmalion Fest 2020 (streamed video reading), *deLuge Journal*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and most recently Urbana Arts & Culture Program. He has also had a career as a commercial artist and can easily be googled and looked up on social media. He's grateful for the loving support of his wife and children.

LARRY SCHUG—he/him—Poetry

Larry Schug is retired after a life of various kinds of physical labor. He is currently a volunteer writing tutor at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University. He lives with his wife and one cat in a little house on 55 acres of permanently preserved land in St. Wendel, Twp., Minnesota. He has published eight books of poems, the latest being *A Blanket of Raven Feathers* with North Star Press. His website is www.larryschugpoet.com

ANNIE SULLIVAN—she/her—Poetry and Fiction

Annie Sullivan is the author of three young adult novels published by an imprint of HarperCollins. They include *A Touch of Gold*, *A Curse of Gold*, and *Tiger Queen*. She is also the co-author on one of the well-known "...For Dummies" books. She grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, and received her master's degree in Creative Writing from Butler University. She loves fairytales, everything Jane Austen, and traveling. You can find more at her website: <https://anniesullivanauthor.com/>

MCKENZIE LYNN TOZAN—she/her—Poetry

McKenzie Lynn Tozan is a formerly Midwestern writer, transplanted to coastal Croatia. She is a published poet and novelist, the Editor-in-Chief of *Lit Shark* and the *Banned Book Review*. Her poems, essays, and book reviews have been featured in *The Rumpus*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Rogue Agent*, *POPSUGAR*, *Motherly*, and *Encore Magazine*. Her short horror story collection, *What We Find in the Dark*, and her horror novella, *Black As Black*, are both forthcoming from The Shiver Collective in 2023. Find more at www.mckenzielynntozan.com

LYNN WHITE—she/her—Poetry

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her poetry is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award. Find Lynn at: <https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com>

PETER A. WITT—he/him—Poetry

Peter A. Witt is a Texas poet, with poems appearing in on-line and print publications such as *Bluebird Word*, *The Wise Owl*, *Inspired*, *Verse-Virtual*, and *Live Encounters*. He is a former university professor who now devotes his time to researching and writing family history and poetry. He is also an avid birder.

SUBMIT TO LIT SHARK OR WRITE FOR US!

Thank you again to everyone who submitted to Issue 3: The Spooky (TEETH) Edition of *Lit Shark Magazine*. It was honestly such a lovely process, and I'm so grateful for your support and continuing this journey.

If you're interested in submitting for Issue 4 and beyond, here is the most pertinent information (and you can always look at our website, too—www.litshark.com).

We one more issue being published in 2023 (yay!): one more general issue like Issue 1.

Issue 4 Deadline to Submit: December 11, 2023

Poetry: Up to 5 poems or 10 pages

Fiction and Nonfiction: Up to 15 pages or 4500 words

Our final issue of the year is open to general submissions. Open to anything! Surprise us! We just ask for minimal sexual content and expletives (and sharks portrayed as villains will be considered, but they'll primarily appear in our annual spooky editions).

And don't forget our monthly Poem of the Month Contest!

That brings us up through the end of 2023. How exciting?!

Now, if you're more of a nonfiction writer, interested in writing essays, theory pieces, book reviews, and the like, this next section is for you:

How to Write for Us as a Regular Contributor at Lit Shark:

In addition to the work our Editor-in-Chief is doing on the site, we've also welcomed to the Shark family several regular contributors. Each one enjoys writing book reviews, but their interests vary wonderfully beyond that, ranging from intuitive creativity, current conservation efforts, nature and ecopoetics, audio ecology, and green living and conservation for families.

If you identify with one or more of these subjects, or if you enjoy another subject that could relate, we would love to hear from you. A range of writing experience is welcome, as are those with some background in biology, conservation and sustainability, and of course, teaching. As long as you love our mission and believe you could positively contribute to it, we would love to hear from you.

How Do You Submit?

On our website, we have submission portals for *Lit Shark* (emerging and established writers), *Lit Pup* (children and teen writers), and our Shiver team.

But if you have any technical difficulties, no worries! You can send McKenzie an email at mckenzie@litshark.com.

Contributors can send all of their information in the body of an email, including their pitch concepts.

Creative writers should put all of their identifying information in the body of the email, but their creative submission should be attached as a Word docx. or PDF (one document!) with no identifying information, so we can ensure you receive a fair, blind reading.

Thank you all for your support! Happy writing and happy submitting! And thank you again for reading Issue 2.

Looking Forward to 2024? (Us, Too!)

We've had so much fun this year and are really looking forward to how we can make 2024 even better. Here's what we know so far, and maybe this will lead to a submission opportunity for you!

Lit Shark's Best Of 2023: Coming January 2024

This is pretty self-explanatory, but we'll be going back through all of the pieces that we accepted throughout 2023, and our favorites from the year will appear in the anthology, but we will ALSO reach out to each of those writers about including something new in the anthology, as well, to give us all something new and interesting to read!

We're loving our monthly Poem of the Month Contest, and we'll continue to run that every month throughout 2024 with one winner and several honorable mentions each month.

Issue 1 (Winter 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Submissions will be considered in January, February, and March 2024, and the issue will come out at the end of March. General submissions; all welcome!

Issue 2 (Spring 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Submissions will be considered in April and May 2024, and the issue will appear at the beginning of June. General submissions; all welcome!

Issue 3 (Summer 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Submissions will be considered in June, July, and August for submissions that cover all things Shark Week, marine life, sea stories, conservation, etc., and the issue will come out at the end of August.

Issue 4 (Spooky Season 2024) of Lit Shark Magazine:

Spooky submissions, dark retellings, and campy horror and shark tales and poems will be considered in September and October 2024 to appear for Halloween 2024!

And Lit Shark's Best of 2024 will then appear in Nov-Dec! Yay!

FIN.
(UNTIL ISSUE #4...)

POETRY & PROSE

contributed by

- EDWARD AHERN • NADIA ARIOLI •
- MAGGIE BAYNE • JANET BOWDAN •
- CATHERINE BROADWALL • BILL DEARMOND •
- PATRICK DRUGGAN • CAROL EDWARDS •
- LYNETTE ESPOSITO • KEN GOLDMAN •
- DAVE GREGG • MATT HENRY •
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- MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON • DEBORAH KERNER •
- ZOLTÁN KOMOR • KACI SKILES LAWS •
- BETH MATHISON • GRACIE C. MCKEEVER •
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LIT SHARK MAGAZINE

www.litshark.com

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