

FALL 2022

THE Tentaculum



Michael Bettendorf
Harley Carnell
Michelle Ann King

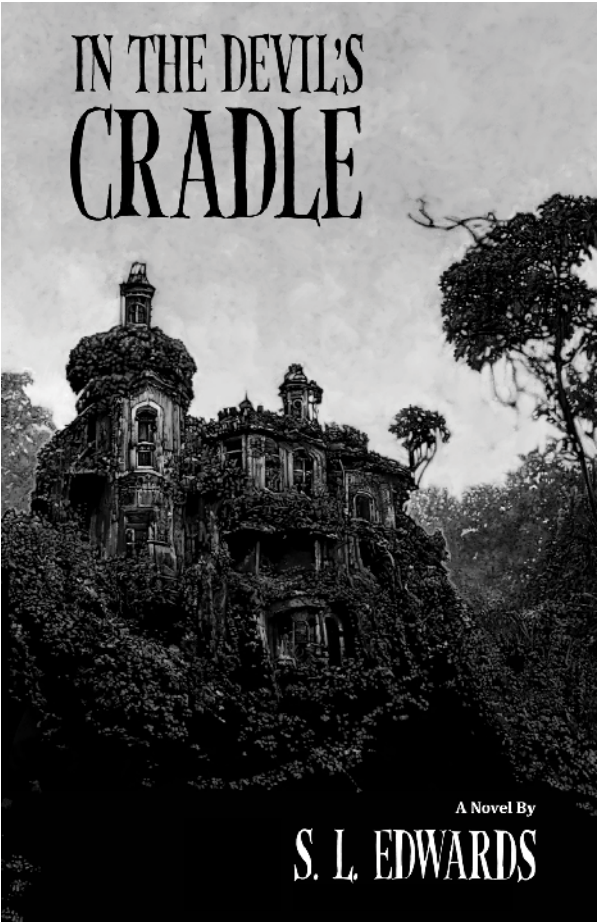
THE FOLLOWER'S REVEL

by Jonathan Louis Duckworth



“*In the Devil’s Cradle* is rich, sweepingly grand in the manner of the best historical fiction, and haunting in its detail of lives caught up in the machinery of political change. A fine, assured debut by Edwards that has me looking forward to more.”

—Laird Barron, author of *Swift to Chase*



Senator William Esquivel is in a rush to save his family’s life. Fleeing political persecution, William takes his family from the capital and flees to the family stronghold of Rio Rojo, a town known as the birthplace of William’s ancestor, a powerful former dictator whose legacy haunts the nation of Antioch. But even as the Esquivel family seeks refuge, the country continues to fray around them. As Antioch bleeds, ancient hatreds, secrets, and ghosts pour from its wounds.

From S. L. Edwards comes debut novel *In the Devil’s Cradle*, a captivating haunted house story where the house is an entire country, a nation coming apart due to influences both internal and external, both natural and supernatural.

Trade Paperback · 244 pp · \$18.99 · ISBN-13: 978-1-956252-03-3

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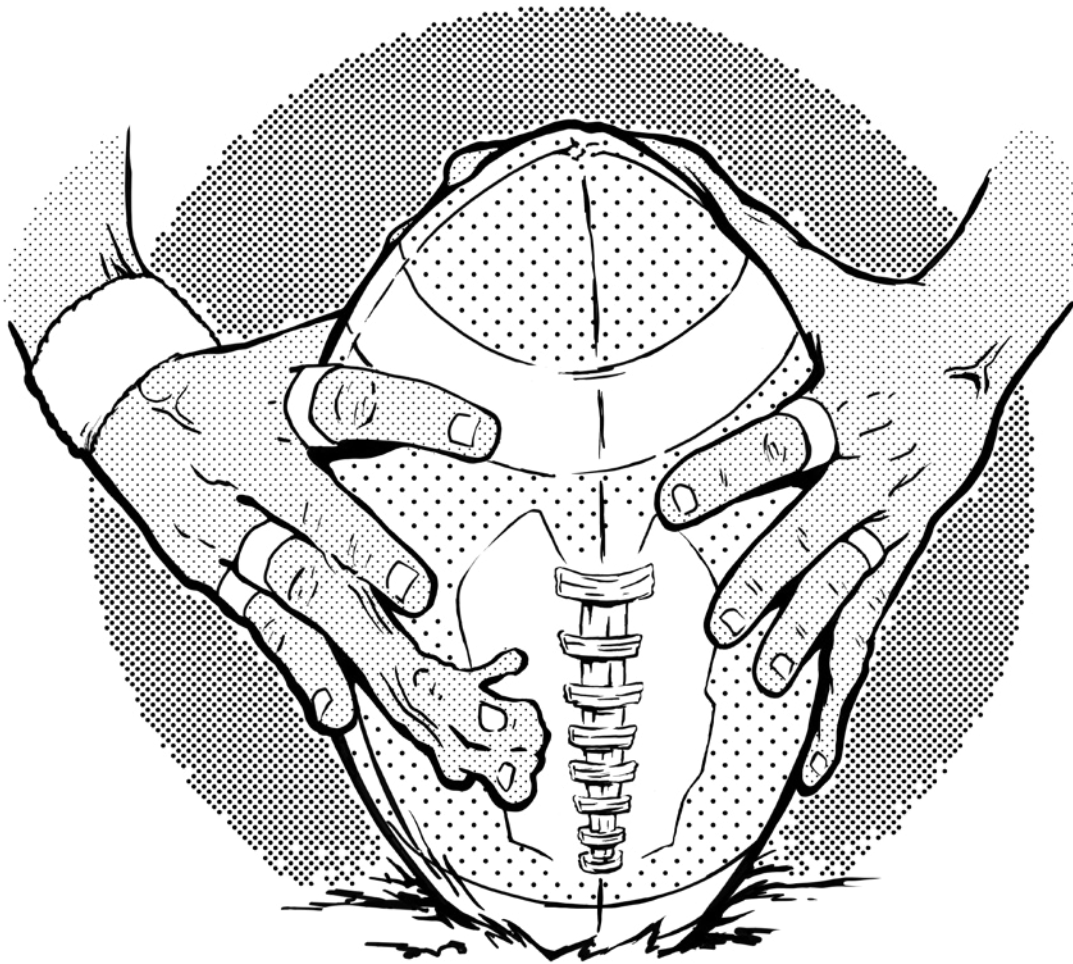
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Strange stories, from strange authors, for strange readers.

THE Tentaculum

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PERSONAL BEST

by Michael Bettendorf

IT'S hard to see eye to eye with your parents when they're always looking down on you. I cannot help that I am young. Or that I am small. Or that I don't want to play football. It's how I am — who I am — and it will never be good enough.

I don't hate football. Honest. I like it, but I like numbers more. And if I had my way, I'd sit on the sidelines and worry about the numbers, but Mom and Dad say I won't win a National Title by worrying about pass completions and yards per carry, and I certainly won't get a Super Bowl ring either.

"There's no *I* in *team*," my dad says. "The only numbers you should care about are on the scoreboard."

Right now though, the only thing I'm counting are the number of empty bottles next to the recliner in the basement. Dad is on his seventh, his average for a Saturday night when he pulls out the old grainy tapes to watch his knee injury over and over. You can see my mom cheering in the background until she sees his knee twisted, mangled. Her hopes of being married to a pro-baller, gone. The ring already on her finger. So young.

There's a seventy-five percent chance he'll say, "... could have gone pro ..." before he starts to get weepy drunk. There's a twenty-five percent chance he'll talk about my dead brother Kyle to himself. And there's a one-hundred percent chance Mom will yell at him if he does.

That won't happen though because Mom is out tonight with the other pee wee football moms, talking about this new formula from Canada and picking up our new uniforms for the playoffs. Probably drinking wine, too.

I take a calculated risk and go into Kyle's room. Holofoil football cards hang on the wall, glimmering in protective cases. Marshall Faulk's rookie card when he was on the Colts. Kurt Warner. Jerry Rice. Urlacher. Wrinkled college ball cards sit in uneven piles on his dresser, dusty and untouched for a couple of years. Ahman Green. A torn Manning card wearing Tennessee gear.

A photo of my brother is taped to the vanity mirror. He's wearing our pee wee team's colors. Burgundy, silver, and black. He looks taller than I remember. His leg is propped up on his helmet, and he's smiling because they'd just won, despite the turnovers he allowed.

I can still hear Dad. *There's no I in team, and that's a goddamn good thing tonight.* Kyle's eyes are full of hate. *You want to play varsity someday? You'll have to learn how to throw a ball.* They wouldn't let me see him when he got sick. One day we tossed the ball around outside. The next, he was gone. Dad's yells still echoing off the shed, bouncing around my ears. *You call that a spiral? Keep throwing like that, and the only spiral you'll see is your football career.* I was young, but I've always been sharp. I remember hearing a doctor say something about a statistical anomaly. *Slim chance. The numbers don't add up.*

I peel the photo from the mirror and quietly shut the door behind me. I peek downstairs and see the bright blue glow of the TV. Dad's tape

is over. There are thirteen empty bottles and four crumpled cans. A personal best.

IROLL out of bed the next morning and quietly shuffle past my parents' room. Dad stumbled into bed late and will be moving slow until lunch. Mom is in the kitchen, scooping powder out of a large container into a shaker bottle. The label reads CreaTEEN and boasts about a new formula and being the "Number One Brand of protein powders for children."

"Go run your drills before your father gets up. Drink this when you're done," Mom says.

"Yeah, okay," I say. "Good morning."

She doesn't catch my tone, but instead twists the lid back onto the container of CreaTEEN and tousles my hair. She's better at hiding her hangovers than Dad, but that isn't hard. Hers have a sort of cold, delicate silence to them as opposed to Dad's clumsy and overt rankling.

I put on my shoes and head outside, not bothering with a stopwatch today. I don't record the times, but I keep track of the numbers in my head. Neither of them will notice anyway, not until they see it on the field.

I run until my lungs burn.

Next door, I hear Miles, our wide receiver, doing high knee drills.

I take a quick cooldown walk to the fence.

"How's it going, Miles?"

He jogs to the fence and says, "Fine. Coach is making me do extra sets because of the game."

I don't think I've ever heard him call our coach *dad*.

"You shouldn't be hard on yourself. We won the game. You averaged nine yards per reception, dude. Zero fumbles and so many first downs, I lost count. I never lose count. Your dad ... Coach ... shouldn't be freaking out."

"Yeah, well. He says if we play like that during the playoffs, we may as well not show up. Says we weren't hungry enough. Now he's got me running extra drills and taking ..."

*I run
until my
lungs
burn.*

He drifts off a bit like he’s out of breath. “Anyway. How about you?”

I tell him *fine* and “My dad got a personal best last night.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“You can come hide out later if you need to.”

The screen door slides open next door, and Miles jogs away without another word. The white vinyl fence obscures him, but he looks taller than he did the other day. Miles is already above average height for pee wee football, but if he hits another growth spurt, he’ll be unstoppable. Coach might even move him to quarterback. We all know that’s what Coach wants — his son, the star quarterback.

I peer through the fence as he’s making excuses Coach doesn’t buy. He’ll be running all morning. Dad shuffles through the grass behind me, waving at Coach. I make excuses Dad doesn’t buy.

“Drink up.”

He hands me the shaker bottle Mom made. “Is this pre- or post-workout?”

“Until we’re playoff champs, it’s both.”

I want to ask if I’m old enough. It’s CreaTEEN, and I’m not a teenager yet, but neither was Kyle when he first started. Protein shakes were just part of the regimen. Protein bars. Supplements. Electrolytic blue and yellow drinks. Always have been. But the statistics of tradition are not infallible, and I am hesitant.

The wire ball breaks up clumps of powder as I give the bottle another quick shake. It’s chalky, apparently vanilla flavored. The consistency is thicker than I’m used to. A bit grainy.

“It’s the new formula,” Dad says.

Coach is standing at the fence now.

“You’ll see improvement in no time,” Coach says. “Isn’t that right, Miles? You’ve got to stay hungry if you want to win.”

Miles hunches over and throws up onto the grass while Dad and Coach laugh, saying things like “Now that’s the sign of a good

workout,” and reminiscing of their times playing ball together.

Mom pokes her head out of the patio door and calls me inside.

“Come here and try on your playoff jersey.”

My uniform is set out on the kitchen table. The jersey is our team’s signature burgundy, the pants and helmet are matte black, save for the silver accents that outline my name and number — number ten. The face mask is striking in silver. Our mouth guards are black with a custom design — jagged, sharp teeth outlined in shining silver.

“Go ahead,” Mom says. “Try it on.”

My jersey drapes over me like an extra layer of skin, and even without my shoulder pads, I know it’s too big, but I’m afraid to say anything.

Dad walks through the patio door, and there’s the smallest glint of pride as his eyes find me standing there, posed just like Kyle. He walks to the fridge and grabs a bottle of something electric blue. He glances at the clock on the microwave and grabs a beer too.



Paradox Puss

by Shane Bevin

The cat meows. There is silence.

Its purrs echo through the box, but the echo of silence is only silence. It curls up into a ball, tail wrapped around its nose. Stretching paws reveal claws and pink fleshy toe beans. Sharp and soft. Scratches on the inside of the box, an unmoving feline, a chirping Geiger counter and the tang of acid in the air. A cozy feline purrs contentedly within the box. A dark, cold space filled with silence and slowly drifting fur. The box cracks open to reveal a cat. Alive and dead.

An uncertain voice whispers, “Puss?”

“Don’t worry about the size,” he says. “It’ll fit.”

He tosses me the bottle and tells me to drink up.

I WALK next door after supper to see Miles under the guise that we’re going to go over plays and routes. Coach answers the door wearing neon running gear. He yanks out an earbud blaring ’90s dad rock.

“Hi. Miles and I are going to study routes.” I speak before he has a chance to ask if I’m here to play video games. He always does. The first couple of times, I thought it was a joke, but after he stomped an Xbox controller to pieces in front of us one time, I knew it was a threat. It always was.

Coach says, “Good, good. Glad to see you take this seriously,” and tells me Miles is in his room, icing his knees. I head toward the stairs that are lined with a runner resembling turf. It’s green and even has hash marks along each step. Twelve steps. Endzone to endzone.

“Before you head up, take a couple of these with you,” Coach says, handing me a handful of nutritional supplements pretending to be cookies. I don’t need to ask if they’re packed full of protein powder. I can smell it.

I reach the top of the stairs and hear Coach shut the front door, ready for his run.

“Your dad said to eat these,” I say and nudge my way into Miles’ room. He’s lying shirtless, stretched out on his bed, eyes fixed toward the ceiling.

“You know it’s bad when you can only see routes in the patterns in the paint,” he says. “Not just the ceiling. I see them in the woodgrain on the windowsills. I can’t even do homework without seeing yard markers on the notebook paper.”

I toss him a cookie. It tumbles and leaves a trail of dusty-crumbs on his bedsheets. His gaming chair squeaks as I sit.

“How’s the knee?”

“Fine,” he says, but when he moves to adjust the ice pack, I see lines like reflections in a pool all over his legs and lower back. I stand and

walk to the side of his bed to get a closer look. His thighs are covered with them. Deep and discolored.

“It’s nothing,” he says. “Just stretch marks from my growth spurt.”

Miles pulls his sheets up to his waist and takes a bite out of the cookie.

“Eat up,” he says.

I take a bite and recognize the gritty, chalk-vanilla CreaTEEN. It has a grimy after-taste. It coats my esophagus with a thin film when I swallow. It clings to my teeth. I set it down and toss our playbook on the bed. We study plays for a little while, but Miles isn’t focusing. He’s distracted, exhausted. He’s in the best shape of anyone on our team, and I know he’s hurt. I see it in his eyes. The same hurt, hateful look Kyle had in his picture.

Miles dozes off, and I take the opportunity to crumble the rest of my cookie to dust into his trash can. There are wrappers upon wrappers in his can of CreaTEEN protein bars. An empty container of supplements. I pick up a plastic bottle that still has a thin blue ring of backwash at the bottom and read the label. All vitamins and minerals and a few multi-syllable words I can’t pronounce. The fine print mentions “mild sedative qualities. Not intended for long-term pain-relief. Not approved by the FDA.”

I read the suggested serving sizes. Age requirements. There’s no way he’s taking the right dosage. The numbers just don’t add up.

There’s a high-pitched sound like a guitar string being tuned too tight. What the hell?

Miles starts to twitch underneath the covers. His eyes are closed, but they squeeze tighter, and he grinds his teeth as his arms stretch before my eyes. *Plink-tnk*. The strings — his tendons tightening. Stretching, too fast for his bones. It’s a surreal, timeless moment, like watching the minute hand move on an analog clock. His muscles pulse below his skin, like a snake laying eggs. They grow in rapid, real time. It’s disorienting and choppy. A frame-by-frame replay.

Sweat slicks a bluish sheen across his face,

like he’s watching movies in the dark. I hesitate to touch him, not wanting to hurt him. Not wanting to be hurt.

“Miles!”

He doesn’t respond to me, but he’s breathing heavily. His chest heaves, and he coughs up a phlegmy wad of goo onto his lips. I turn his head sideways and prop it onto his pillow so he doesn’t choke, just like Kyle taught me to do if I ever caught Dad like this.

I grab his legs to keep him from shaking, leaving the thin sheet between my hands and his clammy skin. His muscles expand, forcing his skin to bloom like it’s a bubble of chewing gum. It pops between my fingers, his blood staining the sheets a sickly deep red. Burgundy, just like our uniforms. Just like the wine our moms drink.

Miles whimpers.

I wipe his mouth with a T-shirt I find on the bedroom floor.

“I’ll be back,” I say. “I’ll get help.”

Coach is still out running, and Miles’ mom left to deliver cookies to the rest of the team. I panic, running down the stairs and out the door, the sound of Miles’ tendons peeling and snapping at the joints trapped in my ears.

Mom catches me at the front door of our house.

“What’s the matter?”

“Miles. Something’s wrong . . . he’s . . .” I stop to catch my breath. “Call 911. His parents aren’t home, and he’s . . . growing.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Dad walks out of the kitchen and into the foyer, where I’ve frozen in place. My chest starts to hurt. Panic? Shock? I’m sweating, and I question every ache in my body. The tightness in my hands. The dull pain

in my ankles. My aching knees. The warm tension in my back. My neck’s cold stiffness.

“It’s okay,” Mom says. “I’ll run over there.”

I’ve become hypersensitive of my body, and for the first time, I feel like I have no control over it. It’s when I notice Dad is holding one of the CreaTEEN cookies that I realize I never did.

Dad says, “Calm down. Come sit and have a snack.”

I remember going to bed, but not falling asleep. Dad, yelling at me about how my diet plays into strength and conditioning. Mom, trying to hold it together, compliant. And me? I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if they’d come looking for me if I snuck out and ran away. Of course, I know they would. Not for me, but for the team. The pee wee playoffs are next weekend. The team needs me, no matter how small I am. I know the routes. The playbook. There’s no *I* in *team*.

MY REGIMEN is strict for the remaining days up to the playoffs. My meals and workouts, supervised. All autonomy is forgone for the sake of the team. I resist at first, but by the second day of controlled diet and even more rigorous workouts, I find myself coming around to it. It’s a whole new set of numbers to obsess over. More data to track. Weight gains. Strength gains. Increased endurance. Body fat percentages. A shift in perspective. A type of growth I’ve never seen before.

“Look at him go,” Dad says to Mom.

I’m doing squats in the backyard, and I surpass my personal best. Coach peers over the fence and gives a thumbs up to Dad. He yells at Miles, who is a head taller than the fence now, tall enough to stand eye level with him. “Get a

His muscles expand, forcing his skin to bloom like it’s a bubble of chewing gum. It pops between my fingers, his blood staining the sheets a sickly deep red.

load of that.”

My knees nearly buckle, but I press on.

No pain, no gain. There is no I in team.

There is no *I* in *me* anymore, either. I’ve grown into something else. Every joint in my body creaks as I drop the weights to the ground, my set complete. I chug the sedative blue drink, and a cooling numbness washes through me, the pain and soreness gone. It’s temporary. I know that, but so is everything else. I think about Kyle.

ISTICK Kyle’s photo in my helmet the morning of the playoffs. The university hosts us to give the pee wee players a taste of their futures. The stadium’s interior walls are lined with photos of academic all-Americans, national title banners, statues of Heisman trophy winners, glass trophy cases — tantalizing baubles of excellence.

In the locker room, we absentmindedly chug bottles of the blue sedative, numbing our minds and bodies for whatever brutality we’ll see on the field. The scars of our achievements cover our bodies. Foot-long stretch marks, our tiger stripes, ripple as we dress for the game.

“Remember, there’s no *I* in *team*,” Coach says. “The only way to ensure a win is to stay fierce. Stay hungry!”

Coach stands near the locker room door and slaps the tops of our helmets as we run by, ready to enter onto the field. A pep band plays our fight song. The pee wee cheer squad somersaults and chants along as we rush onto the field to meet our opponents.

We win the coin toss and choose to receive. Coach does this one-hundred percent of the time. *Stay hungry. Stay aggressive from the start.*

In the midst of the game, adrenaline coursing through me, I neglect the numbers. Instead, I listen to the groans of my joints and tug of my tendons stretching like taffy. I wait for the handoff over and over. The moment the ball touches my hands, I find my opening and run. I do this again and again, but despite my rapid

growth and gains — I’m still overpowered. *Too small.*

And it’s not just me; the whole team is being outplayed. Too weak. Too slow.

Coach screams from the sidelines.

“Stay hungry, goddammit!”

Parents roar from the bleachers, but all I hear is a cacophony of muddled complaints and commands.

“Bench number ten!”

“Don’t fuck this up!”

On second down, our center snaps the ball high. Our quarterback scrambles as Miles is swarmed by double coverage. The ball is shoveled to me as the pocket collapses and our quarterback is flattened. I carry the ball forward but take a hard hit for a loss.

The bleachers rumble with fuming parents. How could we get this far just to fuck it up this close to success? How could we fail our parents and coach this way?

I think about this while face down on the turf, countless defenders dogpiled on top of me. It was never about us, the players. It’s always been about Coach. His failures. My dad. His failures. My mom. The life she never had.

We huddle.

It’s third and long due to the botched snap.

Coach calls a play-action pass to Miles, but I tell our quarterback to give it to me.

“Trust me. I have an idea,” I say. “You’ll feel it, and you’ll know what to do. Remember. They did this to us. Our parents. Our coach. The protein shakes and supplements. They made us this way.”

The team is silent, but I know they understand. They’ve felt the shifts in their bodies too. I know they have. We all have Kyle’s eyes.

“Coach was right. There is no *I* in *team*, but he doesn’t understand what it truly means.”

We break and fall into place at the line of scrimmage.

Our center snaps the ball as he allows his body to give in — finally in control — his wrists snapping as the opposing team’s middle linebacker makes contact. Time slows, in this

moment, this fluid pocket of shared existence among the pee wee playoff teams. Our quarterback hands the ball to me, and for a second, I think he didn't catch onto the play. But as I push forward, I can feel that his hands haven't released the ball. Instead, his hands have fused to it, his joints yanked from their sockets. He is elastic and is being stretched as I run. The bodies of our guards and center linesman collide with the defensive line in a battering of pads. It makes no difference. Protective equipment is no help for our ailed bodies, and our offensive line groans and molds into a wall of flesh.

I am now protected by an impenetrable force, trudging its way, yard after hard-fought yard, downfield.

The opposing team's linebackers and safeties look on in abject revulsion. A chorus of panic and repugnant cries resounds from the bleachers. Our parents weeping into one another's arms. Siblings shower the stands in vomit.

I feel my stretch marks widen underneath my jersey. I imagine them pulled paper thin and translucent at my ribs; a weak gum bubble about to pop. They rip in places, and I bleed. I cradle the football and push onward. With my free hand, I plunge my fingers into the freshly torn holes to stop the bleeding. As I run, more holes form along my spine, and I'm afraid I won't make it.

"There's no *I* in *team*," Miles says, running beside me. He looks different now. Taller. Wider. A risen ball of dough. He runs his hands underneath my jersey and feels for the gashes, sticking his fingers inside of them until we, too, are fused.

We carry the ball downfield, paying no attention to the referees or defense or Coach.

Words like "abomination," and "disqualified," are thrown around, but we don't stop until we've gone all the way to the endzone.

My helmet has cracked in two. I feel the inky blotches of Kyle's photo as it is absorbed by my scalp; my brother's image tattooed onto my head. We shamble to the sidelines in dislocated movements. A singular team. Mom and Dad

won't look us in the eyes. We tilt until our neck pops, our flesh folding over itself so that Kyle's face hangs over them. My brother stares at them, the hatred in his eyes burning like the hunger in our hearts and the disappointment in theirs. Because when it comes to ruined children — they're two for two.

Their personal best.

Michael Bettendorf is a writer from the Midwestern U.S. His most recent work has appeared/is forthcoming at The Horror Tree, The Razor, The Martian Magazine, and elsewhere. He works in a high school library in Lincoln, Nebraska — a place he believes is too strange to be a flyover state.



WOODS FOR THE TREES

by Harley Carnell

ON THE second day of our search for John Shaw, John Shaw joins our search party.

Frustrated after years of incompetence and inaction from the authorities, and after Shaw recently committed a particularly brutal murder, we are combing the woods where he is known to operate and suspected to be hiding. I am trailing behind everyone else, not having realized when I volunteered

both how unfit I was and how deceptively strenuous it is to walk through a forest. It's as I begin walking a little quicker, trying to make up ground on the main group, that I hear footsteps crunching behind me. I turn, and there is Shaw.

"Hey, man," he says, giving me a nod and a little raise of his eyebrows. "What'd I miss?"

For a second, I'm stunned. This is John Shaw — *the* John Shaw. That I'm surrounded by twenty of the toughest guys in town,

all fueled by adrenaline and seething with a burning hatred for Shaw, does nothing to quell my terror. For a moment, I'm convinced I'm not going to be able to speak, but luckily I find my voice.

"Hey!" I call out. "Everyone, it's . . . it's him . . . it's John Shaw."

Footsteps and conversations stop dead, and everyone turns around.

"What's that, Mike?" Paul, the impromptu leader of our group, shouts back.

"It's him," I repeat. "John Shaw. He's here." I point at him.

"Hey," Shaw says to the group, "just come to help you guys look. Sorry I'm late."

Paul stares at him for a few seconds and then nods.

"No worries, man. Appreciate the help. We're in a bit of a rush here so can't give you the briefing I gave everyone else, but just want to let you know what you're in for. John Shaw is a highly violent, highly dangerous motherfucker. Physically, or morally, he'd have no problem snapping your neck like a twig. Also, he knows these woods like I know the back of my cock. We're all here, and we'll do what we can to protect you, but it's not impossible he could just come out from behind a tree and grab you before any of us'd even noticed. Just so you know what you're getting yourself in for."

"I understand," Shaw says solemnly. "It's worth the risk, though. We have to catch the bastard."

Paul laughs heartily.

"There, that's the spirit! Right, come on everyone, let's keep moving. It's gonna be dark soon." And with that, we're on the move again.

As we walk, thoughts are running through my head. Had they misheard me? Unlike Paul or Max or one of the other guys, I speak quietly. Was I just inaudible when I spoke?

As for not recognising Shaw . . . well,

that's a little more inexplicable. But, as Paul said, it's getting dark. And there's something about walking through the woods — the endless repetition of leaves and trees; the low, late-afternoon sun glinting through the trees and flicking into your eyes — that plays havoc with your sight. Perhaps them not seeing Shaw is like a mirage in reverse.

TO MY left, John Shaw says something to me.

"Sorry?" I say.

"How long you guys been looking?"

"A day. This is the second." I don't know why I answer him, and am barely conscious of doing so. All I know is that this is John Shaw. If I don't answer his questions, I am worried I might annoy him, and annoying John Shaw in John Shaw's woods is the very last thing you'd want to do.

He nods.

"Hopefully we'll catch him," he says.

I stare at him, incredulous.

"Although, just between you and me, I wouldn't be too hopeful of that," he continues. "Not to piss on the picnic or anything, it's just that these woods, they're," he shrugs, "well, they're big. Can't put it no simpler'n that. You forget that sometimes. There's whole countries smaller than these woods. I'm not saying geography's my strong point or nothing, but I reckon you could fit the whole UK into these woods, no problem. But hey, I guess if all of us are looking, we've got as good a chance as any of catching him. Oh, shit, my manners. My ma'd turn over in her grave. John Shaw."

He stretches his hand out, and mesmerized, I shake it. He has a firm grip. For a moment I'm convinced he won't let me go, but then he releases me.

We carry on walking in silence. I take a quick look over at him as we walk. As I do, I see his notorious scar, a present left by Julie Smith, the only one of his victims to ever escape. Even in the low light, it is

distinctive. It gives me an idea. Taking a deep breath and clearing my throat, I call out.

"Hey! Hey, everyone!"

"What the fuck is it now, Mason?" Paul shouts. He's calling me by my last name. That's not a good sign.

"It's John Shaw. It's John Shaw. Look, the scar. Take him. Arrest him."

Paul sniffs and then rubs the back of his hand across his mouth. He spits on the floor. My heart leaps. He's livid, finally realising that John Shaw is here.

"Mason," Paul says, his mouth tight, "we're all glad that you've come to help out, and I know it's been a long day, but you're starting to piss me off now. Either shut the fuck up and carry on walking, or you can piss off, do you understand?"

"But—"

"Do you understand?" he says, taking a step forward.

"Yes," I say, quietly.

He swears under his breath and then gestures for us to all keep walking.

"They go on, too," John Shaw says to me, as we keep going.

"What?" I ask after a moment, distracted.

"These woods. They just go on and on.

It's trees after trees after endless trees. They all look the same. You think you're walking around in circles, like they say you do in the desert, but it's not that. You're not in the same places, you're just in different places that look exactly the same. And that's worse, if you think about it. That's to most people anyway. Once you get to know these kinds of places, you can spot the differences — branch formations, leaf patterns, things like that. But to a normal person, you'd have no idea where you are or what you were doing. It's a magical place, almost. It can hypnotize you, if you're not careful."

I shake my head and laugh incredulously.

"You're John Shaw," I say.

"Awful," he says, bowing his head penitently. "An awful, evil man." He pauses. "You know what I think? You'd have to be a real sick bastard to do things like that. I dunno, maybe there's something about a fucked-up childhood or something wrong with your brain or whatever, I dunno. And don't get

me wrong, I'm not saying that I don't sympathize and all that. But once you start killing people and doing all those sorts of sick things, my sympathy's gone. All I'm thinking at that point is that I want that guy either behind bars or dead."

There is a silky, sonorous quality to Shaw's voice. Hypnotic, just like he described the forest.

"But you're him. You're the one who did all those things."

"You just wonder, sometimes," Shaw says, "what goes through people's heads. You

think, 'how could someone do that?' Take good, innocent people and butcher them. Kill them in such despicable ways. It's all about human capability though, isn't it? What humans are capable of. Just some sick people out there. It's a fucked-up world we live in. One fucked-up world."

ALTHOUGH I have known dark is impending for some time, now is the first time that it truly hits me. In town, it is never really dark, not with the streetlights. Out here, we're surrounded and shrouded by trees, so it's never really light, even in the day. Soon, it will be so dark that I won't be able to see anything. I will be here, among the endless trees, in the endless dark, walking with John Shaw in John Shaw's woods. The thought galvanises me and allows me to speak louder and clearer than I thought possible.

“What the fuck are you all doing?” I shout so loud that a couple of the guys jump. “This is John Shaw, this guy here, next to me. Look at his scar. We’ve been out looking for him for two days. He’s here right now. You have to—”

“That’s enough,” Paul says, firmly. He walks right up to me. “I don’t know if you’re tired, or dehydrated, or hell, you just woke up this morning and thought, ‘you know what, today I’m going to fuck up the search party.’ But I don’t care. You’re done, Mason. I’m not taking your bullshit anymore.”

“Listen, Paul, you don’t—”

Paul leans in closer.

“This is your last warning. I’m being nice to you right now, believe me. Don’t make me lose my sense of generosity.” He turns back to the group. “Anyone wanna do a good deed? Hate to lose one of you, but we can’t have him walking back through the woods to town by himself.”

No one answers. Then, behind me, I hear the now-familiar hum of John Shaw:

“I’ll do it.”

“Hey, man,” says Paul, “that’s real nice and everything, but these woods—”

“Know ’em like the back of my hand. I can’t count how many hours I’ve spent in here over the years. I’ll take him to where he needs to go.”

“That’s great man, thanks. Really appreciate it,” Paul says. “And thanks for coming out, too. Sorry this—” he goes to call me something but stops himself. “Sorry you had to leave early.”

“Wait!” I call out, but Paul ignores me, responding only with a final look of disgust. The rest of the group have already started walking. It takes only a few seconds for them to seep into the darkness and disappear. Now only able to hear the sound of their fading footsteps, I feel a firm hand on my shoulder.

“Looks like it’s just you and me,” John Shaw says. “We better get going. We’ve got a long way to go yet, my friend.”

Harley Carnell lives and writes in London, England.

His work has been published in Confrontation, Riptide Journal, Penumbra, and Litro, among others. He has had work performed on The NoSleep Podcast and Tales to Terrify. He has an MA in Creative Writing from Royal Holloway, University of London.



THE FOLLOWER'S REVEL

by Jonathan Louis Duckworth

POSTCARD – “ARRIVAL IN THE ADIRONDACKS”

Postmarked: Nov. 9, 1912.

From: Thomas Kampel. Roughneck Junction, Adirondack Park, NY.

To: Dorothea Kampel, 635 Park Ave, #23, New York, NY.

Obverse: A charcoal sketch of the platform of Roughneck Junction, with the slope of Roughneck Mountain and the shore of Drane Lake in the background. The mountainside trees, rendered as jagged, hatched slashes, taper into a fine dust further up the slope. The sketch is consistent with other artwork attributed to pioneer documentarian and filmmaker Thomas Kampel (1885–1912).

Reverse: In a tidy but sharply slanted hand, Thomas Kampel writes to his wife, Dorothea Kampel (1890–1969). The message reads:
Beloved Dora,

How to describe the smell of spruce, the brisk mountain air that floats down to needle my lungs, the sun on the lake, the crunch of clean snow underfoot, the splendid emptiness of it all? There is not a house or cabin visible any way you might look. What want for a restaurant or ragtime club have these woods? What want for the bray & grumble of motorcars have these mountains? I have scarcely been here an hour & not yet met my patron, nor made the acquaintance of the likely & rugged men who’ll be my picture’s *dramatis personae*, & yet I’m already giddy with the promise of this unspoiled country & its denizens.

When my work is done, lets we return to these mountains, together, for the romance & splendor such climes might offer us! Please write back to me post-haste, transmit my regards to your mother, & tell me how little Caroline is adjusting to her new bedroom.

Ever your smitten schoolboy, confidant, & devoted servant,
-Thomas

REEL NO. 1 “LOGGERS AT WORK”**Format:** 35mm celluloid**Length:** 17:29**Description:**

The film begins with a shot of a pair of sleeping loggers in their shared bunk within the bunkhouse. At 00:25 the first of the loggers stirs from the top bunk and rises from under his covers, followed soon after by the other. From 00:38 to 01:59 the film follows the loggers at their breakfast, with intermittent shots of the cooks at work on their Bussey & McLeod cast iron ranges, preparing the meal, including fried donuts and baked beans. After some shots of the wilderness, from 2:45 to 13:27 the film details the day-to-day work of the Adirondack loggers working for the Drane Timber Co.: felling trees, chopping them into logs, loading the logs onto ox-driven sleds and a treaded steam hauler before launching them into the water where Drane Lake flows into the Hudson River, whereafter log drivers (“river pigs”) guide the logs with peavey sticks. Intermingled with the shots of work are scenes of recreation and relaxation, such as a scene starting at 07:15 where a white-haired logger in his bunkhouse whittles a many-segmented insect from a tree branch and a scene of two loggers locking arms and dancing at 08:22.

At 09:42, while following the work of the pair of engineers who maintain the Lombard steam log hauler, the camera drifts from their work and captures a flicker of

movement further out into the forest. A closer inspection of the subsequent frames reveals an obscure figure, lanky and roughly human shape, moving through the woods.

At 09:47, the figure seems to regard the camera, and as it turns, protrusions resembling antlers appear to branch from its head. At 12:17, while a team of loggers sits around a campfire and eats an afternoon meal of beans, corn-bread, and pie, one logger in the background appears to be shaving his head with a rip saw, holding the saw blade with both hands and scraping at his scalp. None of the other loggers seem to remark this, and indeed, several others walk directly past him unbothered.

From 13:27 to the end, the film focuses on the snowy wilderness, with occasional appearances by loggers, such as at 15:29 when once more loggers are shown loading timber onto an ox sled. At 15:36, a logger bends down to lift the end of a wayward log. He wears a plaid jacket, against which the dark shape of a foot long serpentine creature shows starkly. A closer inspection of the frames between 15:36 and 15:41 reveals the “snake” has numerous small limbs and a pair of long feelers on its head as well as sizable mandibles. The logger evinces no concern, even after noticing the creature’s presence on his sleeve. From 17:15 to 17:22 the film tracks the slow descent of the sun over Drane Lake, while small pancakes of ice drift across the surface. The final shot is of the bunkhouses at night, with slender whiskers of smoke rising from the chimneys.

POSTCARD – “DINNER AT DRANE CASTLE”**Postmarked:** Nov. 11, 1912.**From:** Thomas Kampel. Roughneck Junction, Adirondack Park, NY.**To:** Dorothea Kampel, 635 Park Ave, #23, New York, NY.

Obverse: A charcoal sketch in the same style as the previous postcard. This sketch is split paneled, with the left half showing an exterior rendering of Drane Castle, home of industrialist Henry Prospero Drane (1839–1919), while the right half is an interior scene from the perspective of the unseen observer, Kampel. The exterior scene of Drane Castle makes use of the charcoal medium’s facility for contrast, with the dark granite façade of Drane Castle athwart the snowy slope of Roughneck Mountain. The composition exaggerates the height and prominence of Drane Castle’s three gothic revival-style parapets and depicts a large waxing crescent moon sitting just above the tallest of said towers. The interior scene depicts a banquet table, set with a generous assortment of food and drink, including a half carved roast boar on a platter and champagne in an ice bucket. Two individuals are depicted; one turned toward the observer and engaged in conversation, the other sitting to the side of the first and turned away in profile. The first person, likely 20th century mystic William “BW” Wallace Riser (???? –1920), is a gentleman of middle age with shoulder-length black hair, prominent eyebrows, and a thick handlebar mustache, dressed in a robe with the alchemical symbols for fire and earth adorning its sleeves. The second gentleman, Henry P. Drane, is elderly, white-haired, and full-bearded, wearing half-moon spectacles and a three-piece suit with a single-breasted waistcoat.

Reverse: Kampel writes:

Beloved Dora,

I have enjoyed the most stimulating & electric of evenings with my host, Mr. Drane, & his esteemed friend Mr. Riser, a magnetic orator & esoteric scholar. Listening to Mr. R, I perceived a mind so capacious it could contain my own with room to spare. Mr. D, though more reserved, was scintillating in his own right, describing how he & his workmen transformed a mountain-side into a latter-day Xanadu. D’s a powerfully religious man & tells me he sees God everywhere, even in human suffering.

Now, lest you think I wasn’t being myself, I talked my share of ears off too! Both men seem eager to learn about my trade. D perceives motion pictures’ recruitment potential. Even though he pays a fair wage — (you wouldn’t believe how well fed these miners & loggers are; sheiks & maharajas would gain from picking up an axe!) — he’s always short on workers. He hopes my film can convince more men to leave the city for an honest wage & the thrill of this alpine splendor!

I hope to hear from you soon. D tells me the post is slow to arrive this near to winter, but I’ll positively *die* if I have to wait another day for your reply!

Ever your chatterbox, nomad, & co-conspirator,

-Thomas

REEL NO. 2 “INTO THE MINES”

Format: 35mm celluloid
Length: 21:38

Description:

The film begins with a shot of twin columns of miners, with one column entering the Prospero Mine and the other exiting as one shift replaces the other. Notably, the departing column, many of the men mustachioed, show exuberant smiles as they pass the camera. At 00:47, a close-up shows a sizable chunk of magnetite (iron ore) in the gloved hands of a miner, while another miner holds a handful of small crystals, most likely garnets. From 00:59 to 06:52 the film shows life in the company town, a cluster of log cabins built in a clearing at the base of Roughneck Mountain. Many scenes show the presence of wives and children among the workers, as well as the workings of a schoolhouse where miners’ children learn grammar and mathematics. At 04:19 a chalkboard is shown, with the alchemical symbols for fire, earth, and iron (identical to the “male” symbol ♂) drawn alongside a basic multiplication table. Another unidentified symbol appears beneath the alchemical figures: a centipede, beside which the word “FATHER” is drawn. Beneath this a symbol resembling a pair of antlers appears, besides which is the word “FOLLOWER.” Other scenes in this section show the medical care miners receive with camp doctors and a recreational hall where miners listen to music

on phonographs.

From 7:00 to 19:02, the film shows the daily work of the miners in the shafts, detailing their methods and equipment, which ranges from simple pickaxes and dynamite to carbide lamps and gasoline-powered pumps. From 08:35 to 10:42, the film showcases an innovative technique (for 1912) of filming from the front of a mine cart as it descends into the tunnels, giving a first-person perspective. At 11:01, miners begin slipping sticks of dynamite into pre-drilled holes in preparation for blasting. At 11:21, the rock is blasted, and after the smoke clears, a viscous, black substance seeps up from the blasting site; many of the miners subsequently shown are apparently coated in the same liquid.

From 13:01 to 13:59, a scene shows miners loading ore into carts. At 13:52, rat-sized insects resembling centipedes can be seen swarming over the miners, who continue working without interruption.

After more scenes inside the mines, the film switches to an exterior shot from 17:45 to 17:53, depicting teams of miners struggling in concert with oxen and a Lombard steam hauler to drag chains and ropes from deep within the mineshaft, as if trying to haul something immense up to the surface. Whether they are successful or not isn’t shown. The final three minutes, from 19:02 to 21:38, is a continuous static shot of the mouth of the Prospero Mine, an almost perfect circle cut into the mountainside.

POSTCARD – “THE CHAPEL IN THE WOODS”

Postmarked: Nov. 22, 1912.

From: Thomas Kampel. Roughneck Junction, Adirondack Park, NY.
To: Dorothea Kampel, 635 Park Ave, #23, New York, NY.

Obverse: A charcoal sketch of a wooden structure surrounded by snow-laden pines, spruces, and hemlocks. The structure depicted is rustic and simple, with an A-frame hay-thatched roof and eaves that nearly reach the snowy ground, a design element borrowed from early modern European cottages. There are footprints in the snow leading toward the chapel’s circular wooden door; two sets of human footprints, and between them, a set of hoofprints closely resembling moose prints — two thick teardrops with a pair of dots underneath. The hoofprints fall in pairs, like the human tracks beside them. A thick billow of black smoke rises from the chapel’s chimney. In lieu of a cross, a set of moose antlers decorates the gable, and centipedes have been etched into the door.

Reverse: The writing is sloppier than in prior postcards, with many words illegible or crossed out. Unlike the previous postcards, the message is written in pencil rather than pen. It reads:
Beloved Dora,

There are beautiful songs here, some [sung?] by human voices such to drown ~~us~~ me and others of a music no mortal [throat?] could shape. I have come out here ten times now, in between my work, my important work, and listened until my face ~~was~~ became [entirely?] windburnt. I have not received your correspondence, but I trust we ~~shall~~ will see each other soon, & to [hold?] your warm hand in mine will be better medicine than what the camp ~~quack~~ doctor has prescribed me. The world is bigger & older than we think, & the wars we [humans?] wage are schoolyard scuffles compared to the TRUE war. I want to help fight that war, but I’m afraid I may not be strong enough. If the Follower accepts me, then all will be well. ~~& if not~~ Give my best to the neighbors & keep Caroline SAFE. I have much to teach both of you when my ~~duty~~ work is finished & I return to the city’s lights. I am positively sick of all the LOVE I feel. Sick of love for you, & I ache for our reunion. All is well, [illegible] — I am a guest here.

He who [advocates?] on behalf of your soul,
-Thomas

REEL NO. 3 “EXPIATION”

Format: 35mm celluloid

Length: 12:12

Description:

The reel begins with a long, brooding shot of a crackling bonfire built from thick logs and a tall pile of branches. In the background, a structure built with an A-frame roof of thatched hay stands in the shadows beyond the fire’s reach. At 00:39, two figures walk into frame, standing between the camera and the bonfire. Both wear robes embroidered with alchemical symbols. The figure to the left is recognizable by his hair and mustache as BW Riser. The figure to the right towers over Riser despite its hunched posture, and while the robes conceal its shape, there is the suggestion of some rigid, wide structure underneath its hood.

The scene then changes, and now the shadows of the flickering bonfire roll as dark, oily waves over the assembled faces of three separate columns of people. Most are men, but within the ranks of each column are a smattering of women and even a few young children. The rightward column, comprising a dozen men and two women, all standing upright, are dressed in robes like Riser’s. The middle column, comprising some twenty men, five women, and three children, are all kneeling. They are dressed in common cold weather clothes, but even with the low lighting and poor film quality, their discomfort is evident as gusts of snow blow through their ranks. The final, leftward column

is thirteen strong — nine men and four women, no children. These people lay prostrate in the snow, their naked backs heaving and writhing in the cold, their hands stretched out in front of them, trussed with rope bindings. Each column is inspected and given several seconds of screen time before the camera cuts briefly back to Riser and the hooded giant.

From 01:48 to 06:23, the camera observes ritualistic dances and pantomimes performed by the robed members of the rightward column as they circle the bonfire. Several of these performers shed their robes, revealing themselves naked underneath; one of the disrobed men wears a costume that somewhat resembles the feathered regalia of various Native American societies, except in place of feathers, rigid, carved spines of wood radiate from his body, approximating the form of insectile legs. Another performer, also stripped down, wears moose antlers, and at 02:27, the antlered performer begins walking on his hands and knees in the snow, until the centipede performer embraces him. The pair then rise together, link arms, and dance with abandon. From 04:29 to 06:23, all of the performers, both stripped and clothed, fall to the ground and writhe and wriggle on the frozen earth like worms. At 06:24, the camera fixates on some large burrows in the earth in an indeterminate location, from which naked men wriggle out, crawling on their bellies over the snow. At 07:09, the camera fixes on the chapel, showing an immensely

magnified full moon presiding over the bonfire revel.

At 07:24, the camera focuses on Riser with a medium, chest-high close-up shot. Riser holds a heavy woodcutting axe over his head and begins to speak for about twenty seconds, but his words are indiscernible due to the antiquated frame rate. At 07:52, the shot expands to reveal a large, bearded man in logger’s clothes — a head taller than Riser but still dwarfed by the hooded giant — who approaches and accepts the single bevel broadaxe from Riser. After the axeman takes a few practice swings on a nearby stump, he then proceeds to the leftward column. Many of the prostrated people have stopped moving, but some still try to squirm away. From 08:16 to 10:36, the camera watches with the unflinching nerve of glass and celluloid as the axeman moves up and down the column, carrying out a rote process with mechanical certainty and efficiency: a boot on the spinal column, pressing the victim into the dirt, followed by a powerful downward stroke, hewing heads from necks as easily as loggers hew the bark from timber. Some of the heads roll away from the bodies; others settle in place where they fall. The camera keeps filming, the glass eye panning steadily to match the axeman’s progress, the cameraman’s hand turning the crank ever faithfully. The scene breaks from slaughter only once, from 09:52 to 10:09, to show some of the beheaded carcasses being carried by the plainclothes initiates to the burrows. The bodies are dumped at the tunnel mouths, whereupon eager pale hands rise and grope like worms to find their

prizes, dragging them into the dark. At 10:36, the camera fixes on Riser once more as he makes a solemn but incomprehensible declaration. The camera shifts focus to the other figure, the forgotten giant, which sheds its cloth cocoon, revealing its hidden form.

At 10:52, the Follower stands revealed: ancient, impossibly tall and lanky, dark and hirsute, wrong-faced, antlered — a thing fallen into the taxonomic cracks between primate and cloven-hoofed beast — warped but powerful. Standing at its full height, the creature seems impossible, its human legs too skinny to support its broad moose antlers. The Follower somehow shambles forth on toothpick limbs and awkward hooved feet, and its belly, a vessel engorged and visibly squirming with a living manifest, juts out from its skeletal frame. From 11:09 to 12:01, the camera dares stray nearer to the Follower for a close-up shot as it kneels before the middle column of initiates. The Follower opens its broad, cervine jaw and lets its tongue dangle limp as its mouth becomes a chute for the squirming passengers of its body, and the initiates open their own mouths to receive, one by one, the gift. Centipedes pass from one mouth to another. Some initiates manage to accept the gift without falling, while others convulse and fall to their sides, writhing and wriggling in the snow and dirt.

The final image, from 12:02 to 12:12, is of Riser, shot such that the engorged moon crowns his head. A shadow falls over the brilliant moon — the jagged, many-legged silhouette of a centipede.

POSTCARD – “MY WINDOW AT DAWN”

Postmarked: Dec. 1, 1912.

From: Thomas Kampel. Roughneck Junction, Adirondack Park, NY.

To: Dorothea Kampel, 635 Park Ave, #23, New York, NY.

Obverse: A pencil sketch of a simple box frame window. The sketch’s style is much less elaborate than the other postcard images, with much less detailed shading work.

Reverse: The writing is more restrained and lucid than the prior postcard’s message, with no strikethroughs or illegible words. The message reads:

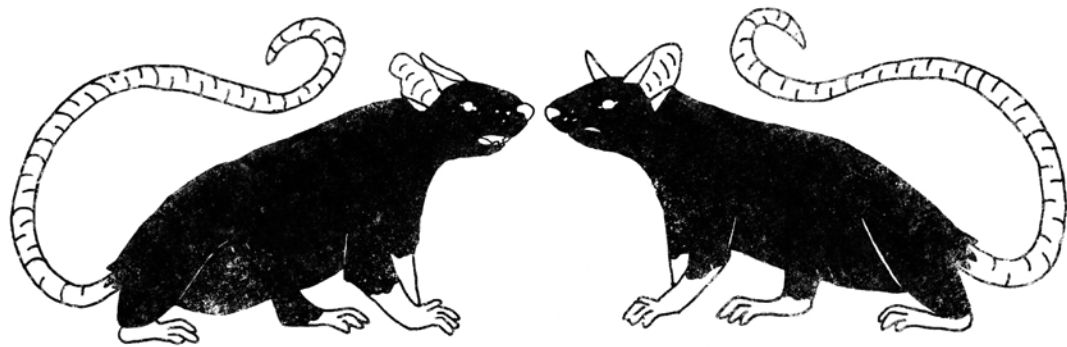
Beloved Dora,

I’m happy to report I’ll soon be home. Mr. Drane and Mr. Riser are satisfied with my work & have given their blessings for me to return to the city. Today is my final morning here on the mountain, & soon I’ll be on a train to cinch shut the frayed threading that ties us two together. Please don’t take to heart any silliness I might have stained my last postcard with. The truth is, darling, I’ve been feeling *positively* something other than myself lately. It’s been days since I’ve seen the sun. But the fog is beautiful in its own way, too. If this postcard reaches you before I do & I fail to turn up, please don’t look for me & don’t worry — all that will mean is that I’ve found somewhere safe. Give my love to Caroline.

Your ever devoted husband,

-Thomas

Jonathan Louis Duckworth is a completely normal, entirely human person with the right number of heads and everything. He received his MFA from Florida International University. His speculative fiction work appears in Pseudopod, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Southwest Review, Flash Fiction Online, and elsewhere. He is a PhD student at University of North Texas where he serves as the interviews editor at American Literary Review, and he is also an active HWA member.



THE BAD ONES ARE ALWAYS THE BEST

by Michelle Ann King

MARTY’S grandson takes the cup of tea he’s offered — without saying thank you, mind — and stares at it dubiously, as if he doesn’t know what it is. Marty wouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t; kids all seem to be brought up on vitamin water and kale juice, these days.

“Drink up,” he says, nodding encouragingly. Marty’s cuppas are the real thing: brewed until they’re the colour of brick dust and made with full-fat milk, four sugars and a thimble of

whisky. “It’ll put hairs on your chest.”

Gary — no, *Garrett*; Marty’s been corrected on that point at least twice already — doesn’t seem impressed by the thought. No doubt he’d just have to wax them off afterwards because God forbid he should spoil any of the smooth surfaces and rounded corners. The kid looks like he’s been popped out of some kind of designer mold, all rough edges pre-sanded off. Model no. 87: Corporate Tax Consultant.

* This story originally appeared in *Kzine*, May 2020.

Marty can just imagine Robert and his snooty wife picking that one out of a catalogue. No wonder they kept their distance all these years; didn't want their perfect creation spoiled by messing about with an old man who used to work with his hands and misses the days when kids wanted to be astronauts and explorers when they grew up, not accountants.

Garrett puts his cup down — without using a coaster, the fucking heathen — and gives Marty a big Hollywood smile. In the living room's fading light, his whitened teeth go off like a flashbulb.

Marty returns the grin, giving it full dentures. The boy followed his nose here in the end, though. That's something.

Garrett turns his attention back to Marty's computer. He's offered to do his old granddad a favour and see if it needs updating, or cleaning up, or whatever. Starting with Marty's online banking account, he notices, before the kid angles the screen away.

"So," Garrett says casually. "Have you always lived around here, Grandad? In Silvertown? That's what it's called, where you were born?"

Marty nods and gives him an approving grin — although he can't help rolling his eyes a little, too. He might prefer life in the flesh — red in tooth and claw, and all that — to the dubious pleasures of the virtual world, but he still understands the concept of *security questions*. So while the lad gets points for initiative, he loses more for clumsiness.

Marty grins again. If Robert could see this, he'd be positively mortified. Not only has the kid reverted to an *undesirable* type, but he's shit at it. "That's right. Silvertown. All one word," he adds helpfully.

The boy flashes another smile as he taps away, fingers flying over the keyboard. His nails are very short, very clean. Buffed. At his age, Marty would've been embarrassed to have manicured fingernails. His were always filthy and ragged, broken in a dozen places

from climbing and scrabbling and fighting.

It's different now, of course — these days, parents freak out if their precious kids so much as pop their heads outside the door without an armed security detail — but the past, as they say, was a different world.

Marty smiles. Literally.

"And did you have a pet, Grandad? What was it, the first pet you had?"

"Dog. Fierce little thing, he was. Half pit bull, half fuck knows what. Wolverine, maybe. Or hellhound."

Another bright smile, another click of the mouse. "Uh huh. And what was his name?"

Marty can't resist. "Supercalifragilistic-expialidocious," he says, then laughs as the boy's fingers go still and his eyes wide. "I'm kidding. It was Killer."

"Oh." Garrett gives Marty an uncertain glance, then laughs too. "Right." His hands go back to the keyboard.

Marty dunks a Hob Nob in his tea. "Don't suppose your dad ever got you a dog, did he?"

The kid shakes his head. "I'm allergic."

Of course he is. Tax consultants are bound to be allergic to anything beyond screens and numbers and climate-controlled offices. God forbid they should ever know the dirt and danger, the fun and freedom, of the real world. Or any other.

You don't know what you're missing. We had some right good adventures in our day — like the time we found the portal."

"Uh huh," Garrett says, focused on the screen.

Marty smiles again. He'd been with Kenny and Eddie from down the street, playing cops and robbers on the local building site. They'd had the time of their lives, chasing Eddie's little brother over piles of bricks and rubble, through pipes, up scaffolding, and down holes. We'll get you, copper!

"So we've got Joey cornered in this great big trench, where they're digging

the foundations. It's over; there's nowhere for him to go. But when we jump in there, he's gone. There's all these roots, worms, bugs — big, weird bugs — but no Joey. We can't work it out. So Eddie's kicking at it, looking to see if there's some kind of tunnel or something, and the next thing we know, he's gone straight through the wall and disappeared."

"Uh huh," Garrett says.

It'd come as a bit of a shock, of course, finding the portal. But once they calmed down, it made sense. For posh kids, yeah, doorways to other worlds would be found at the back of wardrobes stuffed with fur coats — but for the likes of Marty and his mates, they'd appear in dirty great holes in the middle of building sites. It made *perfect* sense.

"It was just like in the stories," he says. "Time was different on the other side. It felt like we were over there forever before we caught up with Ed. Before we found his little



Print on Demand

by Angus McIntyre

"I still say we're cutting it too fine," said Ezra.

In the fabrication bay below, the gantry arm of a massive 3D printer moved back and forth with agonizing slowness. Bloody light from the accretion disk overhead washed the unfinished starship in sinister reds and oranges.

"Only the nose section left to print," Kallon said. "Liu says we've got at least eighteen hours before the star goes nova. We'll be OK."

The control console beeped loudly, making both men jump.

"What does it say?"

Ezra turned, his face hollow with despair. "Print job suspended," he said. "Please replace magenta cartridge."

brother." Or what was left of him, by that point. Again, this portal hadn't been like the ones in the kids' books.

It'd been *much* more fun.

"Where it went wrong," he goes on, "is that Kenny told people what really happened. Where we went, what we saw. What we did. Poor Ed never said a word — never spoke again, as far as I know — but Kenny told the truth."

Which rarely does anyone any favors, honestly. Marty, who understood that, told the story people wanted to hear — or no, not really; nobody *wanted* to hear that kind of thing. But at least they could understand it.

Things weren't like they are now, with people seeing murderers and kidnappers on every street corner, but the concept wasn't exactly unknown, either. So Marty told everyone — his parents, the police, the doctors — about an old fella in a raincoat, who asked them to help find his lost dog. He told them how Joey stayed searching after the rest of them got bored and went back to their game — until finally, they realised how long he'd been gone and went searching for him too.

It was a horrible story, yes — but the bad ones are always the best. And while people might not have been happy about believing Marty's version of events, at least they *could*. Which was a lot more than you could say about Kenny's.

"Uh huh," Garrett says. He's frowning at the screen again, a disappointed expression on his face. Looks like he finally got into the accounts, then.

Marty takes pity. "I wouldn't worry yourself about all that banking stuff," he says. "It doesn't matter if that's out of date, or whatever, because I don't really use it. Not a big fan of banks. Numbers on screens and all that. I like proper money. *Real* money, that you can hold in your hand."

The boy's head comes up. "You mean . . . you keep your money in cash?" His gaze flicks around the room. "In the house?"

“You haven’t touched your tea,” Marty says reproachfully, and Garrett obediently picks up his mug. He takes a mouthful, coughs violently, and just about manages a smile. “Lovely, Grandad. So, er . . . you were saying?”

Marty nods. “I was saying about my old mate Kenny, yes. In and out of nuthouses, hospitals, and prisons for years, he was. Last time he got out, he came round here. He thought he was an exorcist or something, on a mission to rid the world of evil.”

Marty shakes his head sadly. Poor bastard. “Nothing but skin and bone, he was. Said he was living on the nourishment of righteousness or some bollocks. I gave him a nice cup of tea and a packet of custard creams. Perked him right up.”

Garrett shifts in his chair, all fidgety impatience. Kids have got no attention span these days. No sense of commitment. In the old days, you picked a path, and you stuck to it. Like Kenny, bless him. Like Marty himself.

“Of course,” he says, before Garrett can interrupt, “then he tried to kill me and set the house on fire, so maybe inviting him for tea and biscuits wasn’t such a great idea.”

The boy’s eyes widen, and he starts paying attention again. There’s nothing like a bit of death and destruction to focus the mind.

“He realised, you see, about the house. I don’t know how he worked it out, but he did. So of course, he thought it was evil. Cursed ground or something.”

Garrett looks confused. “The house?”

Marty nods, gesturing around the room. “This is where it was, you see. The portal. This estate, it’s what they were building

when we found it. That great big trench we were playing in, it was the foundations for this house. I watched it go up, brick by brick and wall by wall. Never forgot it. Worked like a mad bastard, I did, to get the money to buy it. Took fifteen years and some really

dodgy jobs, but I got there in the end. Lived here ever since.”

“The . . . portal?” Garrett says. He still looks confused. That’s what you get for not listening properly. Forgotten art, listening.

Marty listened to Kenny, when he came round. He ranted and raved for days, about what it’d been like over there — about evil, and monsters, and all manner of horrors. And Marty listened to every word because they’d been mates and because he felt sorry for the poor bastard

— nobody else had ever believed him.

Plus, he found the whole thing pleasantly nostalgic. His own memories had already started wearing a bit thin from repeated fondling by then, so it was quite nice to get a fresh perspective.

“What happened to him?” Garrett wants to know. “Kenny?”

“Nobody knows,” Marty lies. “He’d done a runner by the time the police turned up. They never found him.”

That part, at least, is true. Again, it was different in those days: they didn’t have all that high-tech CSI stuff, fibres and databases and DNA. And Marty was a fine upstanding homeowner, while Kenny Rudow was a known offender with no fixed address and a history of mental illness. Case closed.

FOR a while, Marty had hoped Kenny might turn out to be the missing ingredient, the key that would turn the lock, but

“Of course, then he tried to kill me and set the house on fire, so maybe inviting him for tea and biscuits wasn’t such a great idea.”

no joy. He’d been trying his damndest ever since he’d moved in, obviously — begging, pleading, bringing it offerings — but even when he brought it Kenny, he got nowhere. The portal stayed shut.

Later he started wondering if it was an age thing: if it only opened for kids. Which was a trickier theory to test, since a single man living on his own didn’t get much cause to invite children to come and play in the hole underneath his floorboards. And unlike homeless nutters, kids *would* get missed.

It’d be easier if he had his own, he realised in the end — hence Janice and then little Robert.

But Robert wasn’t exactly an adventurous kid, that was the trouble. Not exactly a chip off the old block. He never wanted to play cops and robbers, or soldiers, or even underground explorers. He cried at the slightest bruise, was terrified of bugs and knives and anything with teeth, and practically fainted at the sight of blood. If the boy hadn’t been the spit of him physically, Marty would’ve done some serious questioning of Janice’s virtue.

He finishes his tea with a slurp and fishes out the soggy remnants of biscuit with his finger. He did think about having another go, but Janice had started to cause trouble by then, and the whole thing had been such hard work, and such a disappointment, that he couldn’t face going back to square one. So he let Robert grow up and go his own way — he became a poet, just to add one final humiliation — and mostly gave up on trying to get the portal open. Mostly.

But now there’s Garrett, and it feels as if maybe he’s being given one final chance. The boy’s older than he would have liked, and an idiot, but he’s still got Marty’s blood in his veins. And he’s at least got a *bit* more oomph than his father. Cyber fraud, or whatever you’d call it,

isn’t exactly Most Wanted stuff, but it isn’t poetry, either. Maybe there’s hope for the kid, with the right encouragement. The right environment.

Maybe the portal will think so, too.

Garrett does an elaborate stretch and stands up. “You get stiff sitting down too long, don’t you, Grandad? Maybe we could walk about a bit — you could give me a tour of the house, if you like.”

“Good idea.” Marty snaps his fingers, as if he’s just had the thought. “Here, why don’t I show you where I keep the money? You can tell me if you think it’s safe enough.”

“Okay, sure. I’m happy to help.” Garrett gives him another smile, although it’s less dazzling this time. The pills dissolved in his tea are probably starting to make themselves felt.

“It’s right this way,” Marty says. “In the back room, under the floorboards. You might have to get down there and dig around for a bit, though. You haven’t got to rush off, have you? Your dad not expecting you home?”

Garrett yawns and shakes his head. The smile turns a little conspiratorial. “I didn’t actually tell him I was coming to see you.”

Marty grins and slaps the kid soundly on the back, hard enough to bruise. Garrett winces and lets out a surprised *oof*, but at least he doesn’t start crying. Good lad.

“Chip off the old block,” Marty says happily, with a little touch of pride — and hope — in his heart.

Michelle Ann King lives in Essex, England, and is a writer of speculative, crime, and horror fiction. Her work has appeared in over a hundred different venues, including Strange Horizons, Interzone, Black Static, and Orson Scott Card’s Intergalactic Medicine Show. Her favorite writers include Stephen King, Tana French, and Terry Pratchett. She has published two short story collections, available from Amazon and other online retailers in ebook and paperback format. Full details and links can be found at www.transientcactus.co.uk

THE MONSTER-GOD OF MAMURTH

by Edmond Hamilton

IT WAS out of the desert night that he came to us, stumbling into our little circle of firelight and collapsing at once. Mitchell and I sprang to our feet with startled exclamations, for men who travel alone and on foot are a strange sight in the deserts of North Africa.

For the first few minutes that we worked over him, I thought he would die at once, but gradually we brought him back to consciousness. While Mitchell held a cup of water to his cracked lips, I looked him over and saw that he was too far gone to live much longer. His clothes were in rags, and his hands and knees literally flayed, from crawling over the sands, I judged.

So when he motioned feebly for more water, I gave it to him, knowing that in any case his time was short. Soon he could talk, in a dead, croaking voice.

"I'm alone," he told us, in answer to our first question; "no more out there to look for. What are you two — traders? I thought so. No, I'm an archeologist. A digger-up of the past." His voice broke for a moment. "It's not always good to dig up dead secrets. There are some things the past should be allowed to hide."

He caught the look that passed between Mitchell and me. "No, I'm not mad," he said. "You will hear, I'll tell you the whole thing. But listen to me, you two," and in his

earnestness he raised himself to a sitting position, "keep out of Igidi Desert. Remember that I told you that. I had a warning, too, but I disregarded it. And I went into hell — into hell. But there, I will tell you from the beginning.

"My name — that doesn't matter now. I left Mogador more than a year ago, and came through the foothills of the Atlas ranges, striking out into the desert in hopes of finding some of the Carthaginian ruins the North African deserts are known to hold.

"I spent months in the search, traveling among the squalid Arab villages, now near an oasis and now far into the black, untracked desert. And as I went farther into that savage country, I found more and more of the ruins I sought, crumbled remnants of temples and fortresses, relics, almost destroyed, of the age when Carthage meant empire and ruled all of North Africa from her walled city. And then, on the side of a massive block of stone, I found that which turned me toward Igidi.

"It was an inscription in the garbled Phoenician of the traders of Carthage, short enough that I remembered it and can repeat it word for word. It read, literally, as follows:

"'Merchants, go not into the city of Mamurth, which lies beyond the mountain pass. For I, San-Drabat of Carthage, entering the city with four companions in the month of Eschmoun, to trade, on the third night of our stay came priests and seized my fellows, I escaping by hiding. My companions they sacrificed to the evil god of the city, who has dwelt there from the beginning of time, and for whom the wise men of Mamurth have

built a great temple the like of which is not on earth elsewhere, where the people of Mamurth worship their god. I escaped from the city and set this warning here that others may not turn their steps to Mamurth and to death.'

"Perhaps you can imagine the effect that inscription had on me. It was the last trace of a city unknown to the memory of men, a last floating spar of a civilization sunken in the sea of time. That there could have been such a city at all seemed to me quite probable. What do we know of Carthage even, but a few names? No city, no civilization was ever so completely blotted off the earth as Carthage, when Roman Scipio ground its temples and palaces into the very dust, and plowed up the ground with salt, and the eagles of conquering Rome flew across a desert where a metropolis had been.

"It was on the outskirts of one of those wretched little Arab villages that I had found the block, and its inscription, and I tried to find someone in the village to accompany me, but none would do so. I could plainly see the mountain pass, a mere crack between towering blue cliffs. In reality it was miles and miles away, but the deceptive optical qualities of the desert light made it seem very near. My maps placed that mountain range all right, as a lower branch of the Atlas, and the expanse behind the mountains was marked as 'Igidi Desert,' but that was all I got from them. All that I could reckon on as certain was that it was desert that lay on the other side of the pass, and I must carry enough supplies to meet it.

"But the Arabs knew more! Though I offered what must have been fabulous riches to those poor devils, not one would come with me when I let them know what place I was heading for. None had ever been there, they would not even ride far into the desert in that direction; but all had very definite ideas of the place beyond the mountains as a nest of devils, a haunt of evil Jinns.

"Knowing how firmly superstition is implanted in their kind, I tried no longer to persuade them, and started alone, with two scrawny camels carrying my water and supplies. So for three days I forged across the desert under a broiling sun, and on the morning of the fourth I reached the pass.

IT WAS only a narrow crevice to begin with, and great boulders were strewn so thickly on its floor that it was a long, hard job getting through. And the cliffs on each side towered to such a height that the space between was a place of shadows and whispers and semi-darkness. It was late in the afternoon that I finally came through, and for a moment I stood motionless, for from that side of the pass the desert sloped down into a vast basin, and at the basin's center, perhaps two miles from where I stood, gleamed the white ruins of Mamurth.

"I remember that I was very calm as I covered the two miles between myself and the ruins. I had taken the existence of the city as a fact, so much so that if the ruins had not been there I should have been vastly more surprised than at finding them.

"From the pass I had seen only a tangled mass of white fragments, but as I drew nearer, some of these began to take outline as crumbling blocks, and walls, and columns. The sand had drifted, too, and the ruins were completely buried in some sections, while nearly all were half covered.

"And then it was that I made a curious discovery. I had stopped to examine the material of the ruins, a smooth, veinless stone, much like an artificial marble or a superfine concrete. And while I looked about me, intent on this, I noticed that on almost every shaft and block, on broken cornice and column, was carved the same symbol — if it was a symbol. It was a rough picture of a queer, outlandish creature, much like an octopus, with a round, almost shapeless body, and several long tentacles or arms branching out from the body,

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not supple and boneless, like those of an octopus, but seemingly stiff and jointed, like a spider’s legs. In fact, the thing might have been intended to represent a spider, I thought, though some of the details were wrong. I speculated for a moment on the profusion of these creatures carved on the ruins all around me, then gave it up as an enigma that was unsolvable.

“And the riddle of the city about me seemed unsolvable also. What could I find in this half-buried mass of stone fragments to throw light on the past? I could not even superficially explore the place, for the scantiness of my supplies and water would not permit a long stay. It was with a discouraged heart that I went back to the camels and, leading them to an open spot in the ruins, made my camp for the night. And when night had fallen, and I sat beside my little fire, the vast, brooding silence of this place of death was awful. There were no laughing human voices, or cries of animals, or even cries of bird or insect. Nothing but the darkness and silence that crowded around me, flowed down upon me, beat sullenly against the glowing spears of light my little fire threw out.

“As I sat there musing, I was startled by a slight sound behind me. I turned to see its cause, and then stiffened. As I have mentioned, the space directly around my camp was clear sand, smoothed level by the winds. Well, as I stared at that flat expanse of sand, a hole several inches across suddenly appeared in its surface, yards from where I stood, but clearly visible in the firelight.

“There was nothing whatever to be seen there, not even a shadow, but there it was, one moment the level surface of the sand, the next moment a hole appearing in it, accompanied by a soft, crunching sound. As I stood gazing at it in wonder, that sound was repeated, and simultaneously another hole appeared in the sand’s surface, only five or six feet nearer to me than the other.

“When I saw that, ice-tipped arrows of

fear seemed to shoot through me, and then, yielding to a mad impulse, I snatched a blazing piece of fuel from the fire and hurled it, a comet of red flame, at the place where the holes had appeared. There was a slight sound of scurrying and shuffling, and I felt that whatever thing had made those marks had retreated, if a living thing had made them at all. What it had been, I could not imagine, for there had been absolutely nothing in sight, one track and then another appearing magically in the clear sand, if indeed they were really tracks at all.

“The mystery of the thing haunted me. Even in sleep I found no rest, for evil dreams seemed to flow into my brain from the dead city around me. All the dusty sins of ages past, in this forgotten place, seemed to be focused on me in the dreams I had. Strange shapes walked through them, unearthly as the spawn of a distant star, half-seen and vanishing again. It was little enough sleep I got that night, but when the sun finally came, with its first golden rays, my fears and oppressions



Structural Decay

by Nathan Lee

He got up just like every morning and shut off the alarm clock. He brushed his teeth and got dressed. He didn’t notice anything odd until he got to the kitchen and tried to verb the eggs. He blinked and looked down at the saucepan, where the nouns still sat, verbing.

“What?” he verbed.

He tried to verb the nouns again, but pronoun wouldn’t verb. Frantically he clung to specificity, but pronoun verbed adverb. Noun verbed preposition article noun, but when he opened it, he saw the noun fading into adjective noun. Noun verbed. Noun verbed adverb.

“Expletive!” noun verbed.

dropped from me like a cloak. No wonder the early peoples were sun-worshippers!

“And with my renewed strength and courage, a new thought struck me. In the inscription I have quoted to you, that long-dead merchant-adventurer had mentioned the great temple of the city and dwelt on its grandeur. Where, then, were its ruins, I wondered. I decided that what time I had would be better spent in investigating the ruins of this temple, which should be prominent, if that ancient Carthaginian had been correct as to its size.

“**I** ASCENDED a near-by hillock and looked about me in all directions, and though I could not perceive any vast pile of ruins that might have been the temple’s, I did see for the first time, far away, two great figures of stone that stood out black against the rosy flame of the sunrise. It was a discovery that filled me with excitement, and I broke camp at once, starting in the direction of those two shapes.

“They were on the very edge of the farther side of the city, and it was noon before I finally stood before them. And now I saw clearly their nature. Two great, sitting figures, carved of black stone, all of fifty feet in height, and almost that far apart, both facing toward the city and toward me. They were of human shape and dressed in a queer, scaled armor, but the faces I can not describe, for they were unhuman. The features were human, well-proportioned, even, but the face, the expression, suggested no kinship whatever with humanity as we know it. Were they carved from life? I wondered. If so, it must have been a strange sort of people who had lived in this city and set up these two statues.

“And now I tore my gaze away from them, and looked around. On each side of those shapes, the remains of what must once have been a mighty wall branched out, a long pile of crumbling ruins. But there had been no wall between the statues, that being evidently the gateway through the barrier. I wondered why the two guardians of the gate had survived,

apparently entirely unharmed, while the wall and the city behind me had fallen into ruins. They were of a different material, I could see, but what was that material?

“And now I noticed for the first time the long avenue that began on the other side of the statues and stretched away into the desert for a half-mile or more. The sides of this avenue were two rows of smaller stone figures that ran in parallel lines away from the two figures. So I started down that avenue, passing between the two great shapes that stood at its head. And as I went between them, I noticed for the first time the inscription graven on the inner side of each.

“On the pedestal of each figure, four or five feet from the ground, was a raised tablet of the same material, perhaps a yard square, and covered with strange symbols — characters, no doubt, of a lost language, undecipherable, at least to me. One symbol, though, that was especially prominent in the inscription, was not new to me. It was the carven picture of the spider, or octopus, which I have mentioned that I had found everywhere on the ruins of the city. And here it was scattered thickly among the symbols that made up the inscription. The tablet on the other statue was a replica of the first, and I could learn no more from it. So I started down the avenue, turning over in my mind the riddle of that omnipresent symbol, and then forgetting it, as I observed the things about me.

“That long street was like the avenue of sphinxes at Karnak, down which Pharaoh swung in his litter, borne to his temple on the necks of men. But the statues that made up its sides were not sphinx-shaped. They were carved in strange forms, shapes of animals unknown to us, as far removed from anything we can imagine as the beasts of another world. I can not describe them, any more than you could describe a dragon to a man who had been blind all his life. Yet they were of evil, reptilian shapes; they tore at my nerves as I looked at them.

“Down between the two rows of them I went, until I came to the end of the avenue. Standing there between the last two figures, I could see nothing before me but the yellow sands of the desert, as far as the eye could reach. I was puzzled. What had been the object of all the pains that had been taken, the wall, the two great statues, and this long avenue, if it but led into the desert?”

“Gradually I began to see that there was something queer about the part of the desert that lay directly before me. It was *flat*. For an area, seemingly round in shape, that must have covered several acres, the surface of the desert seemed absolutely level. It was as though the sands within that great circle had been packed down with tremendous force, leaving not even the littlest ridge of dune on its surface. Beyond this flat area, and all around it, the desert was broken up by small hills and valleys, and traversed by whirling sand-clouds, but nothing stirred on the flat surface of the circle.

“Interested at once, I strode forward to the edge of the circle, only a few yards away. I had just reached that edge when an invisible hand seemed to strike me a great blow on the face and chest, knocking me backward in the sand.

“It was minutes before I advanced again, but I did advance, for all my curiosity was now aroused. I crawled toward the circle’s edge, holding my pistol before me, pushing slowly forward.

“When the automatic in my outstretched hand reached the line of the circle, it struck against something hard, and I could push it no farther. It was exactly as if it had struck against the side of a wall, but no wall or anything else was to be seen. Reaching out my hand, I touched the same hard barrier, and in a moment I was on my feet.

“For I knew now that it was solid matter I had run into, not force. When I thrust out my hands, the edge of the circle was as far as they would go, for there they met a smooth

wall, totally invisible, yet at the same time quite material. And the phenomenon was one which even I could partly understand. Somehow, in the dead past, the scientists of the city behind me, the ‘wise men’ mentioned in the inscription, had discovered the secret of making solid matter invisible, and had applied it to the work that I was now examining. Such a thing was far from impossible. Even our own scientists can make matter partly invisible, with the X-ray. Evidently these people had known the whole process, a secret that had been lost in the succeeding ages, like the secret of hard gold, and malleable glass, and others that we find mentioned in ancient writings. Yet I wondered how they had done this, so that, ages after those who had built the thing were wind-driven dust, it remained as invisible as ever.

“I stood back and threw pebbles into the air, toward the circle. No matter how high I threw them, when they reached the line of the circle’s edge, they rebounded with a clicking sound, so I knew that the wall must tower to a great height above me. I was on fire to get inside the wall and examine the place from the inside, but how to do it? There must be an entrance, but where? And I suddenly remembered the two guardian statues at the head of the great avenue, with their carven tablets, and wondered what connection they had with this place.

“Suddenly the strangeness of the whole thing struck me like a blow. The great, unseen wall before me, the circle of sand, flat and unchanging, and myself, standing there and wondering, wondering. A voice from out the dead city behind me seemed to sound in my heart, bidding me to turn and flee, to get away. I remembered the warning of the inscription, ‘Go not to Mamurth.’ And as I thought of the inscription, I had no doubt that this was the great temple described by San-Drabat. Surely he was right: the like of it was not on earth elsewhere.

“But I would not go, I could not go, until I

had examined the wall from the inside. Calmly reasoning the matter, I decided that the logical place for the gateway through the wall would be at the end of the avenue, so that those who came down the street could pass directly through the wall. And my reasoning was good, for it was at that spot that I found the entrance. An opening in the barrier, several yards wide, and running higher than I could reach, how high I had no means of telling.

“**I** FELT my way through the gate, and stepped at once upon a floor of hard material, not as smooth as the wall’s surface, but equally invisible. Inside the entrance lay a corridor of equal width, leading into the center of the circle, and I felt my way forward.

“I must have made a strange picture, had there been any there to observe it. For while I knew that all around me were the towering, invisible walls, and I knew not what else, yet all my eyes could see was the great flat circle of sand beneath me, carpeted with the afternoon sunshine. Only, I seemed to be walking a foot above the ground, in thin air. That was the thickness of the floor beneath me, and it was the weight of this great floor, I knew, that held the circle of sand under it forever flat and unchanging.

“I walked slowly down the passageway, with hands outstretched before me, and had gone but a short distance when I brought up against another smooth wall that lay directly across the corridor, seemingly making it a blind-alley. But I was not discouraged now, for I knew that there must be a door

somewhere, and began to feel around me in search of it.

“I found the door. In groping about the sides of the corridor my hands encountered a smoothly rounded knob set in the wall, and as I laid my hand on this, the door opened.

There was a sighing, as of a little wind, and when I again felt my way forward, the wall that had lain across the passageway was gone, and I was free to go forward. But I dared not go through at once. I went back to the knob on the wall, and found that no amount of pressing or twisting of it would close the door that had opened. Some subtle mechanism within the knob had operated, that needed only a touch of the hand to work it, and the whole end of the corridor had moved out of the way, sliding up in grooves, I think, like a portcullis, though of this I am not sure.

“But the door was safely opened, and I passed through it. Moving about, like a blind man in a strange place, I found that I was in a vast inner court, the walls of which sloped away in a great curve. When I discovered this, I came back to the spot where the corridor opened into the court, and then walked straight out into the court itself.

“It was steps that I encountered: the first broad steps of what was evidently a staircase of titanic proportion. And I went up, slowly,

carefully, feeling before me every foot of the way. It was only the feel of the staircase under me that gave reality to it, for as far as I could see, I was simply climbing up into empty space. It was weird beyond telling.

“Up and up I went, until I was all of a hundred feet above the ground, and then the staircase narrowed, the sides drew together.

**“A voice
from out
the dead
city behind
me seemed
to sound in
my heart,
bidding
me to turn
and flee, to
get away. I
remembered
the warning
of the
inscription,
‘Go not to
Mamurth.’”**

A few more steps, and I came out on a flat floor again, which, after some groping about, I found to be a broad landing, with high, railed edges. I crawled across this landing on hands and knees, and then struck against another wall, and in it, another door. I went through this, too, still crawling, and though everything about me was still invisible, I sensed that I was no longer in the open air, but in a great room.

“I stopped short, and then, as I crouched on the floor, I felt a sudden prescience of evil, of some malignant, menacing entity that was native here. Nothing I could see, or hear, but strong upon my brain beat the thought of something infinitely ancient, infinitely evil, that was a part of this place. Was it a consciousness, I wonder, of the horror that had filled the place in ages long dead? Whatever caused it, I could go no farther in the face of the terror that possessed me, so I drew back and walked to the edge of the landing, leaning over its high, invisible railing and surveying the scene below.

“The setting sun hung like a great ball of red-hot iron in the western sky, and in its lurid rays the two great statues cast long shadows on the yellow sands. Not far away, my two camels, hobbled, moved restlessly about. To all appearances I was standing on thin air, a hundred feet or more above the ground, but in my mind’s eye I had a picture of the great courts and corridors below me, through which I had felt my way.

“Musing there in the red light, it was clear to me that this was the great temple of the city. What a sight it must have been, in the time of the city’s life! I could imagine the long procession of priests and people, in somber and gorgeous robes, coming out from the city, between the great statues and down the long avenue, dragging with them, perhaps, an unhappy prisoner to sacrifice to their god in this, his temple.

“THE sun was now dipping beneath the horizon, and I turned to go, but before ever I moved, I became rigid and my heart seemed to stand still. For on the farther edge of the clear stretch of sand that lay beneath the temple and the city, a hole suddenly appeared in the sand, springing into being on the desert’s face exactly like the one I had seen at my campfire the night before. I watched, as fascinated as by the eyes of a snake. And before my eyes, another and another appeared, not in a straight line, but in a zigzag fashion. Two such holes would be punched down on one side, then two more on the other side, then one in the middle, making a series of tracks, perhaps two yards in width from side to side, and advancing straight toward the temple and myself. And I could see nothing!

“It was like — the comparison suddenly struck me — like the tracks a many-legged insect might make in the sand, only magnified to unheard-of proportions. And with that



Déjà Vu

by Ben Parker

“At last!” Oscar exclaimed.

He held it carefully, lest he break off the smallest flake from the margin of the ancient papyrus. Some had searched for the Philosopher’s Stone, others for the Fountain of Youth. Oscar had spent both wisdom and youth in his quest for the Scroll of Dreams, the enchantment that would transport one back to the time of life’s greatest joy, to relive the days of youthful innocence and bliss.

As he read the words of the incantation, he exalted in the moment, a moment so full of joy — and oh so familiar.

“At last!” Oscar exclaimed.

thought, the truth rushed on me, for I remembered the spider carved on the ruins and on the statues, and I knew now what it had signified to the dwellers in the city. What was it the inscription had said? ‘The evil god of the city, who has dwelt there from the beginning of time.’ And as I saw those tracks advancing toward me, I knew that the city’s ancient evil god still dwelt here, and that I was in his temple, alone and unarmed.

“What strange creatures might there not have been in the dawn of time? And this one, this gigantic monster in a spider’s form — had not those who built the city found it here when they came, and, in awe, taken it as the city’s god, and built for it the mighty temple in which I now stood? And they, who had the wisdom and art to make this vast fane invisible, not to be seen by human eyes, had they done the same to their god, and made of him almost a true god, invisible, powerful, undying? Undying! Almost it must have been, to survive the ages as it had done. Yet I knew that even some kinds of parrots live for centuries, and what could I know of this monstrous relic of dead ages? And when the city died and crumbled, and the victims were no longer brought to its lair in the temple, did it not live, as I thought, by ranging the desert? No wonder the Arabs had feared the country in this direction! It would be death for anything that came even within view of such a horror, that could clutch and spring and chase, and yet remain always unseen. And was it death for me?

“Such were some of the thoughts that pounded through my brain, as I watched death approach, with those steadily advancing tracks in the sand. And now the paralysis of terror that had gripped me was broken, and I ran down the great staircase, and into the court. I could think of no place in that great hall where I might hide. Imagine hiding in a place where all is invisible! But I must go some place, and finally I dashed past the foot of the great staircase until I reached a wall di-

rectly under the landing on which I had stood, and against this I crouched, praying that the deepening shadows of dusk might hide me from the gaze of the creature whose lair this was.

“I KNEW instantly when the thing entered the gate through which I too had come. Pad, pad, pad — that was the soft, cushioned sound of its passage. I heard the feet stop for a moment by the opened door at the end of the corridor. Perhaps it was in surprise that the door was open, I thought, for how could I know how great or little intelligence lay in that unseen creature’s brain? Then pad, pad — across the court it came, and I heard the soft sound of its passing as it ascended the staircase. Had I not been afraid to breathe, I would have almost screamed with relief.

“Yet still fear held me, and I remained crouched against the wall while the thing went up the great stairs. Imagine that scene! All around me was absolutely nothing visible, nothing but the great flat circle of sand that lay a foot below me, yet I saw the place with my mind’s eye, and knew of the walls and courts that lay about me, and the thing above me, in fear of which I was crouching there in the gathering darkness.

“The sound of feet above me had ceased, and I judged that the thing had gone into the great room above, which I had feared to enter. Now if ever was the time to make my escape in the darkness, so I rose, with infinite carefulness, and softly walked across the court to the door that led into the corridor. But when I had walked only half of the distance, as I thought, I crashed squarely into another invisible wall across my path, and fell backward, the metal handle of the sheath-knife at my belt striking the flooring with a loud clang. God help me, I had misjudged the position of the door, and had walked straight into the wall, instead!

“I lay there, motionless, with cold fear flooding every part of my being. Then, pad,

pad — the soft steps of the thing across the landing, and then for a moment silence. Could it see me from the landing, I wondered. Could it? For a moment, hope warmed me, as no sound came, but the next instant I knew that death had me by the throat, for pad, pad — down the stairs it came.

“With that sound my last vestige of self-control fled and I scrambled to my feet and made another mad dash in the direction of the door. Crash! — into another wall I went, and rose to my feet trembling. There was no sound of footsteps now, and as quietly as I could, I walked into the great court still farther, as I thought, for my whole ideas of direction were hopelessly confused. God, what a weird game it was we played there on that darkened circle of sand!

“No sound whatever from the thing that hunted me, and my hope flickered up again. And with a dreadful irony, it was at that exact moment that I walked straight into the thing. My outstretched hand touched and grasped what must have been one of its limbs, thick and cold and hairy, that was instantly torn from my grasp and then seized me again, while another and another clutched me also. The thing had stood quite still, leaving me to walk directly into its grasp — the drama of the spider and the fly!

“A moment only it held me, for that cold grasp filled me with such deep, shuddering abhorrence that I wrenched myself loose and I fled madly across the court, stumbling again on the first step of the great staircase. I ran madly up those stairs, and even as I ran I heard the thing in pursuit, no soft steps now, but a rapid shuffle.

“Up I went, and across the landing, and grasped the edge of the railing, for I meant to throw myself down from there, to a clean death on the floor below. But under my hands, the top of the railing moved, one of the great blocks that evidently made up its top was loosened and rocked toward me! In a flash I grasped the great block and staggered across

the landing with it in my arms, to the head of the staircase. Two men could hardly have lifted it, I think, yet I did more, in a sudden access of mad strength; for as I heard that monster coming swiftly up the great stairs, I raised the block, invisible as ever, above my head, and sent it crashing down the staircase upon the place where I thought the thing was at that moment.

“For an instant after the crash there was silence, and then a low humming sound began, that waxed into a loud droning. And at the same time, at a spot half-way down the staircase where the block had crashed, a thin, purple liquid seemed to well out of the empty air, giving form to a few of the invisible steps as it flowed over them, and outlining, too, the block I had thrown, and a great hairy limb that lay crushed beneath it, and from which the fluid that was the monster’s blood was oozing. I had not killed the thing, but had chained it down, as I thought, with the block that held it prisoner.

“There was a thrashing sound on the staircase, and the purple stream ran more freely, and by the outline of its splashes, I saw, dimly, the monstrous god that had been known in Mamurth in ages past. Like a giant spider, it was, with angled limbs that were yards long, and a hairy, repellent body. Even as I stood there, I wondered that the thing, invisible as it was, was yet visible by the life-blood in it, when that blood was spilled. Yet so it was, nor can I even suggest a reason. But one glimpse I got of its half-visible, purple-splashed outline, and then, hugging the farther side of the stairs, I descended. When I passed the thing, the intolerable odor of a crushed insect almost smothered me, and the monster itself made frantic efforts to loosen itself and spring at me. But it could not, and I got safely down, shuddering and hardly able to walk.

“Straight across the great court I went, and ran shakily through the corridor, and down the long avenue, and out between the two great statues. The moonlight shone on them,

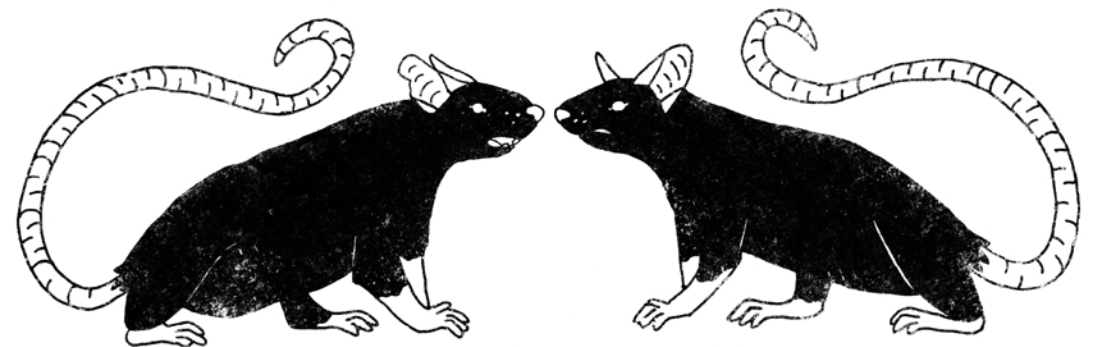
and the tablets of inscriptions stood out on the sides of the statues clearly, with their strange symbols and carved spider forms. But I knew now what their message was!

“It was well that my camels had wandered into the ruins, for such was the fear that struck through me that I would never have returned for them had they lingered by the invisible wall. All that night I rode to the north, and when morning came I did not stop, but still pushed north. And as I went through the mountain pass, one camel stumbled and fell, and in falling burst open all my water supplies that were lashed on its back.

“No water at all was left, but I still held north, killing the other camel by my constant speed, and then staggered on, on foot. On hands and knees I crawled forward, when my legs gave out, always north, away from that temple of evil and its evil god. And tonight, I had been crawling, how many miles I do not know, and I saw your fire. And that is all.”

HE LAY back exhausted, and Mitchell and I looked at each other’s faces in the firelight. Then, rising, Mitchell strode to the edge of our camp and looked for a long time at the moonlit desert that lay toward the south. What his thoughts were, I do not know. I was nursing my own, as I watched the man that lay beside our fire.

It was early the next morning that he died, muttering about great walls around him. We wrapped his body securely, and bearing it with us held our way across the desert.



In Algiers we cabled to the friends whose address we found in his money belt, and arranged to ship the body to them, for such had been his only request. Later they wrote that he had been buried in the little churchyard of the New England village that had been his childhood home. I do not think that his sleep there will be troubled by dreams of that place of evil from which he fled. I pray that it will not.

Often and often have Mitchell and I discussed the thing, over lonely campfires and in the inns of the seaport towns. Did he kill the invisible monster he spoke of, and is it lying now, a withered remnant, under the block on the great staircase? Or did it gnaw its way loose; does it still roam the desert and make its lair in the vast, ancient temple, as unseen as itself?

Or, different still, was the man simply crazed by the heat and thirst of the desert, and his tale but the product of a maddened mind? I do not think that this is so. I think that he told truth, yet I do not know. Nor shall I ever know, for never, Mitchell and I have decided, shall we be the ones to venture into the place of hell on earth where that ancient god of evil may still be living, amid the invisible courts and towers, beyond the unseen wall.

Learn more about Edmond Hamilton’s Weir Tales debut and its overlooked connections to the Cthulhu Mythos in **EDMOND HAMILTON, PARALLEL LOVECRAFTIAN**, page 47.

THE WEIRD OF TOMORROW

by Alex Woodroe



I WANT to propose this thought: a story's genre is not an adjective that characterizes it, like dark or small or heavy.

No, I want to propose that every story's genre is its living, breathing, growing body. I want to propose that it has limbs, and it moves, and it evolves; that it joins with other story-bodies in writhing, swirling genre flocks that we can sort of follow through their eras and predict to a small degree, but they never take the exact same shape twice. Flocks that every story-body contributes to and changes. I want to propose that the flocks don't define the body, but all the bodies comprise the flocks.

And most importantly, I want to propose that New Weird — with or without Horror — is far from the cemetery of glorious but forgotten corpses all the authorities make it out to be.

I've got a vested interest in this, to be wholly transparent. New Weird kept me company through some of the most trying times of my young life and likely shaped a lot of the author and editor I turned out to be. Now that it's my turn to publish authors, I find myself drawn to the same comforts, and in my need to find words for the bodies of what I was reading in my submissions, I named their flock New Weird Horror.

Because I don't believe in expiration dates. I believe in evolution, adaptation, and the irresistible force of a generation's gut instinct to return to their spawning grounds.

ORIGINS OF WEIRD

One of the most practical definitions of genre I've ever come across came from librarians: genre is just the words we use to make sure the people who want your book get your book and the people who don't, don't. I almost always subscribe to this view because it allows writers a certain freedom of invention: you do the work of creation, let editors and publishers and book-sellers worry about all the rest of that stuff later. Explore, experiment. Get weird.

Proving that point, the term New Weird didn't come until after the first wave of works that defined it. At its conception, this particular genre-body was as pure as they come: it was just itself.

New Weird, according to the indisputable stalwart of information that is the internet, is a genre that existed — and allegedly, died — between the nineties and early aughts. It covered a range of authors who, at the time, happened to be writing speculative horror-adjacent works

that crossed and obliterated genre boundaries and the conventions of what speculative fiction was supposed to be. They were said to spawn from the legacy of Weird fiction, drawing inspiration from Lovecraft and Hodgson, taking that very same rejection of conventional monsters and bringing “the tentacle,” body horror, and the cosmic unknown into the future, off-planet, or in fantasy settings. We quickly turned their names into legends in their own right: China Miéville, Mary Gentle, Jeff VanderMeer.

Reading them was being dropped into a completely foreign environment with no hand-holding, where the rules were implied but never explained. There was no painting by numbers, no familiar tropes to anchor you, no uplifting fantasy, no idealistic sci-fi. A vat of genres melted together, creating more than the sum of their parts, along with an unsettling, otherworldly feeling. It was like the stories had spawned a soul in that chaotic ooze, and they were watching us.

The term itself didn't solidify until 2002, when M. John Harrison first used “new weird” as a genre category in the introduction to Miéville's novella *The Tain*. By this point, many would say the genre had already been throeing its final throes.

In Ann VanderMeer's 2008 anthology *The New Weird*, she prefaces the work by calling it a “rough guide to the moment or movement known as ‘New Weird’ acknowledging that the pivotal ‘moment’ is behind us, but that this moment had already lasted much longer than generally believed, had definite precursors, and continues to spread an Effect, even as it dissipates or becomes something else.” Ann's work here was vital to our understanding of the genre, and her acknowledgement of the fleeting nature of that moment is often quoted, but mostly we repeat the part that says “the moment is behind us.”

I'm far more interested in the part often ignored, the one that says “continues to spread” and “becomes something else.”

WEIRD THROUGH MUSIC

Let me take you on a small detour: I'm a huge music buff, and I listen to prog rock. That's no surprise, given the significant overlap between prog rock and speculative writing — if you want the crash course, just listen to Jeff Wayne's *War of the Worlds*.

If you look up prog rock, you'll likely learn that it's a genre that existed — and allegedly died — in the seventies in Britain. It covered a range of musicians who, at the time, happened to be writing rock-adjacent music that crossed and obliterated genre boundaries and the conventions of what rock music was supposed to be. Sound familiar? They combined extravagant songwriting with complex concepts and mastery of their instruments to produce otherworldly magnum opuses, before — again, allegedly — being murdered by the four-chord out-of-tune punk crowd, a heinous crime we will never forgive them for.

What you get now is a large number of stalwart fans, almost always men, who are quite sure they know what prog rock is allowed to be. They'll demand the same old songs, played on the same old Hammond organ. They'll insist that only that same old drummer ever did it right. They'll show up at concerts and — I kid you not — walk up to the band after the gig, when everyone else would normally say “well done,” or “thank you,” and say “great show! But . . . that riff on the second solo was different on the album version,” and expect to hear an apology in return.

The other thing you'll get is a large number of hopefully less annoying fans who believe that the key to progressive rock was hidden right in the name: “progress.” The musicians who shared that bright and fleeting moment sure seemed to believe so, too; they certainly weren't defining themselves by the calendar. They wrote prog rock as a reaction, as a countermeasure against the mindless three-minute love song, as a hunt for something more meaningful and elaborate, as a rejection of societal pressures, and as a full-bodied celebration of their skill as artists.

Heck, some of them thought they were writing something entirely different and just happened to tune into the visceral artistic need of the times.

If you ignore all the persnickety nonsense about who was allowed to be “in” and when the genre “died,” these core tenets are alive and well in music today. Modern bands, whether they call themselves prog rock or not, seek out the new and subversive and profound. Rather than coming and going in waves, it’s a constant trickle, a response to mainstream music that still has plenty of followers and is subject not to a momentary shine, but to constant evolution and adaptation.

And judging by what I’m seeing at Leprous concerts, if you continue to create in passion and truth, the audience will follow.

THE WEIRD OF TODAY

If you continue to create in passion and truth, the audience will follow, even when it’s a genre defined by its inability to accept definition.

And they’re following right across mediums, genres, and tones. From the major limelight moments like *Annihilation*’s film adaptation, to the droves of fearless presses, zines, and podcasts singing the song of Weird, there’s no shortage of venues and creators, if you know where to look. It does take an open mind though because Weird is always hidden in the last drawer you check.

Modern audiences will likely be familiar with Slipstream fiction and Science Fantasy, both genres that eschew traditional boundaries. In their darker corners, you’re very likely to find nests of Weird. It sometimes overlaps with Bizarro fiction, or any number of Punk-suffixed genres, or extra fringe niches like Weird West. A lot of times, a New Weird/Weird film or book will be sneakily credited as the more familiar SF, Urban Fantasy, or Surreal Drama because those genres are more likely to have broader appeal. Vast quantities of Weird are simply credited as Horror.

Things get even more complex if you consider

that “New Weird Horror” as a complete term doesn’t exist at all. At the time of writing this essay, googling that term still leads you to the New Weird Wiki, followed by more New Weird, followed by my own description of what New Weird Horror is for Tenebrous Press. It’s a term I put together out of thin air, under a dire need to specify the kind of horror we were publishing in a way that would highlight our goals and philosophy.

And the best way I’ve found to define this genre, or any genre, is to ask questions of the stories we read and see which answers stand up to our expectations. I highly recommend you practice this with the media you enjoy.

New: Does this story bring me something I’ve never read before? Does it have an element of exploration of form or content? Does it play with genre in new and exciting ways? Does it explore topical subgenres? Does the story address modern topics and modern fears? Does it ask questions we’ve needed to ask? Does it leave me with more internal landscape than I’d have had without it?

Weird: Does the story give me a feeling or a holistic experience that’s surreal or uncanny? Does it subvert expectations and tropes? Does it put together unexpected elements? Does it reject the voice of whatever speculative fiction is dominant at the time? Does it aim to surprise the audience more than cater to it? Does it make me say “what the heck did I just read” through a big old grin?

Horror, the easiest one: Is the story’s main goal to give me a sense of dread, unease, or anxiety? Does it explore dark corners of speculation, of human relationships, of the unknown?

Needless to say, this approach is going to make a great number of people very upset. Genre purists will argue that if you look at stories in this way, you can fit almost anything you want under the New Weird Horror umbrella. Why, they’ll say, all it needs to do is be dark and strange and exciting, and I say — yes, that is the point. There’s nothing I love more than discovering the core philosophies of Weird in

unexpected places, even in media that never intended to harbor them. I take great joy in claiming things like *Alice in Wonderland* or the movie *Dark City* in the name of Weird. If I can’t claim them for Weird fully, I’ll at least plant our flag in some elements of them.

What we get in exchange for throwing the gates open is marvelous: rather than a genre with clearly defined borders, the New Weird of today is being defined right now, with every new story published in its spirit. It will have changed between the time I write this and the time you read it. It will have already escaped whatever post we’d tied it to and become something even more undefinable.

And if that’s not New and Weird, I don’t know what is.

THE WEIRD OF TOMORROW

I can only hope that by now I’ve thoroughly convinced you that New Weird is alive and well, that New Weird Horror is its own little beast, and that all the Weirds have a powerful voice that’s going to resonate far into the future. You’d be forgiven for asking me what that future might look like.

But how can we say for sure? The flock is moving, floating between the currents of whoever feels strongly about it. There are future award-winning New Weird books confounding their authors right now in the shape of unruly first drafts or twenty-third iterations. Editors will take the same words and re-forge them to mean an entirely different thing.

One assumption we can safely make is that wherever it goes, it’ll take social relevance along with it. Horror of all varieties have always been a dumping ground for humanity’s worst fears and anxieties, to be transmogrified into sharks and swamp creatures for our catharsis. That’s not a trope or tradition so much as an involuntary spasm, and so it survives even the most stubborn attempt to subvert expectations. Writers don’t write in a vacuum, so willingly or not, they speak for all of us. If anything, I expect that to only increase as the next generations

find storytelling methods that work for them and provide them with the catharsis they need.

Another shift I’m anticipating is that of form. Modern audiences experience stories in new ways every day, and the changes range from shortened chapters and paragraphs, to interactive story-game books and game-movies on Netflix. There’s hardly a genre more suited to make an appearance across the board, especially nested inside more apparently conventional SF, Fantasy, and Horror narratives that’ll surprise the audience with Weird left hooks when they’re least expecting them. We may not have found that perfect New Weird Horror narrative told through viral TikToks just yet, but it’s coming for us whether we like it or not. And since I, too, am a creature stuck in this present moment, it’s likely that whatever form I can imagine doesn’t hold a candle to what’ll actually happen in ten years’ time.

Finally, the real fear: Is Weird ever going to really go away?

Yes and no. We’re never going to stop writing and publishing things that push boundaries, subvert expectations, and just plain old have fun with the rules. Whether we still call it the same thing next year or even next week is less certain, but that’s also the least important part of it. If there’s one thing I want you to gather from this talk, it’s that you get to choose the words you use to describe your experience. You get to make your case for how the stories you read fit into it. You get to lend your strength to the genres you want to support. What you read, and recommend, and talk about matters.

You get to make your own Weird.

Alex Woodroe is a Romanian writer and editor of dark speculative fiction. She’s a member of the SFWA and HWA, and the editor-in-chief of Tenebrous Press. Her folk horror/fantasy book, WHISPERWOOD, is coming July 2023 from Flame Tree Press. Her Weird SF “Midnight Sun” appeared in Dark Matter Magazine, and her Folk Horror “Abandon” in Horror Library Volume 7 and The NoSleep Podcast. She’s passionate about infusing her country’s culture, food, and folklore into her work, and loves talking shop at @AlexWoodroe.



Illustration: Yves Tourigny

S. L. EDWARDS AND *IN THE DEVIL'S CRADLE:* AN INTERVIEW

WEIRD fiction writer, traveler, professor, and friend, S. L. Edwards sat down with me to discuss his debut novel. In the course of a couple hours we talked about the book's inspirations, what it's like to grow up in Texas, and the potential horrors of unbridled political polarization. The following is a condensed transcription of our conversation.

CAMERON HOWARD: *I can't resist the impulse to say I knew you before you were famous; it was all the way back in 2008 that you and I first met as nerdy teenagers role-playing on a writing message board. Your talent was obvious even back then. Would you have predicted we'd be here discussing your debut novel all these years later?*

S. L. EDWARDS: Well first of all, *gawrsh*, that's very kind of you to say. No I would not have, by any stretch of the imagination. I will say this, and this is going to sound kind of strange, but the moment after you get your first book out — you get some excitement, you get all that going — after that it does start to feel more *normal* to do this. But it never stops being something that is very humbling because you say, oh wow, I get to be a part of this thing that Lovecraft was a part of, that Clark Ashton Smith was a part of, that Peter Straub was a part of. And albeit a much smaller part — much smaller, I cannot stress that enough — but still a part of it. So no, I'm kind of shocked to be here, but I'm very pleased to be here and particularly pleased to be talking to you.

You mentioned that it gets more normal after your first book, are you referring to your short story collections?

Yeah, *Whiskey and Other Unusual Ghosts*, which is going to be re-released next month with two original illustrations and two new original stories. One is a ghost story about Mexico City with all of these real urban legends, and it's one of my favorite things I've written. And the other is an H. P. Lovecraft dream cycle story that I think is really cool and also speaks to my background, the background you share with me, of being a Texan and kind of having this country western phenomenon around us our entire childhood.

In the Devil's Cradle is your first novel, but you've also released two well-received short story collections, and I've known you've done short story work for some time now. So how was the transition from short stories to a longer format?

It was not fun. A lot of my friends joked with me that I would have to do a novel next, and I kind of hated the idea. I've only very recently become a novel reader myself. I had no idea what I was doing regarding writing a novel, and it really took the interest of my editor and publisher Ross Lockhart, telling me that he would like to see more of the story I sent him, to convince me it was worth doing. It was a lot more regimented than, say, writing a short story. I wrote it during the COVID-19 pandemic — simultaneously I was writing my dissertation — and I had convinced myself that this was going to be the only time to write a novel, that I wouldn't get another chance. So it was spending eight hours a day, every Saturday and Sunday, until the first draft was done. It was a grind. But it was a good experience — now I have a much better idea of what it means to tell these longer stories, and I think I could do it a lot easier if I can find the time to write again.

Your novel depicts the fictional nation of Antioch in political upheaval, but the heart of the story is how the Esquivel family endures the conflict together. Your deft use of the setting, the town of Rio Rojo, and its hauntings as a manifestation of the more macro political elements ties everything together. Did these three distinct aspects of the story form together initially, or did certain elements emerge later than others in the writing process?

Yes, they all began intertwined. And it's a funny story that also involves Ross, and

maybe I should mention this in interviews more so as to publicly wave my arms and say “See, it’s a good idea!” This is actually not the first time I’ve written about Antioch nor is it the first published story that features Antioch. There’s a pivotal event in the novel that I don’t want to give too much away for, but most of my Antioch fiction takes place after that event. And it takes place more in what I would call the present day, a contemporary Antioch, while the novel is more roughly a 1950s Antioch. But this is to say that by the time I started outlining, a lot of the work on Antioch had already been done. Then it became moving away from the political legacy of Antioch and the events of the novel and honing in on this separatist town, this place that had a distinct cultural value and a distinct culture from the rest of the nation.

Would you say your perspective as a Texan informed the way you depicted Antioch’s politics?

You know as well as I do, Texas is a very strange place, it’s a very strange mindset, it is a place that seems distinct from the rest of the United States. But in reality, Texas isn’t very different from other parts of the U.S. I mean you look at Texas politics, and they look an awful lot like Ohio politics (sorry Ohio). You look at our weather, and it’s kind of standard southern weather. You look at our food, and the entire border shares our affinity for Mexican food. But when you talk to a Texan, it’s like “Oh my god, this place is Shangri La, this is the best place in the world.”

It’s interesting — even being aware of that exaggerated pride, that’s sort of divorced from reality — that you still feel it, that you still participate in that exaggerated pride. My office is decorated with Texas stuff, I still love Texas in a very irrational, sort of

fervent way, and Rio Rojo is very much the Texas of Antioch. It’s this place with its own history, its own sense of identity and culture — quite frankly, its own sense of destiny — and a disdain for the rest of the country that really was influenced by my Texas upbringing.

But I would not describe Antioch, on the whole, as a right wing country. Antioch is, well, it’s a precarious country. More than Texas, writing about Antioch and its politics was influenced by looking at a number of very fragile democracies around the world. And I would say the horror story of Antioch is that it’s like any other democracy. Democracy is a balancing game, it’s a game of making sure that all of the powers involved both hold — so these powers continue to exist — and that they do not grow. It’s your typical spiel about checks and balances. But also, what is the effect of a recession on a democracy? What is the effect of political polarization on a democracy? What is the effect of lies on a democracy? And more than Texas, I look to the U.S. as the model for the politics of Antioch. But writing about Rio Rojo very much came from my background as a Texan.

You wrote this novel during the pandemic, and in your afterword you mentioned boarding one of the last commercial flights out of Bogotá, Colombia, having spent three months conducting academic research there. You were careful to state that Antioch is not a direct analog to any real place, but can you expand on how your experiences studying and living in Latin America contributed to your process?

There is an episode of Colombia’s history that really influenced the events and the tone of *In the Devil’s Cradle*, and it was a ten-year civil war called La Violencia. La Violencia is unique because one, it was a

civil war that was very long lasting, and two, it was a civil war totally on partisan lines. And it was a civil war in which the nation essentially collapsed. The only institution to survive that conflict was the military. Reading about that event really made me stop and think, OK, what does a national collapse look like? How long can it last? What sort of factions emerge out of these moments? Reading about La Violencia and going to some of these original sources, visiting the museums, really influenced the national collapse of Antioch and how I told that story.

Now again, I do not think events like La Violencia are something unique to Colombia. I would stress to your readers that this is something that *could* happen anywhere. You hear a lot of chatter right now in the United States about the possibility of another civil war, which is very concerning. And I think we should be taking this chatter quite seriously, if for no other reason than as a warning. But if readers need an example that’s not a hypothetical, look to Europe. Look to episodes such as the Thirty Years’ War, look to World War II, look to partisan infighting in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. This is something that can happen anywhere, but just reading about La Violencia in Colombia definitely changed how I was going to write about the phenomenon of a national collapse.

You also mentioned that U.S. politics, and specifically the events of January 6 2021, have conceptual ties to the politics of Antioch. What can your novel tell us about our own nation following the Capitol attack?

The novel was actually finished when the Capitol attack happened, it had been revised, and I was just waiting on final edits. But I had a conversation with Ross, and I said I’m kind of worried about the topic of

this novel. Because we are in this polarized moment, and the novel ultimately is about what political polarization — what people going back to two distinct and irreconcilable factions — can do to a democracy. And I was afraid that something like what happens in Antioch might resonate a bit too true when the novel comes out. The political polarization that I was witnessing at the time of writing the novel — which was about when Biden clinched the Democratic nomination in 2020 and COVID-19 was becoming a partisan issue — that polarization inspired the writing of the novel. And regrettably, I think I was right to voice those concerns to Ross. The novel is about what political polarization can do to a democracy, and we in the United States are living through that horror story now.

As I was reading the novel, one theme that resonated repeatedly was the idea of people sacrificing themselves or their humanity — whether by choice or by force — for political ends. Was this intentional?

Absolutely, absolutely. When you look at any country, there is this valorization of people willing to die for their country. And I want to be clear: I’m not attacking patriotism. I don’t want people to come away and think I’m saying patriotism is bad. But when you don’t question your patriotism, when people do not question *why* they are loyal to their country, *why* they are willing to do things for their country — and very importantly — are there some things that people are *not* willing to do for their country? When you have that kind of unquestioned, uninterrogated, and violent patriotism, you end up with a horror story. You end up with zealots who go into militaries to kill for their country. You end up with people who have a very different vision of their country and people who believe that members of some races or some religions

don't fit in that vision. So that was very intentional in the writing of the novel.

While preparing for this, I read an interview you did last year in which you said, "I'm not sure when I learned 'horror' was distinct from 'literature,' but I was very disappointed." Are you entirely convinced there is a meaningful distinction between them?

Absolutely not. But a lot of people treat it that way. You look at the way that quote unquote literary writers talk about horror, and it's very dismissive. And it's a very strange thing to be dismissive of. Because if the goal of literature, of any work of fiction, is to make a reader feel something, then there is no more important, or natural, or quite frankly, frequent emotion as fear. When a work of art can motivate a reader to *feel*, then that means that that work of art has done its job. So it's very unfortunate to me that horror is kind of put into a niche. And don't get me wrong, there's a few horror writers that are taken very very seriously by society at large. I think of Stephen Graham Jones, who is phenomenal. I think of recent work from Isabel Cañas, her novel *The Hacienda*. And of course Stephen King. But the sort of world that I am in, this very weird with a capital W, very intensely looking at Lovecraft's legacy branch of horror, we're in a smaller sandbox than the other people. And I think it's in large part because there's an attitude to dismiss that kind of story.

Anyone who follows you on Facebook knows you're something of a beer connoisseur. What particular beer would you select as the ideal pairing for an evening reading In the Devil's Cradle?

Oooh, OK, OK, well let me follow this up. What's the weather in this ideal evening?

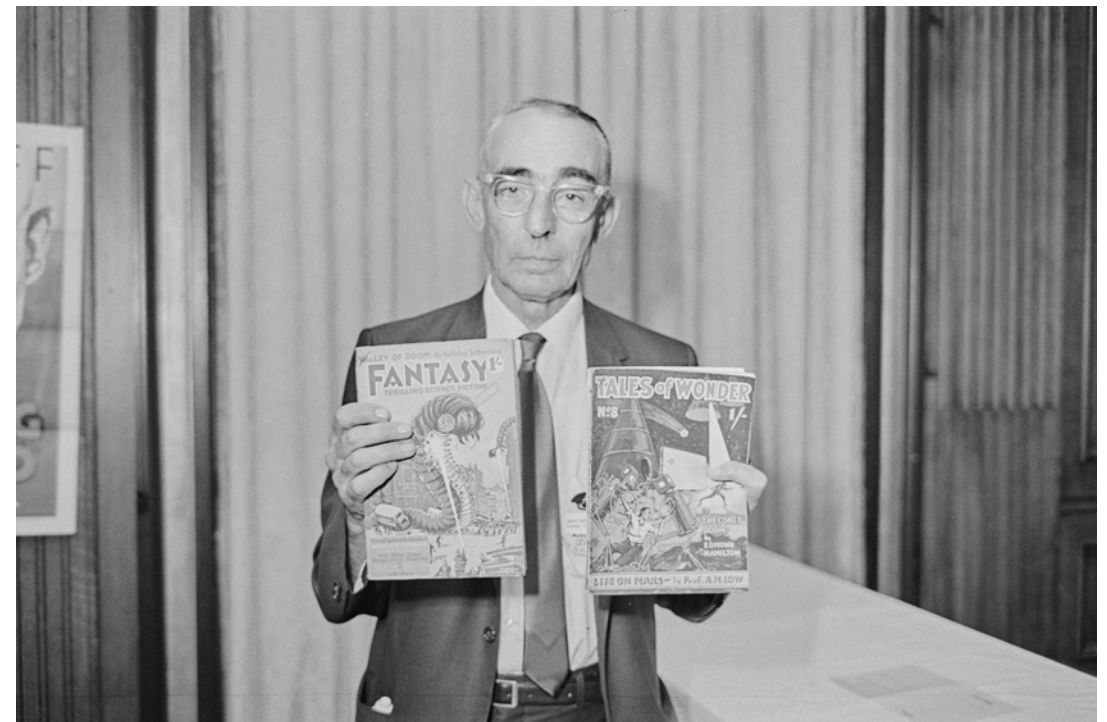
That's interesting. Let's say it's autumnal weather then.

I think a nice Oktoberfest lager, or a fest beer, or a Märzen, or any dark lager in your 3.5% to 5% range would be the ideal pairing for reading the novel in autumn. Start with the Oktoberfest, and then pour yourself a glass of whiskey.



"But I disagree with you about 'The Monster God of Mamurth.' To me that story has a distinct grip. It is out of the pulp tradition, & somehow achieves a slight aura of convincingness."

– H. P. Lovecraft to Donald A. Wollheim, 20 Sep 1935,
Letters to Robert Bloch & Others 315



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Edmond Hamilton holds two pulp magazines at the 25th World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon), also known as NyCon 3, in 1967 at the Statler Hilton Hotel in New York City.

EDMOND HAMILTON, PARALLEL LOVECRAFTIAN

by Bobby Derie

HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT did not emerge a fully-grown pulp writer from his mother's womb in 1890; he developed as a writer over time, and openly admitted those authors and traditions that had influenced him, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Dunsany, and Arthur Machen. Nor was Lovecraft the only pulp writer during this period to own to their influence. Clark Ashton Smith's "The Nameless Offspring" (1932) was inspired by Arthur Machen's "The Great God

Pan" (1895) as much as Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror" (1929) was, to take one example; and Robert E. Howard would be inspired by Arthur Machen's "Little People" stories when he wrote "The Children of the Night" (1931), "The People of the Dark" (1932), and other tales. Aficionados of the Cthulhu Mythos will probably be aware of these and other stories that have forged connections of theme and influence in a literary game that continues to this day — but a few may be surprised at

the amount of “Lovecraftian” fiction that was written contemporarily with Lovecraft but had nothing to do with him at all.

When readers today think of H. P. Lovecraft and what makes something “Lovecraftian,” they tend to focus on specific elements: tentacles, the *Necronomicon*, ancient alien gods, strange cults, fish people, and the like. Yet Lovecraft was far from the only weird writer to use many of these elements. A secret town of fish-people appear in Herbert Gorman’s “The Place Called Dagon” (1927), and formed one of the inspirations for Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936); before the invisible monster in “The Dunwich Horror,” there was Guy de Maupassant’s “La Horla” (1887) and Ambrose Bierce’s “The Damned Thing” (1893); before there was a Cthulhu cult in the Pacific, William Hope Hodgson wrote of a weird sect in “The Island of the Ud” (1912). While no writer mentioned the *Necronomicon* specifically before Lovecraft did, essentially every other element we think of as “Lovecraftian” had been used before Lovecraft did or continued to see use by his contemporaries.

Writers cannot own ideas, only specific expressions of them, and what set Lovecraft apart from his contemporaries was not an emphasis on cults or grimoires, but how he used those ideas, the stories he wove with them, and the larger interconnected narrative that he developed with his friends, which ultimately survived him. Lovecraftian fiction has always been bigger than what Lovecraft himself wrote, but the emphasis placed on reading, reviewing, and reprinting the Cthulhu Mythos above other weird tales tends to obscure all the other stories that were in the “Lovecraftian” vein — either in theme or containing specific elements that Lovecraft used in his fiction — but weren’t part of the Mythos game.

If you were an avid *Weird Tales* reader in late 1931, and someone tried to recall a story about extraterrestrial crustaceans in northern woods that transplant human brains, you might suggest Lovecraft’s “The Whisperer in

Darkness” — but you might equally suggest Edmond Hamilton’s “The Shot from Saturn,” which appeared only a couple of months later. If you were someone like Clark Ashton Smith, who was corresponding with Lovecraft as the story was being written, you might point out the similarities even sooner:

“Your hints about ‘The Whisperer in Darkness’ are most alluring; and I hope you will have it in its definite form before long. That idea of the brains transported in metal cylinders is excellent! By the way, I note a yarn by Edmond Hamilton in W.T., about some heads that were kept alive by artificial systems after their bodies were destroyed. My own conception of a brain in an artificial physique dates back almost to my childhood!”

– Clark Ashton Smith to H. P. Lovecraft, [early Sep 1930], *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill* 232

Lovecraft and Hamilton’s respective stories are very different; Lovecraft and Hamilton were almost as different stylistically as two popular writers for *Weird Tales* could be — but it illustrates how they could build different stories from the same basic building blocks and how what we think of today as Lovecraftian is more than just the odd tentacle or elder god . . . or at least, it should be. Yet for all that Lovecraft and Hamilton were almost antipodally different in their approach to fiction, at least once Hamilton wrote a story that even Lovecraft had to acknowledge.

“Over the years, the 1926 Space Opera Hamilton became a writer better than the self-conscious ‘literary’ or ‘artistic’ one. He demonstrated the validity of his claim that if you wrote enough and kept at it, you could not help but every once in a while do something better than your norm, and perhaps better than the other fellow’s good or best.”

– E. Hoffmann Price, “A Memoir” (1977)

Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977) began his

career at *Weird Tales* with “The Monster-God of Mamurth,” which saw print in the August 1926 issue. The timing was precipitous: after a shaky first couple of years, *Weird Tales* had stabilized and found its ongoing format under editor Farnsworth Wright. Relatively quickly, the twenty-two-year-old pulp writer would find his footing more firmly in science fiction rather than fantasy, and within a couple of years he would begin crafting the stories of the Interstellar Patrol which, along with E. E. “Doc” Smith’s Lensmen series, would form the basic inspiration for *Star Trek*, DC comics’ the Green Lantern Corps, and Marvel Comics’ Nova Corps.

These space opera stories, told on a galactic scale and with all the cliffhanger-timing of a 1920s cinema serial, were often criticized for their similarity to one another; H. P. Lovecraft would go so far as to call him “Single Plot Hamilton” — and Lovecraft wasn’t wrong. For all the sweep of their imagination in the telling and the details, Hamilton’s Interstellar Patrol stories, including “Crashing Suns” (1928), “The Star-Stealers” (1929), “Within the Nebula” (1929), and “The Comet-Drivers” (1930) in particular, are often essentially the same story told over and over.

Yet “The Monster-God of Mamurth” was something very different. It is a story in the tradition of “La Horla” and “The Damned Thing” every bit as much as Lovecraft’s own “The Dunwich Horror,” and one has to imagine that this was deliberate — Hamilton as a new author taking stock of the kinds of stories already published in *Weird Tales* and trying to produce something of a similar style that would sell to the magazine. It worked. The story was voted the second-best in the issue by readers, just behind A. Merritt’s classic “The Woman of the Wood” and above Lovecraft’s “The Terrible Old Man.” For all that Lovecraft would lambast how Hamilton in later years catered to popular interest with his space opera yarns, he would freely admit:

“I think I could manage to be tactful with Hamilton — for damn it, the boy could write if he’d only forget the cursed pulp ideal! His ‘Monster God of Mamurth’ was magnificent!”

– H. P. Lovecraft to Clark Ashton Smith, [9 Mar 1934], *Dawnward Spire, Lonely Hill* 544

Hamilton was in the pulp writing game as a business; having hit on a salable formula, he kept with it for several years — but space opera, for all that it became the basis of his reputation, was never the only thing he wrote, and “The Monster-God of Mamurth” is an example of what he could do away from the comets and disintegrator beams . . . and perhaps it is not so surprising that Hamilton could parallel some of Lovecraft’s ideas. They were both contemporaries, well-versed in literature. Consider these two passages:

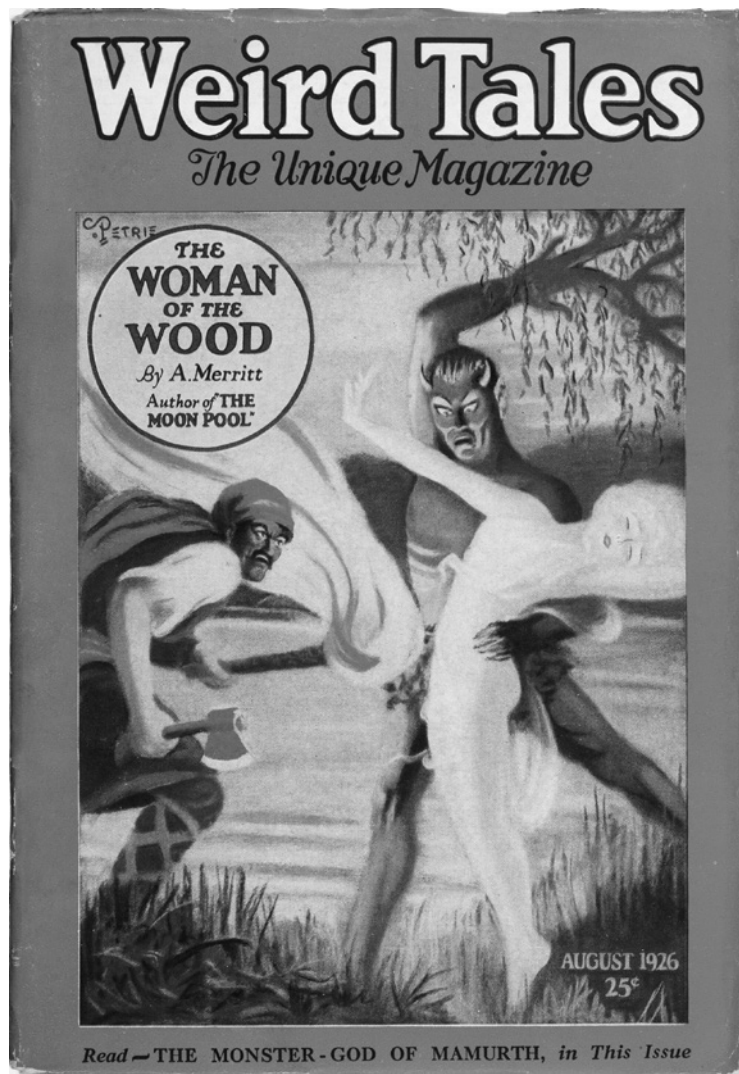
“It’s not always good to dig up dead secrets. There are some things the past should be allowed to hide.”

– Edmond Hamilton, “The Monster-God of Mamurth” (1926)

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”

– H. P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928)

In keeping with his style, Hamilton’s line is terse, pithy, to the point. Yet there is an undeniable parallel in the idea being expressed . . . and, oddly enough, a similarity in how a monstrous being from the ancient past continues as



a strange and terrible survival in the present. Hamilton was not expressly writing anything to connect with Lovecraft's nascent Mythos, yet acting on his own he produced an entity as weird and Lovecraftian as Clark Ashton Smith's Tsathoggua or Robert E. Howard's Thog — a point that was not always overlooked by anthologists. "The Monster-God of Mamurth" is so close to being a Mythos yarn that Italian editor Luigi Cozzi included it in the anthology *La furia di Cthulhu* (1987).

The story has another Lovecraftian connection, a quite important one:

"One of the anthologies [Beware After Dark (1929)] contained a Lovecraft story — I think it

was 'The Call of Cthulhu,' which, by the way, he wasn't overfond of — also contained Edmond Hamilton's early weird novelette 'The Monster God of Mamurth.' Lovecraft recommended it to me as an example of Hamilton's earlier writing. He didn't like Hamilton's intermediate save-the-world stories, which he regarded as formula stuff (some colleagues called Hamilton 'Hectograph Eddie' for using the same plots over and over again), but he thought 'Mamurth' admirable. I was quite taken with it.

The story concerns an invisible building in the Sahara Desert. Hamilton describes the weird sensation of climbing a flight of invisible steps, forty or fifty feet above the desert floor. When I read this I thought, Wouldn't it

be interesting if the narrator found himself in an invisible maze and couldn't get out? One would have to use a long string or tape to find one's way out of an invisible building.

I had the idea of writing this as an interplanetary story, the maze perhaps set on Venus.

I wrote a first draft of six or eight thousand words, called it 'In the Walls of Eryx,' and showed it to Lovecraft. He read the thing. He thought it had possibilities. But the story was, as the critics say, deeply flawed."

— Kenneth Sterling, "Caverns Measureless to Man" (1975)

Lovecraft would rewrite Sterling's draft, which would be published after Lovecraft's death as "In the Walls of Eryx" (1939). The inspiration Lovecraft and Sterling took from Hamilton is clear in the passages where the protagonists both encounter the material for the first time:

"For I knew now that it was solid matter I had run into, not force. When I thrust out my hands, the edge of the circle was as far as they would go, for there they met a smooth wall, totally invisible, yet at the same time quite material."
— Edmond Hamilton, "The Monster-God of Mamurth"

"Extending my gloved left hand, I verified the presence of invisible solid matter — or a tactile illusion of solid matter — ahead of me. Upon moving my hand I found that the barrier was of substantial extent, and of an almost glassy smoothness, with no evidence of the joining of separate blocks."
— H. P. Lovecraft and Kenneth Sterling, "In the Walls of Eryx"

Neither Lovecraft, Sterling, nor Hamilton invented the invisible wall; while Lovecraft and Sterling took inspiration from Hamilton, what this represents is another variation on a familiar pulp theme. There is a certain irony in this particular borrowing from what Lovecraft considered Hamilton's best early weird tale because "In the Walls of Eryx" is a deliberate pastiche of the kind of interplanetary adventure fiction that Hamilton had at that point for many years specialized in.

An invisible building. An ancient creature worshipped as a god. A forgotten horror from the past that has survived into the present. It is easy today to read these stories and wonder at the parallels between Hamilton's story and Lovecraft's body of work. In this case, perhaps, we should look at it from the other side. Was Lovecraft's work Hamiltonian? Were those

early readers of *Weird Tales* or *Beware After Dark* ever struck by how two different writers could hit on themes that so closely paralleled one another?

Probably not. Hamilton's fiction rather swiftly diverged into its own distinct style in the pages of *Weird Tales* as he strove to provide interplanetary stories for editor Farnsworth Wright to compete with the science fiction pulps. "The Monster-God of Mamurth" was ultimately a one-off, not part of an ongoing Mythos . . . and so it has been somewhat forgotten and neglected by Mythos enthusiasts over the decades. Yet it stands as an example of those stories published in *Weird Tales* and other pulps during Lovecraft's day that he had nothing to do with, but which nevertheless paralleled some of his themes and shared common elements. Of them all, Edmond Hamilton's "The Monster-God of Mamurth" deserves to be remembered.

Bobby Derie is an independent scholar with a focus on pulp studies, especially the works of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard. His books include Sex and the Cthulhu Mythos (2015) and Weird Tales: Essays on Robert E. Howard and Others (2019), and his reviews and essays have appeared in the Cromcast Chronicle, The Dark Man: The Journal of Robert E. Howard and Pulp Studies, Lovecraft Annual, Occult Detective Quarterly, and Skelos.





AN INFORMAL chat with readers in the tradition of pulp magazine mail sections like the Eyrie, the Consortium aims to reclaim the open forum via letters that once connected authors and editors to their readers.

CONCERNED READERS

Ginger L. W. Joyce from Evans City, PA, writes:

I came across your collection of tales in my son's room behind a stack of comics. I must say they are the weirdest things I've ever read. As a mother, I believe that these stories and their ideas are a danger to the minds of the children of our great nation. My son spent weeks babbling on about how teddy bears were once alive. He forced me to throw out every one of his sister's teddy bears. I don't think I need to tell you about the tears caused by this little act of madness. Sir, I beg you to stop this insanity now.

We're glad that Nathan Lee's "The Work That Must Be Done" resonated with your son, although we regret any harm it may have caused. Sorry to disappoint you, but we likewise regard our magazine as work that must be done. This issue features another of Nathan Lee's excellent drabbles, "Structural Decay." Keep it away from your impressionable son, lest he start verbing nouns.

Hermione Lyn Caelie from North Lawrence, OH, writes:

I felt compelled to write in because of the story of "The Tenant." It's made me question a lot of things around me, and I am concerned if something has gotten into myself or another

family member. I am scared that no tests will ever be sufficient to help me trust people again. The bond that the alien makes with their daughter is truly, I think, the most terrifying thing that happens in the entire story.

My only quibble with the first issue is that when I went to check my answers for the Cryptid Crossword, I was shuttled into a bizarre dimension that I could not exit! When I flipped the screen over, the screen didn't reorient, instead MY ROOM did. Please fix this, or else I will be too afraid to complete the next one.

Sarah E. Stevens' story is one that will stay with us for some time. If it's any comfort at all, remember that in "The Tenant," it is implied that the aliens lived within humans long before it became a public phenomenon. So perhaps all that has changed is your perspective.

It sounds like your quibble regarding the crossword is not with our magazine but your localized reality. Have you tried reorienting your room and then checking whether the crossword appears correctly on screen?

PRAISE FOR BOBBY DERIE'S "THE LIFE AND WORKS OF SONIA H. GREENE"

Jessie P. Rithop from Yorktown, VA, writes:

Your magazine was suggested to me by a

good friend based on my enjoyment of Lovecraft's work. I was pleasantly surprised to see a biography on Sonia H. Greene in conjunction with her collaborative work with Lovecraft. I was not disappointed with the rest of the works either. I often wonder how to explain to others what "weird fiction" is. This publication provided great examples like a sci-fi cooking competition or aliens using us as rental space.

Scotty Watt from Millersville, TN, writes:

As someone whose first introduction to horror fiction was the works of H. P. Lovecraft, I quite enjoyed the biographical piece on Sonia H. Greene in the previous issue of *The Tentaculum*. I knew little of the woman prior to reading the essay, and it was fascinating to see how a woman so different from Lovecraft in terms of personality and values could find it in her heart to love him. Knowing that their divorce was the result of classism really makes me wonder if he might have evolved as a person, rather than stay stuck in the bigotry he is so widely known for, if he had been able to set aside his pride and try to make a real life with Sonia. I also found the different opinions his contemporaries had of their relationship and of Sonia herself very interesting. It's a shame she burned all those letters, so we'll never get the full biography of Lovecraft his wife wanted to write!

I hope we see more biographical pieces like this in future issues. It is nice to break up the fiction with something more grounded, and the focus on a background player in the genre of science fiction means it isn't the same information we've all read a million times before. Looking forward to the next issue!

Bobby Derie's presence as something of an on-call pulp historian has been invaluable to us here at The Tentaculum. We are proud to publish another one of his essays in this issue regarding Edmond Hamilton and his story "The Monster-God of Mamurth," which we hope you will also enjoy.

WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT NORM SHERMAN?

Jiro Setheppis from Yorktown, VA, writes:

The crossword was fun and challenging. It really challenged how well I knew my cryptids. Who is Norm Sherman? Does he make other crossword puzzles?

Norm Sherman is the host of The Drabblecast, a long-running and award-winning weird fiction podcast for which The Tentaculum serves as a print edition.

He is also known to have an affinity for cryptids of any kind. He is something of a crossword craftsman, and while we have no crossword on offer in this second issue, like any good cryptid, Norm Sherman may be spotted whenever you least expect it.

Mr. Heronn Mañas from Rainbow, CA, writes:

Has anyone working on *The Tentaculum* had the privilege of being in close physical proximity to the venerable Norm Sherman? What does he smell like?

Yes. We suppose you could say he smells . . . Normal.

Send us your thoughts

Have any comments on this issue's stories? Have something else on your mind? The Consortium features mail from readers like you, but only if you send us something! Send us a physical letter, and yes, we will actually read it. If you're not into snail mail, you can email us instead. You might just see your letter in the next issue.

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VARNEY LAKE

Godfrey

the glue maker

Godfrey was a glue maker. He made glue from horse bones and hooves.

His wasn't the best animal glue in the region, but he'd been very lucky.

He sold the glue to a famous bookbinder in town.

However, whilst he had built a very lucrative business, Godfrey had not been able to find love.

He was a romantic, a true believer in the concept of 'the other half'.

One afternoon, crouched over the dead body of a young foal he had bought from a widow, he had an idea.

After shaking the dirt off it—the animal had fallen off a cliff and crushed its owner—he cut off the horse's tail with a big pair of scissors, stood up, and approached a mirror.

He raised the horse's tail behind his head, and he liked what he saw.

It was a new Godfrey, younger, healthier even, with long, silky hair.

It didn't take much to make up his mind...

Didn't he make animal glue for a living?

A few weeks later, and with renewed confidence, Godfrey met the beautiful Isolda, a young woman who ended up being his wife and whom he loved fervently.

One day, while Godfrey was in his workshop working on a hanging carcass, Isolda approached him from behind.

She was smiling from ear to ear as she had great news to give to her husband.

But the moment she touched his back, something strange happened.

Godfrey's shoulders dislocated with a wet crack and both arms suddenly shot back, as if powered by strong pistons.

The hit landed on her chest.

Godfrey turned around and saw Isolda on the floor, her eyes wide open.

He ran to her and, to his horror, found that she was dead.

He burst into tears, his face resting on Isolda's chest.

Godfrey cried for a long time, unable to move.

And his tears... his tears moistened the ends of the horse's tail he had glued to his head almost a year ago.

Story: Nico Saraintaris
Art: Martinez Ruppel



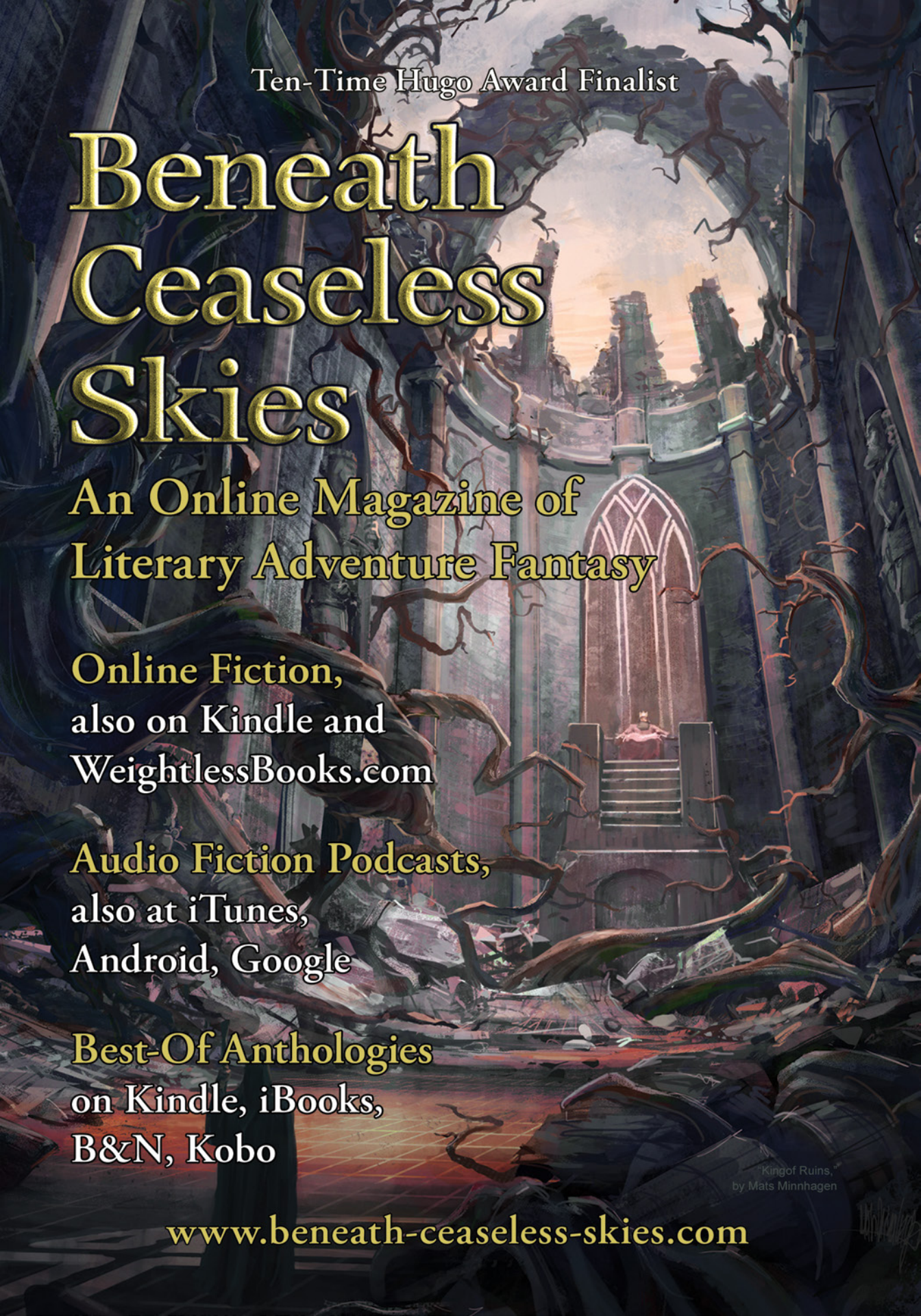
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King of Ruins,
by Mats Minnhagen