

FEVER DREAM

SCIENCE FICTION * HORROR * FANTASY

ISSUE 5 * JAN-MAR 15

COUNTING TWO YEARS AND
2
COUNTING

*

**MORE THAN 70
PAGES OF FICTION**

From

Philip Meredith

Rick McQuiston

Dave Ludford

Luke E. Dodd

Thomas Bird

Angus Stewart

Ed Ahern

Wes Shainline

*

POETRY

From

Holly Day

Sarah Braidwood

Amy Huffman

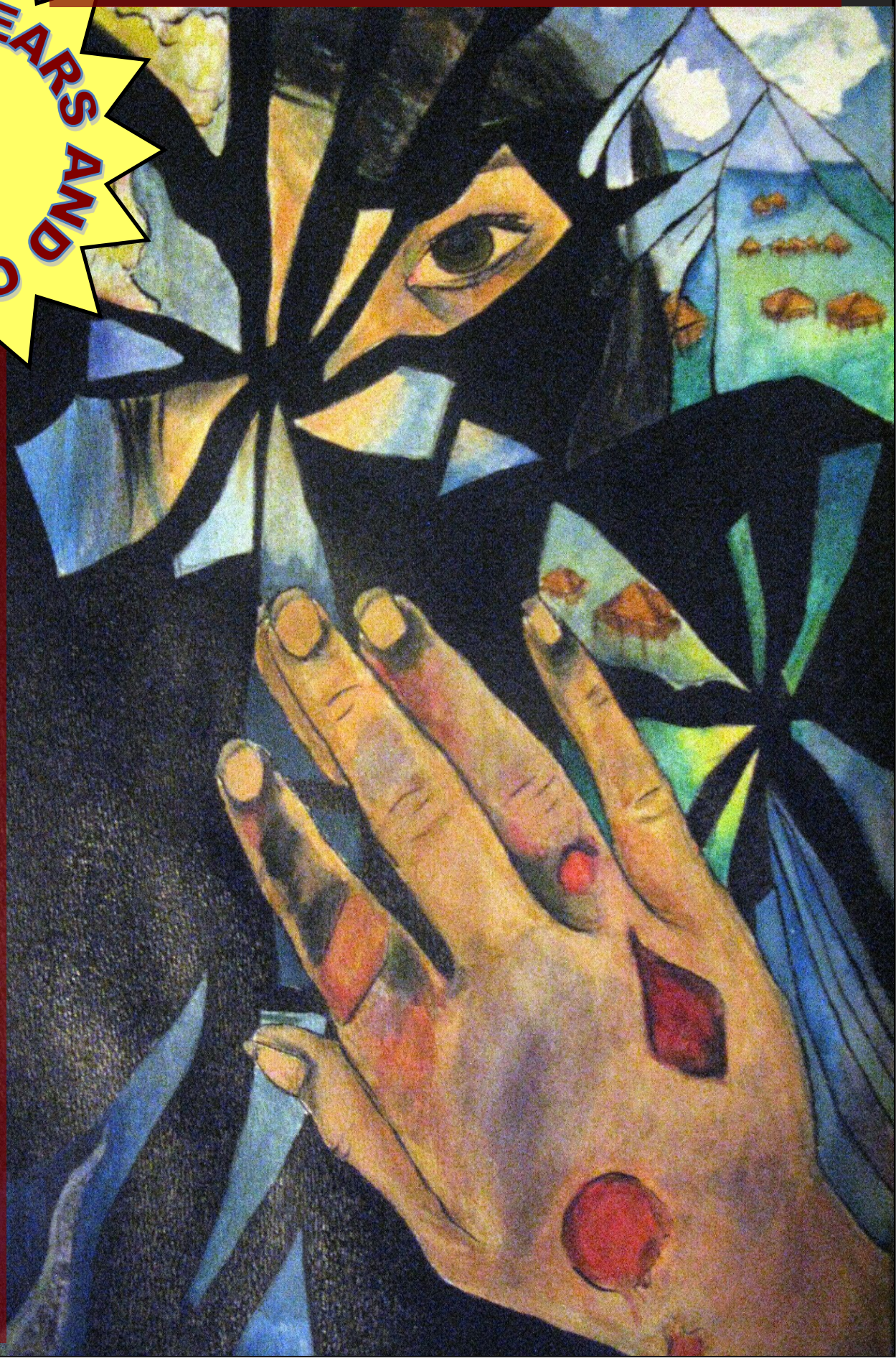
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ARTICLES

From

Jason Daniels

Louise Andrews



WELCOME TO FEVER DREAMS ISSUE FIVE

It has been a busy year for all of us here at Fever Dreams. First was our move to the

highlands of Scotland and then came the Scottish Independence Referendum. We have always tried to keep our personal political views out of the magazine but for some of our regular contributors and staff this was never going to be easy. Sadly the sense of regret and anger that many people felt at the result was sufficient to send shockwaves through the team. We are sad to see Al Thomas leave the Feverdreamers but wish him every success in his future ventures.

In the past few months there has been much discussion between the remaining Feverdreamers and new additions, Andrew Mackay, Dylan Harris and Jason Daniels, about the future of Fever Dreams. You will notice that we have tried hard to keep the essence of Fever Dreams the same while building on our strengths. We have kept the articles on writing fiction that you all love so much and built on that strength with Philip Meredith's fiction clinic. We have moved some of our multimedia content onto the website to make room for even more poetry and short stories. Eager to get in on the action, I will be contributing articles on how speculative fiction relates to other forms of fiction—this issue I am looking at themes of death in Peter Pan.



Issue Five Cover Art by Stephanie Bennett

EDITORIAL by Peter Bennett

Most importantly we announce our first short story anthology. This is going to be a big year for Fever Dreams and we have you, our loyal supporters, to thank for it.

As always we are keen to hear what you think of the magazine, especially the changes to the format. So here it is in all its glory. The second anniversary edition of Fever Dreams, I hope you enjoy it.

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FEVER DREAMS PUBLICATIONS

ARTICLE by Peter Bennett

The last issue of Fever Dreams came out on our first anniversary and in that issue Al laid out what we had planned for the coming year. I read his comments before writing this article and it saddens me to see that, while our goals have not changed, the future for Fever Dreams is no more bright than it was back then. Al was one of the driving forces behind Fever Dreams and we are sad that he has decided to leave us but in his absence we have discovered other voices that, although less loud, are no less certain about the future.

In the past year I have exchanged numerous emails with fans who have had only positive things to say about the magazine. I am grateful to you all for your kind words of support. I know what this magazine means to you and I know the things you value about it. We will continue to support the speculative fiction writers that have made this magazine what it is, providing you with our ten pennies worth of advice and a forum for you to get your work out. This was my goal when I helped establish Fever Dreams and remains my goal today.

There is, however, a stigma in this country, and I dare say in others too, that speculative fiction is in some way inferior to other forms of fiction. That horror, fantasy and science fiction are, in a word, less valuable. I have never believed this and as such I encourage our fan base to join me in celebrating the heritage and history of our genre. I will be writing a column for Fever Dreams this year discussing how prevalent the

ideas of our chosen genre are, looking at the pedigree and history of speculative fiction so that next time someone dismisses you as a mere speculative fiction writer you are armed to take the argument to them.

As part of this mission, the Feverdreamers are banding together to produce a collection of horror stories. Every member of the team, even me, will be choosing their favourite classic horror story, they will then rework and update it for today's audience. There will be space for five fans to have their work included too so check out the submission guidelines later in the issue.

SUPPORTING FEVER DREAMS

We hope that you enjoy the articles that we have collected together in this issue of Fever Dreams. While you are enjoying these articles our team will be working hard on the next issue. We are looking for your feedback. If you want to have your say on issue six or future issues then please let us know what you think on our Facebook and Twitter feeds.

In the meantime we are looking for writers to send us articles on writing, book reviews, film reviews, game reviews... In fact we are looking for you to send us anything related to the genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy. We were delighted with the amount of submissions that we received for issue five and we hope to receive the same support for future issues.

Letters to the Editor

MISSING YOU

In January last year Fever Dreams celebrated its first birthday and I was among those whose had letters printed in the issue. It wasn't an article, short story or poem but I still felt like I was a part of that moment. I have been a big fan of Fever Dreams since Issue 1 and it has become part of my regular reading. I have it on my tablet when I take the bus into work and I feel its absence very acutely. I was delighted to hear that you are returning in 2015 and hope that this will be the beginning of a great year for Fever Dreams. Welcome back, I've missed you.

CATHY LODGE
Newcastle upon Tyne

HAIL TO THE KING, BABY!

I was, like many fans, upset to hear about the problems at Fever Dreams. I was one of those people who kept telling myself that I would get round to submitting a story but couldn't get into a pattern of writing that enabled me to do so. I devoured the articles by Glen and Phil on how to write fiction and was delighted when Glen sent me an email with exercises designed to get those creative juices flowing. I waited with baited breath each month for my social media feeds to announce the next issue but there was nothing. The King was dead and there was no one to replace him.

Then in December I received the best news I could have hoped for. Christmas was coming and Fever Dreams was back. Behind the scenes you had been working to overcome those elder demons and although you may have lost an arm in the fight, in the form of Al Thomas, you are fighting on. All I can say is welcome back Fever Dreams and hail to the king, baby!

J. MCINTOSH
Birkenhead, Wirral

BACK FOR GOOD

I was deeply distressed to hear that Fever Dreams was leaving Dundee in the last issue but couldn't argue with your logic. The writing community in Dundee, fostered mainly by Dundee University, has always been biased against the speculative fiction market. One lecturer at Dundee University (name removed –editor) told me that he felt I had outgrown such childish writing and needed to give myself space to mature as a writer. I was further disgusted by the lack of Fever Dreams inclusion in the Dundee Literary Festival. Likewise when Dundee was being considered for city of culture, Fever Dreams was once again ignored while the University peddled their connections with Mary Shelley and Frankenstein. I wrote to Philip Meredith after hearing about the problems and he offered his assistance irrespective of the magazine. I applaud your efforts and continue to support you all, as you have supported me. While it makes me cringe to say it, I hope that this time you are 'back for good'.

R. DAWSON
DUNDEE

WRITER'S BLOCK

My dearest Peter, Phil and Glen, you have been a source of inspiration to me over the past two years. I was upset to hear that the past year has taken such a toll on Fever Dreams. I thought it only fair to say that your articles (Phil and Glen) and Peter's constant support have been invaluable to me and without Fever Dreams I have suffered tremendous writer's block. I now hear that Fever Dreams has suffered a pardon and hopefully, like my creativity and inspiration, you are safe from the block.

LOUISE MONAGHAN



Since my first article in Issue 4 I have been flooded with requests for a more detailed discussion about the process of world building. Irrespective of genre many writers want to take the

plunge and build their own world. Why would you not want to? Worldbuilding is one of the most fun activities that speculative writers can indulge in but remember its not a small task and its not writing. When I first began writing I developed a small cyberpunk setting and began fleshing it out by writing short stories for the characters who lived in that world, an idea that I borrowed from Tolkien, but these stories were merely tools to prompt the fine tuning of my universe. I loved this setting immensely but never got round to actually doing any serious

ARTICLE by Glenn Kohler

writing using it, maybe one day I will go back to it, but for now it serves as an experiment that helped me understand what was really involved in the process of world building. To help explain this to other writers I often break it down into the following chunks: Geology and Ecology, Flora and Fauna, Populations, Social Structure, Ancient History and Mythology

Just as in our world, these chunks are tightly intertwined with each other. As one aspect develops it will affect the others and may mean you have to change material you have already created. Even if you do have to make changes, keep your notes, you never know when you will be able to use them.

FIRST STEPS

One of the first things that writers think about when creating a personalized setting is a map. I believe that this stems from a tradition of including maps in children's literature that

goes back to Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. There is some merit in doing this, it lets you place important geographic features and place settlements, but unless you have a good grasp of geology and primitive human behaviour this is often a mistake. The number of times I've seen a desert on the wrong side of mountains (and yes there is a wrong side), or people living in an area where they couldn't possibly survive is incredible. You may be the creator of the world but no-one is going to believe that humans built a giant city in a desert with no nearby water supply. Magic should be a last resort not a catch all explanation for things that don't make logical sense.

You will, no doubt, have some preconceived ideas about what you want your world to be. These ideas have no doubt been collecting and gestating in your mind and while the process of worldbuilding will no doubt generate new ideas, these first ideas are important. Commit them to paper! The more ideas that are put to paper, the more you will know about your preferences for your world. Try to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the dominant sentient race?

In a fantasy setting this could be elves, dwarves, halflings, humans or even giants or orcs. In science fiction this could be human or alien.

2. What other races dwell in the world?

These are the less populace races such as the elves and dwarves of Middle Earth. Think about series like *Star Trek*, Spock is one alien on a ship full of humans but we still need to understand him.

3. What is the culture or technological level of the world?

You don't need to know too much about this at the start just think barbarian, feudal or maybe they are post apocalyptic survivors in the ruins of a crumbling civilisation.

4. Has a previous civilization existed before the one you are writing about?

There are various old civilizations in our own world, for example: Egypt, Greece, Rome. There are also theoretical civilizations such as Atlantis or the theory that aliens built the pyramids. Knowing what remains of a past civilization and who built it is important.

5. What is the climate of the area you intend to write about?

An arctic region will have very different means of sustenance to a desert region, and neither are likely to succeed to well at growing crops without magical or technological assistance.

6. What types of geographic features are you wanting to include?

If you have an idea for a dwarf kingdom under a mountain then you know you need to place a mountain. This also means foothills and forests are likely too. Do you want to have access to the sea and foreign trade routes? Then you will need a sea and some idea of what other lands exist out there.

7. What is the prevalence of technology and magic in your setting?

In cyberpunk settings technology is ever present but there are post-apocalyptic settings with little or no technology. Magic could be present but controlled by an elite few which would make it scarce or it could be so common that people barely question its existence.

8. What will make your setting really stand out?

Think about what will make your world stand out to the reader. What will make him share your setting with his or her friends.

As your world develops, these initial answers will guide its creation, though some of your ideas may need to be revised or discarded as unworkable. Chances are though that these

ideas will find a home in a future world.

REALISM versus FANTASY

I've talked about this in previous articles but its worth mentioning again here, a great deal of focus is placed on creating a 'real' world— one that will be familiar to your readers. The logic is that if the readers are able to accept the world as normal, or at least similar to what they experience in our own world, then they will be able to suspend their disbelief of the world you have created. In theory they are able to concentrate on the storytelling without being bothered with questions about 'how the flying island stays in the air'. On the other hand, if your world is no different to our own, then you may as well be writing historical fiction set in medieval Europe.

As a writer you should not feel constrained to make a world that could fit on our planet. Your goal, the end result, should be a fantasy world that stems from your imagination. If you want floating islands or clouds that you can walk on then feel free to do it, just remember that even in a world where magic and advanced technology is the norm, there must be a reason for things to happen.

The same rationale that allows a player to readily believe that a world patterned on our own can be used for even the most fantastic of worlds. If your reader is presented with a world that has a red sun and floating chunks of rock, some of which are large enough to have cities on, hang above the landscape, they will recognise and accept these as 'normal' features of the world, and although different to our own world, they should be able to accept it.

You should also remember though that if you overdo the fantastic then it can become difficult to accept and if you overuse a feature, such as a floating city, then it will be treated as commonplace and will lose its distinctive magic. Truly fantastic things, places and events should be localized to one area or be

very rare. They become oddities, worthy of the attention of your reader and something that fans will discuss with each other at length.

WORLD BUILDING

Every writer approaches worldbuilding from a unique perspective and as such I'm going to warn you that your personal interests and preferences can be used to aid in building your world but that for some writers there is a tendency to focus only on the aspects of the world that specifically interest you and let the rest sort itself out in good time. This sort of haphazard technique will often result in true-to-life details prevailing in one part of the world design while there are obvious facets of the world that are ignored. This leads to worlds where the landscape is epic and the setting fantastic but every kingdom is a cookie-cutter feudal fiefdom making weapons and armour and growing wheat. It will become readily apparent to your reader as your story unfolds that you didn't care enough about the economy of your setting and they will get bored of the indistinct fiefdoms quickly.

I make no claims to being a master worldbuilder. Regardless of my knowledge of this world I frequently come across aspects of my own worlds that I wished I paid a little more attention too, but that's why I'm going to do this in steps. The goal here is to create a fantastic setting for your speculative fiction, and the steps used to create a good world, for science-fiction or fantasy or horror, remain the same. I encourage you to try to answer the questions in this article, and next time we'll look at how we can refine that information to develop the geography of your world and then in Issue 7 we'll discuss the fine art of map-making. Once we have a map in place we'll use that map to populate our setting with animals and plants, and finally we'll look at placing our settlements. The last article will discuss how these settlements interact with each other, giving rise to a currency, political and legal system. See you next issue.



The worst thing a writer can do is assume that there is a proven way

to write. Often experienced writers will tell you to do what I say rather than follow what I do and one of the most confusing aspects of writing this applies to is the re-use of old work. I received an email from a writer asking whether I felt it was possible for him to lift lines, paragraphs or even whole scenes out of an old manuscript that he had abandoned. I would be lying if I said that I have never tried to shoehorn old material into new writing but I have learned that generally its not a good idea to force old writing into new.

I completely understand how tempting it is. I hate to waste my writing. I am also aware of that feeling you get when you read a well-written passage, you are proud of it and want other people to see it. The problem is that the likely outcome of reusing it will be a period of extensive rewriting (while you try to crowbar it into the story) and eventually you will be forced to accept that it does not work and take it out again or the scene will seem jarring or out of place.

I believe that for some writers there is a mind set no different to Dr. Frankenstein's compulsion to reuse old body parts. There is a belief that you can stitch together ideas and scenes from old novels to create a new novel, and it sadly is not uncommon, but while

ARTICLE by Philip Meredith

Frankenstein was successful in creating a re-animated being from the parts of others, like fiction created in this way, the stitch marks were obvious to any one who cared to look upon his abomination.

The problem is that, even if you wrote it fairly recently, when you try to graft that writing from an expired work onto your new content there will be a change in style and voice. You will change the names, alter the details to fit the new storyline and alter the dialogue to reflect the thought processes of your new characters. Then you will spend a considerable period of time changing the tenses, looking at the tone of the narrative and altering the viewpoint. You will keep the stitches as small as you can but will it be worth it in the end?

When I have tried to do this in the past I probably spent three or four times as long editing that scene than I would have done writing a new one. In many cases so little remains of the original scene that I couldn't honestly say they were the same. Ask yourself if the scene is really that important. Do you think someone is going to come up to you and say—hey that scene changed my life?

There is a big difference between keeping your old writing and butchering it so you can reuse it for parts. I wholeheartedly recommend

that you keep all your old writing because it may still come in useful but you should only recycle an old piece if it really fits the new plot. That does not mean that you should spend three weeks trimming the flesh and shaping the bones of your manuscript to make it possible to accept the graft. It means that the work should organically and logically fit into your new piece. If you do end up in a situation where you find that you can use a scene from an old piece of writing and it fits with minimal effort, then do not cut and paste.

My suggestion to writers, especially those that share my compulsion to hoard their work for possible future use, is that you store the sections you are fond and proud of under a suitable name in a directory on your computer. Give the directory a name that will mean something to you, mine is affectionately entitled 'the bone yard'. This directory can then serve as a depository for the 'bones' of future stories. If you are short of inspiration then you can look over the names of the files and see if anything springs to mind. You may look at the list and a whole new plot may spring to mind.

More importantly for me, they can also serve as a prompt to allow you to recall an experience when the memory seems a bit ragged round the edges. I once spent the day in a library researching for a story. There was a guy on a nearby table that kept sucking his teeth loudly. He was asked by two people to stop and he would apologise and stop but after a brief reprise he would restart. I took my irritation and poured it into my notebook and later transferred the contents to my computer for permanent storage. It still amazes me to this day how such a small stimulus can evoke such a powerful desire to harm another human being. I have re-read that passage on numerous occasions when I have been stumped and the potency of that writing has been distilled into several short stories since then.

I would argue that this is possibly the best use

for your writing graveyard. Not as the source of parts for a Frankenstein's monster of a story constructed of the disembodied scenes of old novels, but as a potent source of content and emotions that kick start the imagination and allow you to write the scene afresh.

We all change and develop all the time and my current writing is of a better standard than my past writing, no matter how good I thought it was at the time. Though I admit there are times when you have that one killer line too good to lose, as far as basic scenes and ideas are concerned it's rarely worth the effort it will take to prepare them for transplant.

It's one of those pieces of advice that gets thrown around but I'm going to stress it again. Keep a notebook for your ideas and subjects, maintain a folder on your computer and log your notebooks contents. If you are ever stuck for an idea for a story or feel blocked while writing a scene then take a stroll through your folder, leaf through your notebook, and see if the answer is in there.

One of the hardest things to do as a writer is acknowledge that it isn't working and needs to be put to rest, yet the process of creating the work up to that point and the emotions and ideas embedded within it are still valuable. In many ways writing a novel or a short story that you will later discard is never a waste because you are still learning and developing your skills. Even the act of beginning again and not being discouraged is a valuable experience, just remember to wipe the slate clean before you do.

WRITE TIME

The single most often heard complaint from would-be writers is...

'I'll get round to writing one day... when I have the time.' If you've been around writers for any length of time then you have heard it said, and I have heard it said around the world and on the internet.

What I find most odd about this statement is that often the would-be scribes never explain why their lives are so busy. The usual excuses tumble out—job, children or tiredness, but they never account for how their life is so much busier than everyone else's. If these people worked in a huge corporation, a clandestine government organisation or a crime syndicate I could, possibly, excuse the reluctance of these individuals to commit words to paper but otherwise I can't.

I'm not saying that we should dismiss everyone who says this or label them as having no serious intention to write. Some certainly, but let's be honest have you ever heard someone say 'I'll get round to being a doctor...' or 'I'll get round to becoming prime minister...' with the same sincerity that people say they'll get round to being a writer. Let's be clear this isn't the same as 'I'll get round to re-decorating the spare room...' or 'I'll get round to washing the car...' That is a half-promise which, frankly, is intended to buy you time and is more than likely vastly exaggerated. You know it has to

ARTICLE by Jason Daniels

be done but you don't want to do it now.

So why is it the writing seems to attract this most sincere of excuse? Do we really believe as a culture that writing is one of the few things that time can actually prevent?

There is only one likely reason, in my opinion, for this. These most sincere of would-be writers believe that knocking off the odd short story is a piece of cake. They believe that scribbling a novel or play is something that anyone can do, given the odd few minutes between shampooing the dog and feeding their kids.

Give me a break!

It's January. That's 2015. A whole new year has just come over the horizon. For those of you who've been using this 'If I Only Had The Time' excuse, just think about the coming days and evenings which represent your life over this new year. Think about the things you usually do: watching an endless parade of cop chases, smugglers with more tobacco than they can feasibly smoke in a lifetime, home restorations on buildings that should be bulldozed instead of restored, people degrading themselves for fame or worse, for counselling, and a lifetime's worth of nature programs. I'm

not saying that television is bad but couldn't you be putting all those hours to use for something better? Something more useful? Something like say writing?

Think about it. I'm not asking you to give up TV but surely there is one programme that you can pass.

Okay. I'll admit that I'm kidding. Partly.

The truth is that people forget that you don't have to write solidly for six hours to feel a sense of accomplishment. In truth if the quality of your writing is good enough then six minutes would probably be enough. It's what you write that counts, not how much. Quality not quantity.

The good thing about writing is that, for the most part, it goes on inside your head. Nobody ever wrote a book by merely pouring words onto paper. The words have to go through the brain first, then they get swilled around and added to ideas, taking shape and that is when you put them on the page.

Most writers I know, and I'm sure the guys here at Fever Dreams would agree with me, do far more thinking about what to write than actually hitting the keyboard. Believe me, it doesn't take any time at all to think of a sentence, a phrase, an idea or a scene. I'm no scientist but I'm sure it's a matter of nano-seconds. I do it all the time. Writing it down is when the real fun begins because that is when you see the words in front of you. That is when you begin playing with form and getting a feel for the run and flow of a sentence on the page rather than how it first looked in your head.

That is writing.

I get excited if I can put down a couple of hundred words a day which mean anything. I know our editor writes five thousand words a day, but even he will admit that, after editing, most of them end up on the equivalent of the cutting room floor. The important thing to realise is that every word, whether it be two

hundred or two thousand, is progress. It is forward momentum in the ongoing writing process.

Think about the places and spaces in your day where you have time doing nothing much: on the bus to work, on the train, in traffic, in the shower or the bath. Take these precious gaps in your schedule and think about your writing. Then snatch a few more minutes later in the day to write down what you thought about. When you can squeeze a few more try to enlarge and polish those words, then extend them and so on...

Pretty soon, you'll have found more time than you ever thought possible, because after a while, you'll be itching to get back to it. It will hopefully draw you in, like a drug.

So as we enter this new year, stop deceiving yourself, because that's the only person you are deceiving, and make time for your writing. Find those few minutes every day or every other day to devote to your craft. Even a sentence a day can give you a feeling of accomplishment. If you can't manage that then jot down a few words and build on them. Play with words and/or characters in your head and write them down. Choose to do something you really want to do instead of something you can do.

If you make these small changes then 2015 can become an important year in your development as a writer. I can say that because this time last year I made the decision to do just what I'm recommending to you. I was the one slumped in front of my TV telling myself I'll make time to write in 2013. What I can't say is that you'll be published by 2016 but I can say that you won't look back on 2015 and feel the need to make excuses.



I was taking the time to go through some old rejection letters the other day:

chucking out the blank compliment slips with no comments and no regrets; re-reading the standard, unsigned rejection notes "Thank you for your submission..." that seem to have been created by the Microsoft paperclip with scripted comments diluted by overuse, and giving those slips that took the time to include the title of my submission a second glance. These last ones often caused me to wince as I remembered how often I had misread or, in vain hope, misunderstood the comments because I wanted them to secretly mean that the editor had loved my story but couldn't print it for a variety of reasons.

One particular letter, unusual in its helpfulness, had summarised comments from the sub-editors, mostly encouraging but the editor had kept the last one for the 'matchsticks beneath the fingernails'. This comment went along the lines of "...not convinced by the story and feel the writer was relishing playing the part rather than empathising with the characters."

I immediately set about creating a voodoo doll of the critic, sticking pins in his eyes and holding him above the lit gas burners on the stove top, and once I felt better set about analysing what he had actually said. I'm still wondering some five years later.

ARTICLE by Louise Andrews

If there is one thing that writers have to do, it's to understand our characters and what makes them tick, or more appropriately what we want to make them tick. If we don't then how can our reader ever hope to and this applies just as much to the villain of our piece as any other character.

I looked up empathy in the dictionary. It told me that empathy means identifying with or understanding a person. That's all well and good but I write horror and some of my characters need to come to a sticky end pretty damned quickly. In comparison to plot and character development, empathy is fairly low on my list.

What interested me most about the criticism was the statement about playing the part. This I could understand. Writing a story while remaining outside of it or detached from it is, in my opinion, not putting your whole heart and soul into it. The more passion and interest you feel while writing, the more exciting it will be for your reader. If I'm bored then it'll show on the page. If I can't convince myself of the reality of a place, person or action then I won't convince my reader. If I skip over the less interesting passages to get to the good bits then I can be pretty sure that my reader will do the same.

I agree that we as writers have to get inside the skin of a character, good or bad, if we want to write them convincingly but, as their creators, understanding what makes them tick is entirely in our hands. Each creation is a one-off, not a cookie-cutter character or someone else's discard. We can't buy our characters ready made from Characters R Us. We can't go online to Ideas-In-A-Hurry and order 1x Villain (batteries not included on a bogof offer). As much as we may like to be able to go to a Home for Lost Fictional Characters and fill out forms showing we have a suitable place for them as valuable members of our cast, that isn't how writing works.

Our characters, my villains particularly, come with baggage. The baggage I give them depends entirely on my mood. I don't shop from a list of character defects because that will only serve to create stale and formulaic characters. What I do most of all is consider what I want them to bring to the book. If I want them to be mad as a box of frogs then that's what they will be. No debate. End of.

Their individual quirks, if we can call them that, might include a black sense of humour; it might call for jealousy or resentment against another character or organisation; it might demand a whole raft of excuses for being the way they are, just because they feel like it. What it never calls for is a full psychological assessment and profile. I don't need to know how they felt about their childhood/parents/school/first pet/little sister or how they were treated at their first job. Not unless it's relevant

to the story. In short, my character is bad because he or she is, and while I will give valid reasons purely for plot, I am not empathising with them. No way.

Some of my most enjoyable writing, and many horror writers will agree with me, comes from creating that villain who jumps off the page and demands your attention. They dominate every scene that they appear in. We must also understand that writing is about enjoyment, on both sides of the work. If I over analysed my characters then they would cease to be fun and would become something else entirely.

My Checklist

- Give your villain an explanation not a psycho-analysis
- Write a bio for your villains as well as your good characters
- Give them realistic foibles—hopes, fears, anger, humour and frailties. Try looking at comic book villains for ideas about how relationships with the main character, sickness, an aspiration or other behavioural quirks can be used to add depth to your villains.
- Make them believable in a simple way. Remember that, at the end of the day, bad is bad.
- Give them a redeeming quality that won't impact on the ending of your story

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise is a 38 year old horror writer living in Manchester, U.K. She has spent the last four years teaching creative writing at night school with a particular interest in horror and science-fiction. She has over 200 publishing credits to her name mostly for short horror fiction and academic articles. She is currently writing a thesis on the influence of super-heroes and villains on the character archetypes in modern horror.

To Die Would Be...

A LOOK AT DEATH IN PETER PAN

by Peter Bennett

Peter Pan is about the death of children. It is equally about parental neglect and about not wanting or loving children.

Peter Pan's central themes are often missed because of a tendency to dismiss the story's main adult character, Captain Hook, as mere caricature. This is because many are unaware of a tradition which goes back to the play's first staging that Hook be played by the same actor who plays Mr. Darling, a flawed father. Mr. Darling and Hook are, in fact, the same character, operating respectively in this world and in Neverland. George Bernard Shaw noted that *Peter Pan* "is ostensibly a holiday entertainment for children but really a play for grown-up people," (Shaw in Ormond, 1987) and appreciation of its message for grown-ups requires attention be given to its main adult character.

That *Peter Pan* is about child death, Barrie bluntly suggested in the program notes for the 1908 Paris production of the play: 'Of Peter himself you must make what you will. Perhaps he was a little boy who died young, and this is how the author conceived of his subsequent adventures' (Birkin, pg. 116). In Chapter 1 of *Peter and Wendy*, Mrs. Darling, on hearing of Peter from her children, dimly remembers from her own childhood 'odd stories' about 'a Peter Pan who [...] when children died [...] went part of the way with

them, so that they should not be frightened.' (Barrie, 2012, In.55) It seems, then, that the term 'lost boys' is a euphemism for 'dead boys', who go to Neverland not by flying but by dying. Peter Pan is not merely a dead child but also a psychopomp for dead children. In this context, Peter's role of taking children to Neverland seems starkly menacing to parents, represented by Mr. and Mrs. Darling.

If the Lost Boys are dead then it may be tempting to see Neverland as a form of childhood heaven. Yet Barrie implies, Neverland is only 'part of the way' to their final destination. There must be some purpose to their stay in Neverland and part of the answer seems to be given in a narrator's digression near the start of *Peter and Wendy*: Neverland is the configuration of a child's mind, different for each child, providing constant adventure; this implies that one goes to Neverland to have adventures:

'I don't know whether you have ever seen a map of [...] a child's mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it [...] and these are probably roads in the island, for the Neverland is always more or less an island [...] it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still. Of course the Neverlands vary a

good deal. John's, for instance, had a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it at which John was shooting, while Michael, who was very small, had a flamingo with lagoons flying over it [...] Of all delectable islands the Neverland is the snuggest and most compact, not large and sprawly, you know, with tedious distances between one adventure and another, but nicely crammed [...] Children have the strangest adventures without being troubled by them.'

The relationship between death and adventure is further defined as Peter famously declares in Act III of the play: 'To die will be an awfully big adventure.' (Act 3, scene 1 ln.180) It is by dying to Neverland, or growing up, that lost boys move on, as is stated in *Peter and Wendy*, Chapter 5: 'The boys on the island vary, of course, in numbers, according as they get killed and so on; and when they seem to be growing up, which is against the rules, Peter thins them out.' When a Lost Boy has had his fill of adventures, it seems, he grows up and moves on.

But not Peter. He has more adventures than any lost boy but he never grows up and never moves on. Peter tells Wendy, in Chapter 3 of *Peter and Wendy*: 'I ran away the day I was born . . . because I heard father and mother talking about what I was to be when I became a man.' (Barrie, 2012, Chapter 3 ln.65-7) Peter never understands that 'growing up' can be about more than merely pursuing money and respectability. He rejects growth because it has been misrepresented to him; he is in rebellion and in love with stasis. His problem is not that he won't grow up, but that he can't. Peter, though guiltless, is, nevertheless, flawed, and perhaps a child suicide: If 'lost' is a euphemism for 'dead,' then 'runaway' could be argued as a euphemism for suicide. In Catholicism even infant suicides, who know no better,

are barred from eternal life and doomed to linger in purgatory represented by Neverland. Peter can never die into eternal life because he has spurned this life, and Barrie's playscript concludes with a narrator's comment that evokes the pathos of Peter's predicament:

'It has something to do with the riddle of his being. If he could get the hang of the thing his cry might become 'To *live* would be an awfully big adventure!' but he can never quite get the hang of it, and so no one is as gay as he.' (Barrie, 2008, pg. 153)

Regardless of morality, Peter Pan is useful. His distinctive character flaw makes him so and enables him to remain in Neverland, serving other children who need his help to grow up. He can help others to be saved precisely because he cannot save himself.

Those whom Peter takes permanently are boys who have died young. For them, Neverland is an educative limbo, preparatory to the 'awfully big adventure' of eternal life. Yet Peter also takes other children to Neverland, children such as the three Darlings, who have not died and may return to our own world. The Darling children are indicative that these short-term visitors to Neverland seem to be children whose neglect by their parents impels them to resort to an interior fantasy world to have the adventures needed for maturation. The distinction between these children and the lost boys is a bit vague because any visit to Neverland is fraught with peril, and return is never certain. A visit from Peter Pan can be seen to symbolize an estrangement of child from parent that entails risk of lasting bereavement. He then is a death bell calling parents who themselves have not grown up to do so before it is too late.

It is not by chance that Mr. Darling's flaws as a parent bring Peter Pan to his children's nursery and sends them flying off to Neverland. Mr. Darling had not

wanted children because they cost money; he preferred to employ his wife as his bookkeeper until she demanded children (*Peter and Wendy*, Chapter 1). His children sense this. When we first meet them, John, imitating his father, declares that Michael is not to be born and that no more children are wanted. Mr. Darling is preoccupied with his financial position in the city and spends little time with his children. He monopolizes his wife's time and leaves his children in the care of a dog, who can neither read nor speak. Thus Wendy becomes storyteller and it is her stories that draw Peter to their nursery. Mr. Darling further facilitates Peter's abduction of his children by ignoring his wife's wish to stay and chaining up the dog-nanny even after being advised that her barking indicates that she has sensed danger. With no-one to stop him, Peter takes the children off to Neverland, there to help them grow up because their father cannot.

Mr. Darling, in the form of Hook, is in Neverland to recover his lost children and avenge himself on their abductor. His right hand, which Peter has severed, represents his posterity; the ticking-clock crocodile that swallowed his hand and that finally devours Hook is his mortality, against which his children are his only shield. He pursues his children not out of love but out of tyrannous pride and at the play's climax, when Hook fails to regain their obedience and force them to become pirates like himself, he proves quite ready to murder them. Either way, he seeks to deny them freedom to grow up.

Hook's desire is not limited to his own children, he seeks to murder all other children in Neverland, preferably in a way that kills them both in this life and the next. Hook declares, 'A holocaust of children, there is something grand in the idea!' (Act V, scene 1 ln.206-7) If he is to be mortal, then so shall all the world. His first attempted child murder is the drowning of the Indian maiden, Tiger Lily, whose people believe that "there is no path through water to the happy hunting ground" (Act III, scene 1 ln.30-40), but

Hook's preferred method of child murder is by forcing his victims to 'walk the plank.' (Act V, scene 1 ln.90) In an inversion of baptism, Hook seeks to kill children in a way that will kill not only their bodies but also their souls.

The connection between Hook and Mr. Darling is strongly illustrated throughout the play. Hook's foppery caricatures Mr. Darling's preoccupation with dressing for his business dinner. His piracy caricatures Mr. Darling's financial job in the city and his obsession with money. Like Mr. Darling, whose cowardice his children expose in the form of his unwillingness to take his medicine (Act I, scene 1 ln.241), Hook "bled yellow" (Act III, scene 1 ln.148). Most tellingly, Hook claims to mourn his lack of children and of their affection:

"No little children love me. I am told they play at Peter Pan, and that the strongest always chooses to be Peter. They . . . force the baby to be Hook. The baby!" (Act V, scene 1)

It is not strange that Mr. Darling should visit Neverland, he is far from grown up and this is the root cause of his incapacity to parent. He won't take his medicine, he complains that no one coddles him as his wife coddles their children, and he demands that his wife sing him to sleep in his children's nursery. He wants his wife to be his mother, a confusion mirrored in the relationship between Peter and Wendy. Mr. Darling desperately needs an adventure, one which will lead to his death, which Peter obligingly provides to him as Hook. At the end of the novel, when Peter revisits Wendy after a year's absence, she finds that Peter has forgotten Hook. Peter indicates that he was only one of many: "I forget them after I kill them," [Peter] replied carelessly." (Act 1, scene 1 ln.180) Dealing with parents is one of Peter's routine functions; every lost boy has his own Hook.

Hook merits our sympathy because Mr. Darling does. It is by Captain Hook's death in Neverland that Mr. Darling is redeemed in London. When his children return to him he has been transformed into a loving father, not only to his own children but also to the lost boys whom he, as Hook, had sought to murder. The promise of his penitential move into his dog-nanny's kennel is fulfilled. *Peter Pan* is a tale of redemption, and its child protagonist is an agent of salvation, but to see this, one must appreciate that Hook is the self to which Mr. Darling must die.

Everyone understands that Peter saves the Darling children from Captain Hook. Less widely understood is how in doing

so he saves them in London from their father's lack of parental love. He accomplishes this by saving their father through adventure and death. Failure to recognize that Mr. Darling and Hook are one, reduces the former to a bit character and his redemption becomes a peripheral development unrelated to the main story. It reduces the character of Peter Pan to a boy who won't grow up, and his tale becomes a wistful one of parting from childhood. The reality is that Peter can never die, and in granting Mr. Darling's death in Neverland, he grants him the one thing Peter himself is eternally denied. Mr. Darling grows up, and there is nothing sad or wistful about that.

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Editor's Comments

I have to admit that I was somewhat sceptical when the idea of a "literary" column was raised , and doubly so when it was suggested that I write it. A literary column meant references and academic writing style but more than that it meant deciding on what I was going to cover. I didn't want to exclude fans of science-fiction, fantasy or horror by choosing to cover one specific genre so I decided to focus on a subject that is close to my heart: how our childhood reading influences our love of speculative fiction as adults.

It surprises me that despite the fact that we all grow up with the same fairy tales and yet we have such diverse tastes as adults. So what is it about the books we read as children that shapes our adult preferences. In this column I aim to illustrate the ways in which speculative fiction is derived from the fairy-tales, wonder folktales and picaresque novels which we all read as children while illuminating the adult themes embedded within them. I will be very interested in hearing what you think.

BREATH OF TAKUJI

by Philip Meredith

Captain Collins stared through me. He didn't believe me. I knew what

he was thinking. He was thinking that I've read too many comics, seen too many creature features. He didn't want to believe the truth because it didn't sit well in his stomach. He reminded me of myself. I had refused to accept the truth of Kitty's infidelity because I couldn't face it. I couldn't live in a world where she was unfaithful and so I chose not to believe. Captain Collins chose not to believe the truth. He was a military man. Military men believed in the real world. The world that I presented him with was not real. He thought that my story was the result of some fevered imagining based on a diet of comics and films. He thought that my mind had been corrupted. He thought that I knew where Doctor Stephen Evans was. I did. I do. I told him. He didn't want to believe me. I didn't want to believe either, right up until I walked in on Kitty. I couldn't deny it to myself after that. Captain Collins has the luxury of ignorance, a luxury that I no longer have. To be forced to live in a world where you can no longer deny the truth with which you are faced is torture. I was wrong. The Captain, Stephen and I, we were all wrong.

If you are reading this then you should know that these words are the truth. What do I have to gain by lying to a stranger? We believed that the comics and films were works of fiction. The shambling figures looked so fake. They couldn't be real. We laughed at them. That is what we did to deny the truth to ourselves and that is where we all made our colossal mistake. We laughed, just as you have laughed. We denied that these figures were



When I was asked to write a fiction clinic for Issue 5 of *Fever Dreams* I went through some of my older works looking for one that I would be happy to re-print and critic. I wrote *Breath of Takuji* for a 50s inspired collection of Lovecraftian short stories back in 2010 and it's a story that I have a love-hate relationship with. I recognise the good qualities of the story but am also painfully aware of its shortcomings. This is the version that was accepted in print and through out you will find my comments. I hope you will find my reflections useful in crafting your own stories — Phil.

real, just as you have done. Don't make the same mistake we made.

That's where I made my colossal mistake. I denied the truth about Kitty to myself. I felt the truth and knew it long before I could accept it. It peered at me from beneath the fractured, mirror surface of my mind. I ignored the cracks and the howls that emanated from deep within. The cracks grew larger. The howling grew louder. On that day, when I returned home to find Kitty in the arms of her lover, the surface gave way and the truth burst through howling in triumph. She had laughed and said that I was capable of showing the whole world how much I cared about it, but I was incapable of showing her. I froze and turned my back on her. She shut up. As the truth about Kitty's fidelity erupted from its prison of denial, it brought with it a legion of other truths that I had also denied. The truth does not set you free. The truth is something to be feared.

The truth is what brought me to my current situation, hanging over a railing violently heaving black ropes of vomit into the Pacific Ocean. I was headed for Majurik Atoll to provide emergency medical assistance to those injured by the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. To get there we had to pass through a collection of other Atolls. At each location Doctor Stephen Evans would disembark and collect a few samples. For the most part the islands had been reduced to a scalp of dead, splintered trees and cracked rock formations as white as bone. The water, I was warned, had become alkaline and was unfit to drink. I didn't care. After a week of traveling out on the water I had had enough of it. I don't get travel sickness, at least I didn't before and haven't since. It was all that water, stretched out around me. It was as if it had swallowed up the land. Each stop was so brief. I felt like the land dissolved into the sea the very moment that you reached out to touch it or that the strange creatures that slithered in the dark waters beneath me had reached up and dragged it down to the depths.

"I can't believe they would send someone who gets so sea sick. You okay, Jeff?" Stephen asked. "You look awfully pale."

Stephen's hand rested lightly on my back, as if the mere weight would set me heaving again. I shrugged it off.

The opening paragraphs are written following a carefully established tradition. Lovecraft's stories are usually reflective writings from melancholic intellectuals who have had experiences beyond their ability to rationalize and explain with science. "The truth is something to be feared" is a simplification of one of Lovecraft's basic philosophies. He observed that we live upon an island of knowledge and that we should be wary how far we stray from its safety.

This story is set in the 1950s and therefore the "inspiration" for the protagonist's story is blamed on comics and creature features. The modern horror film was still a thing of the future but films like *Godzilla* were doing well in the drive-ins. This detail adds to the setting.

I have set the scene, this story is the testament of a scientist who has suffered an emotional trauma - a cheating spouse. He is being queried about the location of Doctor Evans by the military and has survived when Doctor Evans hasn't. The intrigue of the story is then how he survived and what has really happened to Doctor Evans.

The story will be told through an embedded narrative, the main character is accompanying Doctor Evans as he performs research and provides medical assistance in the aftermath of the Bikini Atoll atomic bomb tests. The landscape is scarred and dead, the use of the words "scalp" and "bone" establish the atmosphere of poison and death. The acknowledgement that he doesn't care about the unsafe water combines with the vomiting to indicate that he is likely suffering from radiation sickness. This is a personal preference, I like my horror to be "explainable".

"I'm fine. It's just taking me some time to find my sea legs."

Stephen nodded. I pulled myself to my feet and wiped my face with a handkerchief. We stood in silence for a moment. It was warm and clear out there. The slate gray water undulated all around us. Here and there I could see pockets of darkness in the water, a suggestion of something massing in the depths.

The extensive foreshadowing of danger lurking in the water is something that I am personally unsure about. Foreshadowing is often overused by novice writers and I wrote this story early in my writing career. The sea creatures dragging the land beneath the sea in the previous paragraph and pockets of darkness elude to a danger in the depths. A danger that is growing, seeks to destroy the land and drag it beneath the waves.

"I don't see why we couldn't have set up a medical center on one of the larger Atolls. These people live on these waters. They would have been more comfortable coming to us."

Stephen said, "That's the problem, they wouldn't come to us!"

"Why not?"

Stephen shrugged. "Couldn't tell you. There are quite a few different groups on the different islands. Some of them were destroyed by the Bravo blast. Most of the remaining groups are undoubtedly suspicious of us."

"But if they require medical assistance?"

"From what I've been told there are a few groups of people who are still quite," Stephen paused, searching for the right word. "Some of these people still rely on traditional homeopathic medicines."

I said, "Nothing like going back to basics, huh?"

"I wouldn't wish that on anyone." Stephen turned on the rail. "These people need real medical help not primitive traditions and witchcraft. The injuries from the radiation can be severe and we don't know enough about the damage it can do. These are modern injuries and they require modern medicine to treat them. How much experience do you have with radiation poisoning?"

I smiled. "I treated some of the soldiers on Utirik. Minor radiation burns, nothing too severe."

"I've lost count of the symptoms," Stephen said looking down the bow at the churning foam. "Hair loss, weeping lesions but that's not the worst of it. While I was on Rongelap I saw a handful of miscarriages, and a stillbirth. It's the stillbirth that got stuck in my mind."

I sniffed the air. "I know what that's like, when you can't get something out of your head."

"This isn't going to go away easily. They are saying it's going to be a big diplomatic and humanitarian disaster."

I lifted my elbows off the rail and straightened. "Who's 'they'?"

"The powers that be. The Captain told me that it was all over the newspapers," Stephen said. "The Bravo blast was more powerful than they anticipated, they say. The most powerful explosion ever. Huge."

A smear of black peeked over the horizon line, stretching out flat between the sea and the sky.

"It's a pity," said Stephen as he turned away from the rails.

I watched as the smear began to thicken and change color.

"What is?"

"The price of progress."

Stephen disappeared into the ship and I remained, one foot on the topline, watching as the flat rectangular edges of buildings and the bright green of vegetation appeared on the golden strip of shoreline. I could hear the whine of the engine and the boat gave a small

The main reason I have a problem with this story may now be evident to you. If not I will explain. The peoples inhabiting Bikini Atoll lived in homes made of wood and dried palm leaves. These materials would not have survived the atomic bomb test. Despite extensive research I could find no record of how the people on the islands lived after the blast and before the American relocations. This is a problem that as writers we come across and my solution was to rely on creative licence.

The American's did provide corrugated iron and canvas shelters for the indigenous peoples, they built medical facilities on the larger islands and shuttled in the sick by boat. I thus used photos from other villages in surrounding islands and cultures to inspire my vision for the Majurik settlement. Unfortunately there is, I have come to accept, no way that the islanders could have constructed an "aluminium shanty-town" without accepting help from the Americans, which Chiwa states they won't do.

Lovecraft was interested in words and how they were formed. His Cthulhu mythology is full of words that are drawn from his study of linguistics. I did spend a period of time studying the Marshall Islands and Marshallese, their language. Initial attempts to translate the main deities, Azathoth and Cthulhu, gave me Takuji and Tlalos. A study of the folklore of the islands provided me with a tale about Kapin Marok, the depths of darkness, something that combined nicely with Lovecraftian lore.

The character names were provided by a census of the Marshall Islands. Online documents like these are an invaluable source of inspiration for writers.

lurch. I could see the village more clearly now. It was little more than an aluminum shanty-town that went back into the trees. A dull ache settled into the front of my head, just behind my eyes. I told myself it was dehydration, a result of the vomiting.

The engines cut out and the boat turned until I was facing the makeshift dock on the beach. The beach was strewn with shells, driftwood and dead fish, some of which had been half eaten by whatever scavengers lived on the island. I could feel the sweep of the ocean breeze against my damp face and hear the ebb and flow of the tide. It was a warning that, should it so wish, the sea could suck you down into its depths.

As I disembarked I could hear Stephen's raised voice giving orders about what to unload. At the end of the dock I could make out two figures, one holding the arm of the other and helping them along. The first, a tall dark, figure with a lanky grace, introduced himself as Kamangeni. He had arrived at Majurik from Majuro two days ago to prepare the people for our arrival, and would function as our translator. A woman accompanied him. She moved slowly, leaning on a staff. He introduced her as Chiwa. She was old and frail, most of her hair had gone and her face was a mass of wrinkles.

Stephen and I introduced ourselves. Chiwa took her time studying us, looking from one face to another, squinting.

"The people of Majurik are not used to having outsiders on their land," Kamangeni said in broken English. "I had trouble getting them to allow me to stay here."

Chiwa began to speak, waving her arms at the pale sky. Kamangeni listened intently before turning to us.

"Chiwa says that this land is sacred. She says that the people of Majurik Atoll are protected from the fate that has befallen the other people."

Stephen furrowed his brow. "Did you tell her that we are here to provide medical help? Have any of the people on the island become sick recently?"

Kamangeni nodded. "I did tell them of the reason for your visit and I was told that there were a few people here who are sick. I was also told that they do not want help from outsiders. These people view anyone not born here, on Majurik, with great suspicion."

"How did you get to stay then?" Stephen gave him a lazy grin. "If you won them over then perhaps there is something we can do to ease their suspicions?"

"Possibly," Kamangeni said, turning to talk to the old woman.

She made a noise with her lips but did not answer immediately. Instead she reached into a pouch that she had slung over her shoulder and withdrew a small coconut. She made a few heated comments to Kamangeni whilst waving the tip of her stick in our direction. Kamangeni nodded respectfully at each statement before taking the coconut from her hands.

"Chiwa states that this island is protected by the spirit of the sky. He is invisible like the wind and cannot be confined to any temple or represented by any carving or statue. His essence is contained within the life that grows on this island. If you wish to stay on this land then you must eat the food that grows upon it." Kamangeni held out the coconut.

"I can't eat that. The natural produce on the island may not be safe to eat," Stephen stared at Kamangeni's hand. "That's part of the reason we are here. The food and water that these people depend on may have been poisoned."

Kamangeni did not withdraw his hand. "These people are highly superstitious and if you are sincere in your desire to help them then I would suggest drinking the milk from this coconut. If you do not have Chiwa's blessing then you will not be able to stay. If you cannot stay then you cannot help these people."

Stephen blinked in the sun. I could see that he was uncomfortable with the idea. There was no way of knowing how much radiation the nut contained without first testing it but to do so would probably alienate the old woman and everyone else by proxy. Stephen regarded the coconut with distrust, and with each moment

that passed I could sense the old woman's agitation growing. I took the coconut from Kamangeni and slugged the milk that it contained. It was surprisingly bitter. Chiwa said nothing. Her toothless maw spread wide into a smile. Stephen, seeing this, followed my lead. Chiwa reached deep into her pouch pulling out a handful of powder. She raised her hands high into the air and cast the powder over us. Stephen didn't react at all. The small woman moved forward carefully, and lightly touched the tip of her staff to our foreheads, first Stephen's and then mine. She muttered several words to no one in particular and then turned to Kamangeni and nodded.

"You are permitted to stay," said Kamangeni with a wide smile. "Welcome to Majurik Atoll."

Stephen nodded. "Thank you," and then turned to me. "That was unusual. I can't wait to meet the rest of them. If we have to do that to earn everyone's trust..."

He left the sentence hanging. The soldiers had loaded the medical cases onto handcarts and brought them down onto the docks. They stood watching in silence. One of them, I recognized as Captain Collins, passed a clipboard to Stephen. He signed and returned the clipboard. Chiwa gestured at the crates and talked quickly with Kamangeni.

"Chiwa says that you must not bring anything onto the island. She believes it will anger the spirits."

"It's a tent and medical supplies. If we don't bring them then we will have nowhere to stay and no way to help these people." Stephen said turning to him. "How do you expect us to help these people without basic medical supplies?"

Kamangeni sighed. "I am sorry but as I have said these people are very superstitious. I have arranged for you to have accommodation in the village but your medical supplies must stay on the boat."

Stephen shook his head sadly and turned to me. "There's no helping some people," he said under his breath.

"Our medical knowledge is far more advanced than theirs," I said quietly, doing my best to

smile. "Even without these supplies we have a better chance of helping these people than anyone on the island. The supplies will still be here if we can convince them that they need them. The boats not going anywhere."

Stephen laughed.

"You may be right," he said. "Orders are orders. Document injuries and offer medical assistance if possible. I guess even if it's not possible to help them then we can still learn a few things by examining the injuries."

He turned to the soldiers and instructed them to return the cases to the ship. Captain Collins seemed unimpressed with his decision to leave the supplies and stay in the village but eventually, after a heated debate, gave a resigned sigh and instructed the soldiers to return the supplies to the ship.

"I'm assuming," Stephen said to Kamangeni, "that I will be unable to take samples from the island."

It wasn't a question but Kamangeni translated it as such. I watched the back and forth of the conversation for several minutes, intrigued by the frown on Chiwa's wrinkled features. Eventually her features seemed to soften and she nodded her head in agreement.

"Chiwa says that you may take samples of the plants and animals but nothing more," Kamangeni said and then quickly added. "It is the best I can do for you."

Stephen smiled at him. "Tell Chiwa that I am grateful for her generosity."

While Kamangeni translated his statement, he took a small case from the last handcart.

"We'll be here if you should need anything," said Collins.

Stephen nodded.

"We'll only be a day or so," said Stephen, shaking Collin's hand. "You can practically see the village from here."

"Sure, sure," he said. "Watch yourselves."

Kamangeni led us along a path towards the aluminum shacks that I had seen through the

gaps in trees. We stopped outside two huts at the edge of the shantytown. Kamangeni straightened to his full height, and said. "You may stay in these huts while you are on the island."

"Sure," Stephen said.

"You are free to walk about the village and talk to the people but you must not take blood or give them any medicine. You will be provided with food, as is the custom for guests, and you must eat it. It is a serious insult to turn down food offered by a host. Lastly, the sea can come in quickly and the nights are dark so please stay away from the beaches at night. This is for your own safety. Is that understood?"

Stephen nodded and I said, "Absolutely."

"If you have any questions about the people or customs of Majurik then I will do my best to answer them. I will accompany you around the village and help you in any way that I can but first I must take Chiwa home."

Stephen looked at me. I tilted my head and shrugged.

"I'm sure we will be fine till you return," said Stephen.

"I shall return as quickly as I can," Kamangeni said. The loose grin suddenly returning to his face. "I am sure you are eager to have a look around."

And he turned and led the old woman through the village.

This dialogue was particularly difficult to write. Any dialogue featuring a translator is likely to have a very different flow:

speaker > translator > speaker

This makes writing this kind of dialogue very difficult to do convincingly. I still feel that I could have made this dialogue a little less clumsy and I feel that I need to warn other writers of this danger.

The village was little more than several dozen aluminum shacks scattered around a handful of dirt roads. The people walked the roads with odd, waddling steps. Most of them were men, with maybe a handful of woman. The radiation effects were obvious from a cursory glance. Many of them had lost their hair, and several had obvious raw, weeping wounds on their arms and face. What interested Stephen was that they all seemed to have the same dark red scars.

"I've never seen a scar like that caused by radiation before," he said excitedly. "They obviously suffered some degree of radiation saturation from the Bravo blast. The symptoms seem consistent with radiation sickness. All except those scars."

"Right," I said slowly. "What would cause a scar like that though?"

Stephen seemed baffled. He looked down the street for a moment and then said, "I guess we'll have to ask them when Kamangeni gets back."

I woke up early the next day. I woke from the middle of a terrible nightmare. There was something chasing me. A strange, stumbling creature that moved in staggering lurches. All the while it whispered to me. It whispered terrible truths. I dipped my hands into the bucket of water that someone had graciously left by the door and washed my face. I still felt sleepy. I slipped into my clothes and left the shack. Outside I could smell the salt in the air. I could see the slate gray waves between the trees and hear the gentle swell of the tide. The door clacked as it hit the housing and disturbed my thoughts.

I wandered down towards the beach, not really aware of where I was going. Something from my dream lingered in my head. A noise, a strange whispering, it spoke in words that I didn't understand. It spoke so softly that I couldn't tell where one word ended and another began. I tried to force it out of my head. I tried to concentrate on the sound of the waves. The sound retreated to the back of my skull, buzzing and nagging at me.

Down the coastline I could see a group of

fisherman standing in the surf. The fallout would almost certainly affect whatever they caught. Stephen had tried to convince several of the men yesterday that fishing was no longer safe. The sea was poisoned and starting to die. The same was true of the fruit and nuts that their diet depended on. I'd heard him talking angrily about the matter to Chiwa over the evening meal. I couldn't blame her for her reaction. He was asking her to believe that the food that these people depended on was slowly killing them. Stephen wasn't offering her an alternative just telling her that they had to stop eating the fish, coconuts and bananas that made up the majority of their diet.

I had spent most of yesterday meeting the islanders and dealing with their polite shortness. Stephen ignored their forced smiles as he examined the weeping sores and red scars. Kamangeni translated his questions but received no responses. I think by the end of the day even he was beginning to feel like we were wasting our time. I began walking down the beach in the other direction. I walked for a few yards along the deserted beach and couldn't help but think of how much Kitty would have loved it here. I was almost grateful to see the group of people on the sand ahead. They were standing around something on the sand. At first I thought it was a fish but it seemed too large to be a fish. I reminded myself that there were some large fish in these waters, but I knew that the shape was wrong. It looked like a man. Maybe there had been an accident. If I could help then maybe the islanders would trust us and we could get them to listen.

As I got closer the hair on the back of my neck began to stand on end. I could hear its leprous breathing before I could see it. It was a strange huffing and wheezing noise, like someone choking and suffocating. I had assumed by the noise that whoever it was had almost drowned but I realized that the marks in the sand were all wrong. Everything about the scene was wrong. I took it in more horrified than curious. My mind struggled to make sense of it. Whatever it was on the sand was not human, but at the same time clearly had been. The creatures was lying face down in the sand, occasionally it would reach out with its webbed fingers and pull itself towards the waterline. Its skin was flecked with dark, scaly

patches that oozed slowly. The air was putrid with the smell of decaying fish. I cannot hope to describe in mere words the unutterable hideousness of the thing that crawled before me. Its bottom jaw was impossibly warped and its bulging eyes were little more than veined, opaque orbs. The wheezing was coming from wounds on either side of its neck. At first I thought that a blade had inflicted them but I noticed that they opened each time the creature inhaled or exhaled.

I watched in horror as the creature tried to stand, only to fall back into the damp sand. A piteous groaning rose from its repugnant maw. It continued pulling itself toward the shoreline. It seemed like the pasty skin of the creature's arms was melting into a thin, leathery membrane almost like a wing. The creature gurgled loudly, coughing up a milky fluid flecked with crimson that hung in strands from its nose and mouth.

I couldn't move. The creature tightened its mutilated muscles. It turned to stare at me, the pale, veined orbs rolling in what passed for eye sockets. It reached out a reeking, webbed hand towards me and let out a choking rasp.

I turned and ran back to the village.

When I returned with Stephen and Kamangeni, the creature was lying in the surf. Its twisted form flopped back and forth with the tide. Each time it pulled itself forward only to be struck by a wave. The sea swallowing it up in water and foam before spitting it back onto the shore. The creature lay panting on the sand, its battle to reach the sea at a stalemate.

The islanders consulted in hissing whispers amongst themselves, watching the blasphemous thing in its futile war with the waves. I didn't understand the words they were saying but their fear was evident. I did manage to pick out one word over and over again: Takuji.

"What is Takuji?" I asked Kamangeni.

"Ah, Takuji," he replied. "Takuji is one of the primal deities that the Majurik islanders worship. He is like the air. He is all seeing and all knowing. It's nothing but superstition but the elder people find it hard to let go of their

This scene introduces the supernatural element to the story. The creature is stumbled upon rather than it coming charging out of the sea and its deathly state makes it less threatening but no less grotesque.

Fans of Lovecraft will recognise the Deep Ones, a race of amphibious fish-frog men that are able to breed with humans and feature strongly in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*.

superstitions and they pass them on to their children and they pass them on to their children and so on. Chiwa is the oldest person on the island, and as such she is afforded great respect and a position of influence. If you believe the stories that some of the villagers tell, she was here when the first outsiders came from Spain and Germany, but if you believe that then you would have to believe she is over a hundred years old."

"I'm not sure that I find that hard to believe," I replied. "She looks like she belongs in another century."

We both laughed. Chiwa glared at us and we bowed our heads like naughty schoolboys. Stephen had made his way into the surf and was attempting to examine the slimy creature. It was barely moving now. He started to speak but Chiwa silenced him with a wave of her stick. She gestured towards Kamangeni and began to speak.

"Chiwa says that you are not to interfere. She says that this person," Kamangeni stopped as the realization of the words dawned on him. "This person has been given new life by the will of Takuji. Takuji has granted them the ability to travel to the city beneath the waves where Lolak reigns. If they cannot make the journey on their own then they are not fit to enter Lolak's realm."

Stephen gestured at the crowd of people gathered around the repellent creature. "This person requires medical assistance. You're all just going to stand there and let him die because of superstition. Kamangeni tell Chiwa that this is the result of the poison from Bikini

Atoll. This is not the will of some mythic deity. This is our fault."

Kamangeni's words were greeted with a toothless smile. Chiwa cackled as he tried to explain what Stephen had said. Finally she shook her head. Her features grew serious as she spoke sternly in response and with a bony finger she gestured towards Stephen and I.

"She remains unconvinced," Kamangeni summarized.

"What exactly did she say?" I asked.

Kamangeni shrugged in response. "She does not believe that you have the power to create anything like this. She says that all the works of men are born from dreams. These dreams are messages from the gods."

"She believes that the weapon we tested was created because of a dream and that this dream was sent by god?" I asked.

"Essentially yes," Kamangeni nodded. "As far as she is concerned the bomb is fire and air. It is a divine scourge sent by Takuji."

"A divine scourge," Stephen spat the words. "I've had enough of this voodoo nonsense."

As Stephen knelt down in the surf, Chiwa pointed a shaky finger at him. Two men dragged him out of the surf.

"That was very foolish," Kamangeni said shaking his head.

I apologized to Chiwa, bowing my head respectfully. Chiwa nodded as Kamangeni translated for me. For a while the old woman's breathing seemed to drown out the hissing of the creatures breath and the crash of the surf.

"Takuji breathed life into all things. His breath is the air that we breathe," Kamangeni translated her words. "His breath sustains the plants and the animals that we eat as surely as the earth and water. His essence is in all things. His voice carries on the wind. His words are felt by the minds of dreamers. Those who listen to his words are rewarded."

I nodded.

"Just as his breath brings life," she continued.

"His breath can bring change and death. The people of the other islands worship the gods of other lands. They have allowed the words of outsiders to change them. They angered Takuji and his breath brought them death. You to must listen to his words, when Takuji speaks all must listen."

I nodded again.

"Tell me," she said looking through me. "Tell me about the dream you had last night."

"I don't remember," I lied as the dream rushed forward to fill my mind. The hellish whispering rose from the dark recesses of my brain.

Chiwa's disappointment at my words was clear. She didn't say anything. The creature lay still now, its scabrous body rising and falling with the swell of the tide. Chiwa waved her stick and a handful of men dragged the body onto the sand. At her command, another ran toward the village and returned with a lit torch. She reached deep into the pouch and pulled out a small bottle. Chiwa lifted her hands. She murmured and others joined her. The combined muttering rose and fell, sounding like a pained groaning. Exchanging her staff for the lit torch, the old woman stepped towards the slimy corpse, her back straighter and her stride suddenly stronger. She upended the bottle, splashing the creature with its contents. Lowering the torch, she lightly touched the flame to the mangled, fish-like features. It caught fire immediately. She dropped the torch onto the body, allowing it to burn too. I stayed to watch until all that was left of the warped form was a charred, smoldering skeleton that looked almost human.

Stephen had gone back to the boat. He complained that his eyes hurt and his throat stung and he wanted to check himself over. We agreed to meet for the evening meal and that we would depart from the island early tomorrow. Kamangeni and I accompanied Chiwa back to the shantytown. I had hoped that my actions had engendered some trust

"If Takuji is the god of air, then I assume Lolak is the god of the sea?" I asked Kamangeni.

"Yes, it is not uncommon in these islands. There are many great creatures living in the

waters around these islands. The Majurik believe he resembles an octopus and he dwells in a city in the deepest part of the sea.”

“So why,” I asked, “would Takuji and not Lolak allow people to travel to this underwater city?”

Kamangeni smiled. “The Majurik believe that all life comes from the sea. The elders tell of how the first man walked out of the sea when Takuji breathed upon him. He also, if you believe the tales, breathes upon man and allows him to return to the sea.”

I nodded.

“Takuji is not good, nor is he evil. He is both and neither. He goes where he wills and does as he wills. It is not surprising that these beliefs continue to survive when you consider that strong winds and high waves can bring such devastation. Those who please Takuji are rewarded by a second life. You don’t believe in an afterlife?”

I nodded again.

“The Majurik believe that the afterlife is at the bottom of the sea,” Kamangeni explained. “They believe that life came from the sea and eventually must return to it. It’s no different to Western ideas of burial. It’s tradition.”

I smiled. “There is certainly a lot of tradition for such a small island.”

Kamangeni laughed.

Chiwa stopped outside a small shanty and tapped lightly on the crumpled sheet of tin that served as a makeshift door. Nobody answered. She knocked again, harder this time and then carefully pulled the sheet of tin aside and ducked inside. I followed a moment later. It was dark inside. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the light. There are the far end of the room, illuminated by the shaft of light entering through the crack in the door, was a dried grass pallet. On the pallet, under a tattered blanket, was the shape of a body.

Chiwa called out to her. “Chaonaine?”

The form in the bed shifted. The old woman moved slowly across the room until she stood over the bed. Cautiously she reached out and

rested her hand on the form beneath the blanket.

“Chaonaine?” she shook the figure slightly.

The figure stirred. As the form rolled onto its back, and the blanket slipped down I could see that the figure was a pregnant woman. Chiwa chittered away to the figure for a few moments before she turned to address us. She beckoned to me with one long, bony finger. I watched as the old woman removed a dressing to reveal a dark red scab. She poked at it, and satisfied she removed the dressings completely. She held out the dressing to me and nodded eagerly.

“She says that you should take it,” Kamangeni said.

I took the dressing. It was a scrap of cloth that had been coated with a pungent ointment.

“The ointment will help you,” continued Kamangeni. “It will seal flesh that is opened by Takuji’s anger.”

“What about the scars?” I asked.

Chiwa ran her hand over the scab on Chaonaine’s stomach.

“They pass in time,” she replied. “It will leave only a mark. It is a mark of Takuji’s favor. Those who follow the will of Takuji are blessed and he breathes upon us, sealing the wounds.”

I nodded and lifted the dressing to my nose. Chiwa chittered sharply.

“You cannot eat that,” Kamangeni said quickly. “It only works on the skin. If you so much as taste it then you will die.”

I extended the dressing toward Chiwa. She shook her head.

“She says you should take it with you,” Kamangeni said.

Chiwa nodded eagerly and gestured for me to take the dressing. I thanked her and bowed my head gratefully. She gave me her familiar wrinkled smile and waved her hand to indicate that we were free to go.

Stephen hadn't turned up at supper and I decided that I should check in on him. The sore eyes and itchy throat, he explained, were down to the food and water. He had spent the day wandering the island collecting grass, fruit and nut samples. I told him about the events of the day and handed him the dressing. He dismissed it as I expected he would. Disappointed by his disinterest, I wished him a good night and retired to my bed.

There is something about a man's scream that is so rare and strange that it turns your blood into a torrent of ice. The screaming was coming from the hut beside me and it seemed to contain frantic words that I could not make out. I pulled open the door of the hut in time to see Stephen running towards the forest. His body glistened with sweat from head to toe. He turned to me when he saw me, and cried out. "Stay away from me, oh, God, Jeff, don't touch me, or it'll happen to you too!"

Before I could prevent him, he had disappeared into the trees. I ran after him, bewildered and bemused. "Stephen," I shouted. "Where are you?"

I could hear him shouting amongst the trees and gave chase.

"No!" Stephen kept shouting. "Stay away! I was wrong!"

After several minutes his shouting stopped. I got sick to my stomach. I edged forward through the trees in the darkness calling, "Stephen, Stephen...!"

Stephen didn't answer. He couldn't.

He lay slumped on the ground a few feet ahead of me. I tugged him over, flipped him onto his back. His face was a red mask that glistened in the moonlight. His fingers painted scarlet where he had touched the weeping wound that had once been his face. I watched in horror as more and more of his flesh turned into weeping red sores. The sweet metallic smell of blood filled my nostrils. I shouted for help but got no response. I had no way of knowing where on the island I was. My only concern had been to catch up with Stephen. I had given no thought to how I would get back. I shouted. Silence. I shouted again. It was a lonely, crude sound in the dark emptiness.

The island was not that large, if I walked in a straight line then I would eventually come to the village or the shoreline. If I found the shoreline then I just had to follow the coastline until I found the dock or the village. I could get help and come back for his body at first light.

It took me a while to decide which direction to walk in, logic dictated that I faced the opposite direction that Stephen had been facing when he fell. I had been chasing him through the forest for several minutes on a meandering pursuit and there was no guarantee that a straight line would bring me back to the village. I decided that if I walked in the direction that he had been heading then I would reach the sand that much sooner and, I reassured myself, that meant I would be guaranteed to find my way back to the village or the boat.

As I stumbled through the forest I could not shake the image of Stephen's bloodied face from my mind. My heart pounded in my chest. He had said he was wrong. What was he wrong about? Had he been sick all along? It made no sense.

I was disturbed from my thoughts by the sound of music. I could discern a rhythmic tune of pipes and drums. The sound grew louder with each step. I became able to discern droning voices and one particular voice that was high and shrill. The discordant sound struck me with a nauseating fear. That fear grew as I walked out of the trees onto the sands. There, in the flickering firelight, the islanders reeled in a wandering dance. The dancer's movements were off-kilter, almost drunken, tracing a slow circle around two figures. The first was covered in a formless, black robe and carried a staff carved like a serpent. The robed figure swayed with the rhythms of the music occasionally casting its arms into the air. Chiwa's voice emanated from inside the cowl. I didn't understand the language but it seemed familiar to me. The infernal words rolled into one another and I realized that she was speaking that eldritch tongue that I had heard in my dreams. The other figure lay on a large, flat stone, her back arching in convulsions. Her features were distorted in an agonized scream but I recognized her as Chaonaine.

Beyond the circle of slow, stuttering dancers

were two ancient monoliths. They had been crudely worked into loathsome images that haunt me to this day. The first resembled a massive bear but with a barbarous hog-like snout and dreadful fangs. The second had a scaly, squid like aspect. It stared at me with its spherical, unseeing eyes and I felt it gnawing at my guts with dark terror. It was to these unhallowed, blasphemous carvings that Chiwa's words were addressed. The crone pranced and bellowed oblivious to Chaonaine's thrashing on the stone before her.

I was swaying with the sinister music. My feet naturally followed it, adapting to its inexplicable shifts and chaotic changes, almost as if someone else were controlling my movements. My arms traced slow curving motions in the air.

Chaonaine thrashed wildly now. Her feet planted firmly and her shoulders bouncing against the stone. I gagged as an explosion of blood erupted from between her legs, staining the stone crimson. The woman roared with each push, and slumped afterwards. Chiwa stood at Chaonaine's head, stroking her hair and continued in her accursed ululation. After a few minutes, the woman collapsed exhausted by her efforts. Chiwa made her way around the stone and reached down at the piteously, mewling newborn. She lifted the grayish-white, slippery thing above her head in her gnarled claws. I longed to run into the dark sanctuary of the forest but I had become the obscene marionette of some sinister, primal being. My lips began to move sounding out inhuman words, mingling with the voices of the islanders, joining them in their pagan chant.

A loathsome figure emerged from the shadows between the monstrous stones. It was a grotesque mockery of the human form. It had two prodigious, bulging eyes in a fish-like head that ended in palpitating gills. The hunched aberration moved with a waddling gait. Its skin was shiny and had the color of algae. Its back was covered in dark scales. I watched as it reached out its scaly, webbed paws and took the unholy abomination from Chiwa's arms. It raised its head and emitted a croaking screech from its wide, flabby lips. The sound drowned out everything else, filling my ears, overloading

my brain. It echoed and reverberated through my entire being.

Released from my infernal trance, I began to scream. I screamed until my lungs ached and stars exploded before my eyes. I screamed every last breath of air from my lungs and then I passed out.

And now tonight, a week later, I am writing this out for what it is worth. The rhythmic scratch of the pen on the paper is accompanied by the slow beat of the sweat dripping from my brow onto the paper. My skin itches and softens. They don't believe the truth because they have the luxury of ignorance. They will not have that luxury for long. Even as I write these words, the skin on my body loosens and my face feels wet and slippery. My eyes water and the sweat dripping from my brow stains the paper a dark shade of crimson. Tomorrow they will find me, the decaying flesh having slid from my skeleton like a putrescent cloak, and they will have no choice but to accept the truth. Their eyes will be open. Just as, I hope, reading this will open your eyes.

The climax of the story was very satisfying to write. When I was first coming up with the idea for this story I toyed with the concept of *The Thing from the Black Lagoon*. I loved the idea of Lovecraft's Deep Ones abducting women and breeding with them and thought that the birth scene would make a memorable set piece. The fact that this process would go unnoticed or misdiagnosed because of the atomic testing brought it together nicely.

Using Lovecraft's embedded narrative structure meant that I had to decide what would happen to the hero. Often the hero's survive but are physically and mentally scarred by their experiences but I thought that the death of the main character in such a grotesque manner would be a more pleasing end. It also lends strength to his testament, what does a dying man have to gain by lying? In dying he will inflict his painful truth on others bringing the story full circle.

REVERSE EVOLUTION

by Sarah Braidwood

Blizzards form overhead,
a flurry of frozen matter
bursting through the void.

Spectacular sparks
of silver and blue
twist and twirl above me.

Descending down stairs
of curvaceous clouds,
our ancestors arrive.

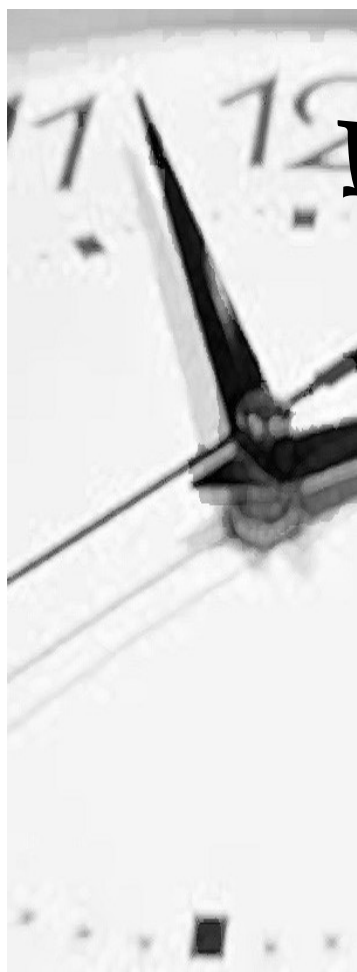
Humans, they are not
but purple creatures, dark
feathered wings widespread.

It's time. Now we must go
Back, from where we came.



VITAE

by Holly Day



He was already dead as a doorknob when they found him
his head cradled in his arms, phone cradled in his hand
he could have been sleeping, dreaming of Saturday
except for all the blood.

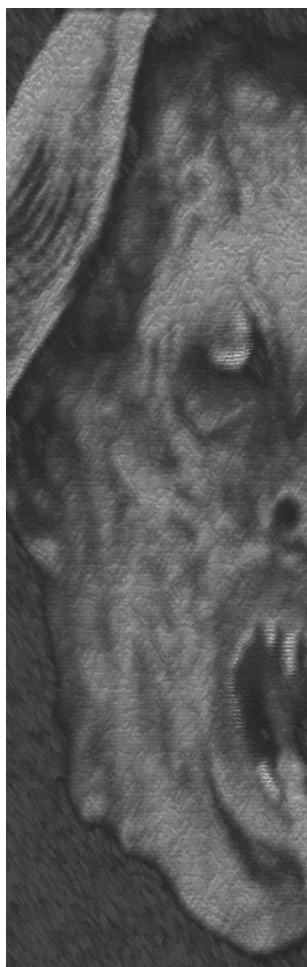
it must have taken unflinching persistence, patience, fear
of the timeclock tick-ticking in the corridor
to complete crunching the day's sales receipts
with a hole as big as a ledger in his chest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Day is a housewife and mother of two living in Minneapolis, Minnesota who teaches needlepoint classes for the Minneapolis school district and writing classes at The Loft Literary Center. Her poetry has recently appeared in *The Tampa Review*, *The Comstock Review*, and the *St. Paul Almanac*, and she is the 2011 recipient of the Sam Ragan Poetry Prize from Barton College. Her most recent published books are *Walking Twin Cities* and *Notenlesen für Dummies Das Pocketbuch*.

SHEDOWN

by Holly Day



High in the north off the coast of Scotland

Near a narrow strip known as the Isle of Boch

they still whisper of a witch that once stalked infants
trapped in warm dreams of full teats and new teeth.

A pale-skinned woman with long pale
blonde hair bears her own child, bare-headed, blue-eyed
wizened with small, sharp teeth and sharp nails
to the houses where newborn infants lie, trapped in deep sleep.

She waits in dark corners, dark cloak covering her face
or in the dark growing deep beneath the baby's crib,
until the adults all fall asleep. Then she comes out
with her own child, lowering the creature she holds

into the human baby's crib, lets it feed
until sated.

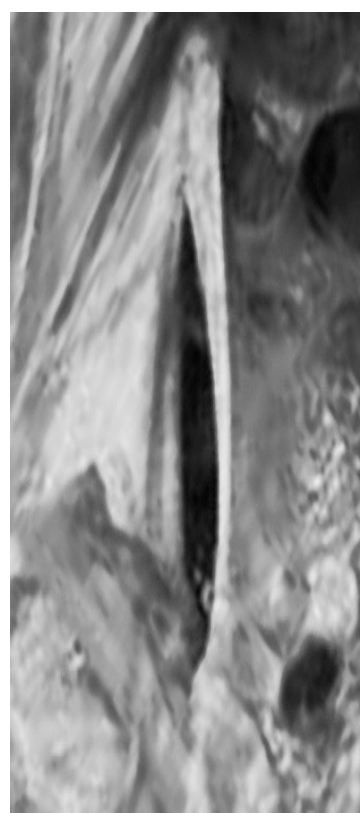
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DEAD BODIES MAKE GOOD CELLOS

by A. J. Huffman

Partially decapitated head, pulled back, reveals
wind pipes. They play as good as strings.
He uses leg bone from another body, slightly bowed,
ties it with hairs from various heads. His arms are used
to the motion, it mimics dismemberment, a form
of symphony in its own rite. He drags
exposed throat's internals for hours,
records the post-death screams for replaying at night.
The sounds gently rock him to sleep.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.J. Huffman has published seven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her eighth solo chapbook, *Drippings from a Painted Mind*, won the 2013 Two Wolves Chapbook Contest. She also has a full-length poetry collection scheduled for release in June 2005, titled, *A Few Bullets Short of Home* (mgv2>publishing). She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, *Kritya*, and *Offerta Speciale*, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of *Kind of a Hurricane Press*. www.kindofahurricanepress.com

THE LAKE

by Wes Shainline

“Is this Ned Allen?”, the nameless creditor blared, uncaring through the phone.

“Uh...speaking....how did you get this number?”

“You gave it to us when you signed up for the credit card”, she replied, beginning to get an attitude. He knew it was for good reason. When they called on the cell, it was easy enough to avoid talking. Now they were calling at work. He was captive, they knew that.

The last thing he wanted was a co-worker overhearing, or worse yet, his boss. Yes, there were several cubicles with people constantly yakking on the phone, but that wasn't the point. He worked at an accounting firm, he really couldn't afford credit problems. It would strike right at his credibility, he grimaced at the obvious pun.

The creditor continued, seemingly unperturbed by his pregnant pause, “Would you like to take care of the total balance today? Or, if you like, we can set up a payment plan...would that work for you?”. She sounded as if she read straight from a script, he knew she probably was. It was most likely a computer screen hooked directly into her headset. At the outset of the call, she'd warned him that their call was recorded, ‘to ensure great customer service’. Yeah, that was it. He didn't have time for this. He had work to do.

With all that history, he wanted to pacify her, at least for the moment, “I get paid on the 15th, would \$50 do the trick?”.

“Per month, yes”.

“Ok, here's my checking account numbers....”, he gave them, knowing full well he had no intention of paying, or ability,



really. After his rent and bills he had barely anything left. He did have to eat after all. He laughed bitterly in his mind. If the worst did happen, he'd just change account numbers, claiming that his account had been compromised. The fact that this left the problem unsolved and that he'd still have to deal with it next month was unavoidable. Ned was simply trying to deal with today's issues.

In that way, he was no different than the government or millions of Americans. This line

of reasoning had got him into credit trouble in the first place. He was always dealing with credit issues tomorrow. He was just trying to survive, he reasoned. This thinking had lulled him into dazedly completing his day's tasks. He eagerly awaited the magic time of 5:00 rolling around. Then, he was free...at least for today, and that's the important thing. He'd survived another day.

Mostly from memory, he drove home, certain he could so blindfolded. Yes that would be extreme but he'd probably never actually do it. His life had become one long routine but it was over for today. He pulled into the apartment complex, parked by the front, and proceeded to check the mail.

"Junk..junk", idly flipping the catalogues and advertisings in the large trash can placed in the corner for just that reason. Ned was just about to fling another piece of mail when he stopped cold. The print on the front of the envelope boldly proclaimed it was from the IRS. Nervously he opened the letter, his hands shaking terribly. He almost ripped the contents of the letter.

As he scanned the letter he realised with growing horror that he was in arrears to the tune of almost 2,000 dollars! This was the IRS. He couldn't hide from them. They could garnish his paycheck. They would get their money one way or another. Fear gripped deep inside his stomach.

It was many hours from darkness, being the heart of summer. What he needed was some fresh air, to commune with nature, to exercise and relinquish the multiple stresses of the day. He decided that a run would be a great way to relieve some of the days stress. Resolving to do just that, he climbed back into his car and drove out to a vacant lot adjacent to a nature trail. He exited the car and began to limber up for an extensive run.

This scene before him was exactly tailored for his situation--solitude, the chirping birds, wind rustling through the leaves, sunlight dappling the path before him. As he began to run, a deer was visible for the briefest of moments. It darted away into the surrounding forest as he approached. There were a good many squirrels, climbing trees with seeming grace. One spoilt the illusion by running directly into the path of a cyclist, who swerved wildly to avoid hitting it and almost collided with him.

Continuing his run, he noticed the crowning jewel of the entire scene, an enormous lake, scintillating in the sun. The soft lapping of the waves had a placid calming effect on

him. He resolved to spend a few moments to drink in the majesty of the fresh water lake.

A little while later, his calves burning, he did just that. Standing by the edge of the lake, hands anchored firmly on his hips, he nodded in satisfaction as a gaggle of ducks went quacking by.

There were splashes in the water, signifying the presence of something. He could only assume they were caused by fish attempting to escape the large hawks that dive bombed the surface of the lake..

Just as he was about to return to the car, a glint caught his eye in the pebble-strewn depths of the lake. He rubbed his eyes, unable to believe what he saw...was that... gold? He smiled to himself as he imagined taking a trip to the cash-for-gold places dotting the streets. He imagined walking out with a fan of cash notes, enough money to satisfy all of his debts. He would even have a generous portion left over. Maybe enough to purchase a decent car.

He focused on the glimmer. Yes, something was glinting in the water. As he looked closer he realised that there was more than a single glint. Several objects winked below the surface of the water. Ned wasted no time. With little regard for his shoes and shirt, he plunged head first into the warm, inviting water. The glinting, that could only be gold, seemed to move farther out when he dove to grasp the ephemeral shininess.

No problem, he would just reach a little farther out, the water was only up to his waist, he wasn't worried. Now the gold was around his feet, exactly where he wanted. He reached down with both arms to scoop up the gold glinting in the muck. The stone strewn bottom beneath his feet seemed to shift, trapping his feet. He reached down in an attempt to release his feet but he had never been able to touch his toes. He would simply have to wait for assistance or for the rocks to shift again and release him.

He waited for several hours, the sun-worshippers and splashing revellers that had crowded the shore during the day were all gone. Likewise, the boating aficionados, he realised that he was the only person in the water. The sun was just beginning to sink behind the horizon. It was almost night, but not quite. There remained a few minutes of daylight.

Something in the rocks stung his feet, reaching through the rubbery soles as if his feet were bare. He instinctively tried to pull his feet away from the source of the pain but the rocks held them tight.

The ducks, which before had been a pleasant distraction, now seemed menacing. They had a toothy sneer, almost a grin. Quack, roar, quack they howled, as they converged on his helpless form.

With both his free arms, he quickly splashed the ducks, which would normally have sent them scattering. Not now, not these ducks. As they continued to converge on him, he started to shout, "Aaah! Get away!" His shouting seemed to do the trick and the ducks fled to the far side of the lake.

Water drenched his face and blurred his vision. His mind raced. He rubbed his face and tried to shake the water from his eyes. He spotted a soaring hawk and for a moment he longed to trade places with it. He imagined soaring above the treetops, he could see his immobilized body flailing in the lake. The grinning, toothy maws of the ducks, mere tiny specs. The soaring hawk could even hear his plaintive screams, "Aaah! Get Away". The ducks seemed to sense the presence of the hawk, wisely, they scattered.

Grinning and laughing at the ducks sudden scattering, he realized that he was running out of time. They would return eventually. This was his chance to get free. Glancing beneath the muck of the lake bottom, he could tell his feet were still securely fastened.

Out of pure frustration, more than anything else, he desperately tried to move the ensnaring rocks, "Move, you dumb piece of shit....I...said...move", he yelled, through gritted teeth while thrashing about wildly in the water.

Weren't there supposed to be park rangers constantly roaming the area? Somebody had to be around, at least around the cars, which wasn't that far from his location.

"Hey!", he yelled, "Can anyone hear me? I need help....now!"

Yell as loud as he might, no help came, he was all alone, his loud bellowing just confirmed that.

It was almost a cry...his voice cracking with

emotion from sheer frustration. He realized now, too late, he should've been howling hours ago, when the lake was dotted with people.

Now there was only the full-moon to provide illumination. He was unable to decide if that was a good thing, or much, much worse. For one thing the sneering ducks with their toothy jaws were back and could see him. As could the soaring hawk. He knew it could see his bobbing head.

It dove for his exposed hairline, talons extended. Flying down, at great speed, the hawk's talons raked his scalp, tearing skin and hair; drenching his scalp with blood. He howled with pain, "Yeowww! Help!" Not a soul came to his aid.

The sneering, toothy ducks now took their turn. With his feet still firmly immobile, the ducks flapped, cackling, towards his outstretched arms. They seemed to take pleasure in chomping at his flailing hands, turning his fingers into bloody stumps.

He felt what seemed like some type of crab or fish by his feet. It was slimy, he knew that much. Defensively he pulled his arms around his head and gazed down into the water unable to penetrate the murky depths. Whatever they were seemed to be drawn to the blood running down his face and from his stubby bleeding palms.

Swarming around his lower extremities they began to gouge out nickel-sized lumps of flesh. Blood flowed freely into the water now, driving the water creatures into a frenzy. One in particular, latched onto his penis and began to crawl up into his bladder. The pain was unbearable. He began to lose consciousness from the blood loss and pain. His limp body slumped backwards, bobbing with the gentle ebb and flow of the lake. He thought he heard a groan from the pebble-strewn lake bottom. He was relieved as the sediment shifted, carrying his mutilated form further out into the lake's depths. His head slipped beneath the gently, rolling waves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wes has moved around quite a bit, first as a military child and then working in radio. He wanted to write since age 12, got side-tracked in radio for a number of years, and then returned full-circle to his first love--writing. As a teen, he voraciously read mainstream Science Fiction and Fantasy. Now, he prefers to write odd, non-mainstream Sci-Fi, but just as speculative. Wes can be reached for comment at wesshainline@yahoo.com.

WEEKENDER

by Luke E. Dodd



Jack jogs across the hospital parking lot and hits the unlock button on his key

ring. He pulls at his scrub top to reveal a white undershirt and climbs into his well-used, but maintained, sedan. Once in, he's away. It's been a long week of work, class, rinse and repeat. He drives, rolling east out of town. After two quick phone calls, Jack settles into the monotony of the interstate. After 50 miles or so, he's past the rush of folks heading home. With no music or radio voices, the only sound is a soft "whirrrrr" of tire on blacktop. Another hour passes, and he takes a two-lane highway south and meanders through a mix of woodlots and small farms. For a spell the road parallels electric lines that slope lazily between aged, furrowed poles. A red-tailed hawk perches on one of these great, dark crucifixes; it tracks Jack's progress with predatory eyes. At this point the sun is low, painting the hawk's western vantage with swatches of crimson and magenta that blend

into the darkness of the landscape. Slowing for a curve in the road, Jack sees the hawk for just a moment, framed against the background of darkening sky and a full moon beginning to break the horizon of a tree-lined fencerow.

A map lies on the passenger seat, unfolded to reveal a squiggle of highway along the periphery of a green expanse. Jack follows this path, skirting the forest's boundary. Eventually, however, the asphalt cuts straight into the heart of vegetation and shadow.

The tires make a crunching sound as he comes to a stop in the parking lot. Jack parks a car's-width away from the only other vehicle in the lot, another beaten blue sedan. Aside from a layer of dust, it could be a twin to his own car. As Jack pulls himself out of the car and stretches, he's enveloped by fading heat. The grating sound of Jack's footsteps on gravel is nearly masked by the pulsing call of a katydid as he meanders over to the sole point of interest in the clearing. The wooden kiosk, beginning to go punky and soft, displays camp regulations and trail maps. Jack studies the kiosk, scribbles his name and information on an empty visitor's list, and turns back to his car. He sheds his sneakers and scrub bottoms, then pulls on something a bit better to resist vegetation and rocky trail. After a quick series of mental checklists, Jack slings his pack on, double-checks for his keys and locks the car doors. Bounding down the hiking trail, he disappears into the forest twilight.

The plastic cigarette lighter is perfect in its simplicity and utility. Using this truckstop tool, Jack coaxes a nest of wet kindling into smoldering. Behind him is a small multi-colored tent, supposedly for two people, standing erect under the spanning branches of a squat hemlock. Jack's partially unpacked pack lies near the open rain fly; his makings for dinner, a bundle of socks and hankies, and a ratty, dog-eared birding guide are strewn about on top. Later, Jack thumbs through the

book as his beans and rice simmer and the songbirds argue with one another in the riparian canopy. They hush as he eats supper and, with a clear night sky, Jack manages to read well into the evening even under the boughs of the protective conifer.

Later that night, Jack sleeps as the whippoorwill calls. The mesh and fabric of the tent rustle with a slight breeze that picks up along the creek.

Jack gasps and awakes with a start in the early morning hour. A dream had crept to the precipice of reality. He had been here, in his tent, in the dream. But there had been something outside as well. He could hear it, smell it outside of the tent, fetid and overpowering. Jack grasps for it, but the dream is smoke, slipping away. Jack crawls from his tent, and slides his feet into crusty camp sandals. The air is chilly, a stark contrast to the heat of the prior evening. The humidity has stayed, however, leaving the air clammy. Indeed, Jack can see fog stretching up the slope on the streamside opposite his bivouac. Scrounging back in his tent, Jack finds a pullover and the makings for breakfast. A little whisper and a blue-hot flame spout from a compact camp stove; Jack sets water to boil for breakfast.

While he waits, Jack investigates the periphery camp. No sign, be it tracks or snapped vegetation. The trail system here on the national forest was a series of loops, so it was unlikely that someone would have arrived at the parking lot and gotten on the trail early enough to spook him this morning. Even so, there should be at least one other person out here if the other car in the parking lot was any indication. No sign... Resigned to uncertainty, Jack strides down to the stream. He kneels, pushes up his sleeves, and dips his hands. The cold water splashes his face and, with that bracing jolt, the last remnants of the dream dissipate from his memory.

Jack hikes during the day. Swirls of clouds sit low in the muted sky, seeming to touch the antediluvian ridge tops. Even so, the day is not without color. The earliest stages of autumn are setting in all around Jack, and

leaves are beginning to give up their lush green in favor of lighter yellows and fading browns. Moving up and around the hills, slopes, and narrow hollows, Jack huffs and puffs as he hikes the looping trails that wind through the knobby topography. At no point does he run into the other camper. Following the day of hiking, birding, and snapping some photos, Jack returns to camp. As he approaches the trail spur leading to his small camp, Jack notices a crow pecking at the hard-packed earth and ash within the fire ring. The scavenger takes flight as Jack approaches the circle of rocks, but Jack can see what lured the bird to his camp: flecks of oats on the hard-packed earth where he rinsed out the bowl from his breakfast. Shrugging his pack, Jack settles in for a lazy night before he has to head back to the city tomorrow.

Jack's head nods and the dog-eared paperback drops to his lap. On the verge of sleep, Jack does his best to bury the embers of the small campfire. The spare coals mellow and fade as Jack's breathing becomes heavier in the tent. Were he awake, Jack would find the enormity of the forest's silence unnerving.

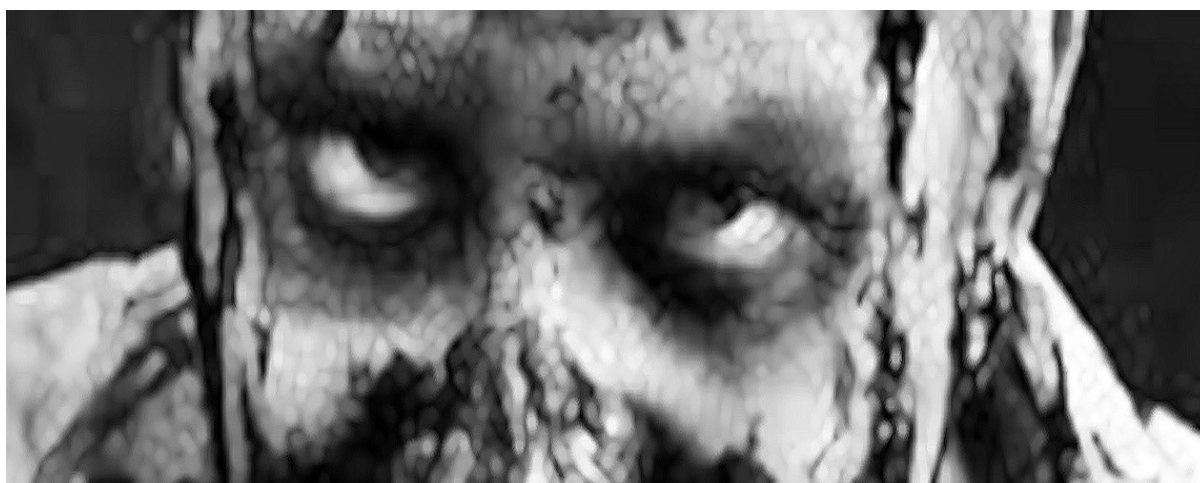
The red and white fabric of the tent rends apart, like flesh separating to expose bony secrets beneath. A colossal animal looms over Jack. The creature is bipedal, but only slightly. Jack not only smells, but feels, the rancid breath of the thing. Sitting prostrate before the horror, Jack knows this is no dream. Heat, wetness, and the stench of carrion lap over him in waves. With a tremendous swipe the brute sends Jack flying like a rag doll. Jack meets the thick base of the hemlock under which the fabric of his tent lay in shreds, like the remnants of a bloody birth. Jack's right humerus crunches with the impact. Fighting for consciousness, Jack feels himself lifted. Claws dig into his torso, and he is hoisted. It is a quantum of the beast's strength. The repulsion of the predator's breath reaches unbearable heights as Jack feels the stray hairs from the beasts' muzzle brushing his neck.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luke E. Dodd is a scientist, devourer of music, and collector of hobbies. He and his wife live in Kentucky.

LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING

by Rick McQuiston



Detective Richard Abbott ran a gloved hand over his face. Four-day-old stubble threatened to tear the thin latex glove.

"Sir?" Officer Jeremy Baines said. After nearly a year on the force, it was the first time he'd seen a dead body. "Jacobs called. She said forensics will be here in 30 minutes."

Abbott nodded to Baines. "Good." He leaned in close. "Tell me, Officer Baines, do you see anything unusual about the crime scene?"

Baines, a rail-thin twin of a young George Clooney, looked around the room. "Well Sir, it's obviously a suicide. The man didn't leave a note, but there's no sign of forced entry. The doors and windows were all locked from the inside, and a gun was found next to the body. It has his fingerprints on it."

Abbott thought for a moment. "Possibly," he mumbled more to himself than to Baines,

"but one thing I've learned from this job is that looks can sometimes be deceiving."

A puzzled look washed over Baines' chiseled face. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Sir."

"I don't think it was a suicide."

"But why, Sir?"

Abbott took two steps back. "Never mind that right now."

"Sir?"

"Just do as I say. I want you to slowly walk toward the front door. Don't make any sudden movements, nothing that could startle it."

Baines did as he was told, and in less than a minute he was standing by the front door to the house.

"Good," Abbott said so quietly he hardly heard himself say it. "Open the door, but gently. Slow and gentle."

"But..."

"Just do as I say if you want to live."

Baines nodded and opened the door, being careful not to make any noise.

"Now when I say to I want you to run out of the house. Get to cover as quickly as you can. I'll be right behind you."

Baines nodded again and steadied his nerves as best he could. The stark terror on his boss's face overruled any doubts he had about the situation.

"Now!"

Baines turned and fled out the door just as a single bullet whistled past his head. The noise was deafening, and before he fell onto the front porch, he saw something that brought him back to his childhood when he used to watch zombie movies.

Abbott sprinted out of the house and leaped over Baines on the porch. "Get to cover!" he shouted as he dove into a row of bushes.

Baines scrambled off the porch and into the bushes as well.

Abbott looked over at Baines. "You all right?"

Baines was still trying to catch his breath. "I saw it!" he muttered between gasps for air. "There's a zombie in there! I saw it!"

Abbott shook his head. A cold realization reflected on his sweaty face. "No," he said in an unusually calm voice considering the circumstances, "there's no zombie in there."

"But I saw it! It had a gun!"

Abbott put a hand on the young policeman's shoulder. "Son, remember what I told you about how looks can sometimes be deceiving?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"That man in there is dead, and he wasn't the one who tried to shoot you."

Baines was by then fondling his firearm. "What are you talking about? I saw him! He had a gun in his hand!"

Abbott looked down. "I came across some-

thing like this a few years ago. I was investigating a murder scene just like this one, only it was a woman who was killed."

Baines was having trouble listening. His mind was racing in a hundred different directions at once.

"She'd been shot in the head," Abbott continued. "Same situation: no forced entry; doors and windows locked from the inside; no suicide note."

Baines looked at Abbott. "What are you talking about, Sir? We should be calling for backup."

Abbott ignored him. "She shot at me while I was walking to the front door. Just missed me." He pulled out his gun and stared at it. "It's kind of funny, don't you think? I don't like guns and yet I became a cop. I guess it was my way of dealing with what I saw." His eyes narrowed. "Sometimes looks can be deceiving. Sometimes it's something else, something we don't expect."

He looked up and caught a glimpse of movement behind Baines.

"Sir?"

Abbott opened his mouth to scream, but when the bullet barreled into his forehead, he fell to the ground in a lifeless heap. A crimson pool immediately formed around his head.

Baines whirled around and, just before he too was sent into oblivion, he understood.

It wasn't a gun at all. It was some kind of creature, a monster that imitated a gun.

And when it let loose the bullet with his name on it, the creature, the monster that could assume the shape of anything it wanted, as well as that shape's abilities, reared back and hissed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick is a forty-four year old father of two who loves anything horror related. He has nearly 300 publishing credits and has written two novels, *To See As God Sees* and *Where Things Might Walk*., six anthologies, one novella and edited an anthology of Michigan authors. They are all available through Lulu and Amazon, and on his website @ many-midnights.web.com.

He is currently working on his third and fourth novels.

Looking Forward to It

by Ed Ahern

The background for this story is adapted from W.M.L. Hutchinson's version of the fable, *The Prince Who Was a Seer* published in 1914 in *The Golden Porch*.



“I 'm not in the mood for a walk, Granddad.”

Stephen's grandfather Mel stared up at him.. "Humour me, maybe you'll feel better by the time we get back." He spoke in that resonating tone that had convinced hundreds of people to trust him.

Maybe so, Stephen thought. Can't make things worse.

The adolescent and his grandfather rambled through the woods near their house, the boy's keen eyes picking out squirrels and birds, toads and fish, and bugs crawling through leaves. I think I feel more comfortable with animals than with those jerks at school.

His grandfather stopped him as they were cutting through the old family graveyard on their way back. "I'm tired," the grandfather said, "let's sit for awhile on this stone bench."

They sat on the bench in front on a gravestone so old the name had weathered off it. "Maybe I'll tell you a story while I catch my breath."

"I'm too old for stories, Grandpa."

"Oh? What's bothering you so much?"

"It's all right, I'll live."

"Now I have to know."

Stephen hesitated, but he wanted to tell someone. "You know that I don't fit in with the other kids at school. I look at things differently, and a lot of what they do seems stupid or cruel. But I really thought one of the girls, Chrissie, understood me, and we talked together a lot. When I finally opened up and told her how I really felt about things, she called me a raving weirdo, and told some of the guys, who got serious about picking on me."

Mel shrugged. "So you have bad taste in women? This tale is about that kind of problem. It's a useful lesson, but few people know the story, and nobody believes it anymore."

"Anyway," he continued, "Once, about three thousand years ago, there was a young prince named Melampus who was hunting in the woods of Attica..."

"I'm almost eighteen, way too old for fairy tales, grandpa."

"I doubt it, and don't interrupt me please, because this is important. One day while hunting Melampus got tired and lay down for a nap near an old shrine. He dreamed that a large snake, with scales speckled in shades of emerald and blue sapphire, slithered onto his chest. The snake flicked its tongue onto his eyes, ears, and mouth, looked at him for a moment, and crawled off."

"When Melampus woke up, the dream seemed so real that he shook himself as if to throw off the snake. But he was alone-no, not really alone, because he could hear birds and squirrels in the trees, and rabbits and mice in the undergrowth. Really hear them."

"The snake has given Melampus the gift of understanding us," said a jackdaw crow.

"And more than that," replied a barn owl. "He now knows the healing plants, and what the future brings."

"What am I hearing," Melampus yelled out.

"A grey squirrel chattered, 'don't be startled, Melampus. You can hear our voices of the woods and fields and gardens. What we see and hear we can tell you. But be careful, for we can only talk with you, and know nothing of what is in the minds of other men-men who are often devious and evil.'"

The grandfather went on to tell how Melampus rescued the king's daughters, and claimed a portion of the kingdom for himself. He married a woman named Bias, aptly named, for although she loved Melampus, she could never see past her prejudices. And Melampus began a life of curing illnesses and looking into the future.

The old man waved his arms and talked without pause, delighted to finally reveal the story to someone he loved. He told Stephen that Bias gave Melampus a son, who in turn had a son, Amphiaraus.

"One day," he related, "Amphiaraus visited the tomb of his grandfather. He felt suddenly tired, and lay down on a bench a little like this one. As he slept, he dreamt of the same brightly speckled snake, and that the snake licked its dry, forked tongue on his eyes, ears, and lips."

"When he awoke he too could hear voices coming from the hedges and trees near the burial site."

"Amphiaraus has awakened," said a field mouse. "Look closely inside yourself, man, for you now know much."

"Amphiaraus realized that he knew the purposes of plants and herbs, and could foretell tomorrow as if it were yesterday morning. The animals began telling him what they had seen and heard, what men had really done. But he could not know men's thoughts,

and loved badly, which was his downfall.

"Amphiaraus fell in love with his cousin Eriphyle, a princess of Argos and sister of king Adrastus. Eriphyle was a beautiful girl, with enticing eyes and milky skin, but she was as greedy as a magpie, and over everything else loved expensive jewellery. "

"Granddad," Stephen interrupted, "sorry, but this isn't helping me."

"Patience, young man, this story was birthed hundreds of lifetimes ago, hopefully you can listen for fifteen minutes while I tell it.

"Anyway, a barred owl flew onto a branch near Amphiaraus and hooted. 'Amphiaraus, you have been cheated out of your inheritance by your cousin. You should have half of Adrastus' kingdom as your birthright, but he has left you ignorant and without power. You should claim what is yours."

" Amphiaraus began healing sick people, and predicting futures that came true. He became more popular than Adrastus, which the king resented, but could do nothing about because Amphiaraus was so revered. And he met with scribes and learned that he was indeed entitled to half the kingdom.

"After some months, Amphiaraus visited Adrastus. 'I have no bad feelings for you, and have great love for your sister, Eriphyle. But I am entitled by royal right to half of the kingdom, and we must agree how to divide it.'

"Now, Adrastus loved power even more than his sister loved jewellery, and to give away half of the kingdom would rip him apart. He stalled. 'Cousin, please come back in three days and I will offer a solution.'

"Once Amphiaraus had left, Adrastus summoned his sister. 'Eriphyle, for the good of the kingdom you must marry Amphiaraus.'

"She pouted. 'I am fond enough of him, and he's rich, but I don't love him.'

"'Little sister, I can't kill or exile him, I need his talents to predict our future. Marrying him keeps the kingdom under our control. You'll grow to like him, and you'll be able to bathe in gold and jewels.'

"She agreed, and Adrastus offered Amphiaraus marriage to Eriphyle if he would settle for a fiefdom under Adrastus' rule. Amphiaraus was so smitten with Eriphyle that he gave up his birthright for her.

"In time Eriphyle delivered a son, and Amphiaraus lived in contentment, his life rich with the conversations with all kinds of animals and the healing and counselling of his fellow men.

"But Adrastus' urge for power could not be contained, and he made plans to conquer the neighbour state of Thebes. He went to Amphiaraus for reassurance of his success, but Amphiaraus instead told him that his defeat would be total, and that most of his troops would die in the battle. Amphiaraus finished by saying that he would not join in the fight.

"This advice festered so rottenly inside Adrastus that he decided that it must be wrong. But he knew that his troops would not follow him unless Amphiaraus was with them. He went to Eriphyle with a magnificent jewel. 'Dear sister. For the good of the kingdom, you must convince your husband to follow me into this battle. In return for your help I'll give you this gem.' And Adrastus took out a flawless ruby the size of a plum.

"Eriphyle lusted for this gemstone as she had for no man, including Amphiaraus. After token protests she agreed to convince Amphiaraus in return for the ruby. She whined, she pleaded, she scolded Amphiaraus for his cowardice, she turned cold and withheld her favours, she belittled him in front of his friends. Finally Amphiaraus, still desperately in love with Eriphyle, agreed to to go into battle alongside Adrastus.

He drifted into sleep, and in that sleep a snake came, iridescently jewelled, and as long as Stephen was tall. As it slithered across his chest Stephen could feel its weight and the bunching of his shirt...

"They marched out as a great army, but were slaughtered beneath the walls of Thebes. Thousands of warriors, hundreds of nobles, died that day in battle. Adrastus, seeing that the battle was lost, turned his chariot to flee. As he looked back one last time over the battlefield he saw Amphiaraus, surrounded by Thebans. But Amphiaraus was not killed in battle. The ground opened up beneath him and dropped him down, then closed up again, leaving only a seam of raw earth where Amphiaraus had stood.

"After the battle a gravestone was planted to mark the spot where Amphiaraus disappeared, and some say that it still stands. And that's the story of Melampus and Amphiaraus, who could talk to animals. They were kind and wise, but were undone by the women they were closest to."

Stephen smiled despite how he felt. "So I shouldn't trust women, granddad?"

Mel smiled in turn, a little sadly. "You may trust either men or women to be only as good as they can be. Those of us who see and feel differently must be wary of the rest of the herd, so that we don't get trampled. Let's go in, I'm hungry."

Over time Stephen was left alone by his classmates, as if he spoke a foreign language they couldn't understand. That February his grandfather, his only close relative, died in his sleep. At the funeral hundreds of men and women went up to Stephen and said how much his grandfather had helped them, not just in finances but in their private lives as well. 'He knew,' one man said, 'what was

wrong with us, physically and spiritually, and told us how to be healed."

Stephen had just turned eighteen and was able to stay in the house without supervision. This is no life, he thought one day. If I don't hide who I am I'm a pariah, if I dumb myself down to fit in I'll be screamingly bored and frustrated.

One unusually warm day in March, Stephen decided to retrace the walk he and his grandfather had taken. He came out of the woods in front of the stone bench and the weathered grave stone. He sat down on the bench, looking at the unreadable inscription and feeling more than a little sorry for himself.

The spring light had warmed the bench stone, and Stephen stretched out to let the sun beat down on him as well. He drifted into sleep, and in that sleep a snake came, iridescently jewelled, and as long as Stephen was tall. As it slithered across his chest Stephen could feel its weight and the bunching of his shirt as it coiled and uncoiled. The serpent paused, then slid its tongue onto his eyes, ears and mouth, the touches dry, cool and tingling.

He awoke with a shudder and fell off the bench onto the grass. There was no snake to be seen, but he could hear voices, soft and loud, close and far.

A rabbit barked: "See what the old one has done for him."

A turkey buzzard squawked from aloft: "He hears our voices now."

A barred owl, never seen in bright sunlight,

landed on the top of the tombstone. His words tumbled out with rounded vowels. "Boy, you know more than you can yet imagine. How to cure, and, yes, how to hurt, what tomorrow brings, and what you humans did yesterday and are doing today. But beware the minds of men, they are unreadable for us, and are often foul places."

Stephen walked the woods and fields every day that he could, finding the plants that heal and those that harm, and what animals are really like, and how to know tomorrow like this morning's news report.

One day, behind the school building, he began a conversation with a colony of Norway rats that nested near the garbage dumpsters. As he stood in apparent silence two of his classmates noticed him.

"Watch out, weirdo, or you'll smell like rotten food."

"Creepy little turd, once you graduate you'll get stuck in an asylum."

Once the boys had moved on one of the larger rats spoke up. "It's all right Stephen, maybe they'll be one of the ones to die."

"Die? What do you mean?"

"Other boys are putting gasoline bombs underneath the viewing stands, saying they will explode them during the ceremony. Many will die or be maimed. This is man-vicious and we do not understand it, we who sometimes have to eat our young when we're starving."

Stephen was shocked into silence, then asked, "what did they look like? Did you hear their names?"

"One was short and stuffed with tasty fat. He wore black glasses, and he was called Bob. The other, Bob called Larry, and was lean and a head taller."

Stephen knew them both, outliers like himself. He'd sensed a wrongness in them, and never

gotten friendly. Graduation was a week away, and he needed to prevent the bombing. But if he told the school principal what was planned and who was planning it the principal would question Bob and Larry, who would deny it and then go looking for Stephen. If he called the police and told them who he was and who was planning what it would have the same unpleasant result.

Finally, after an afternoon of anguishing, Stephen walked to one of the few remaining pay phones in town and called the police. Masking his voice, he told them that the graduation ceremony would be bombed by two boys who were planting gasoline bombs under the bleachers, and hung up.

One hundred forty seven students were to graduate that day, but only one hundred forty five were in attendance. Bob and Larry were missing, and as he marched past the bleachers to get his diploma, Stephen could see five newly dug holes under the stands. The news report that evening told the story. The two boys had been caught the night before setting the timers and arrested. The town police took full credit, with no mention made of a tip off.

All the better, Stephen thought. I'm off the hook. I really need to figure out how to use this talent.

That summer, Stephen got a job at a gas station convenience store. He began making and selling herbal teas to cure the ailments his customers told him about. Those he cured told others, who told others, and soon the gas station made most of its profit from tea.

The gas station owner helped Stephen finance the opening of a small tea shop, and people began driving in from out of town. As Stephen talked with customers about their ailments he couldn't help but perceive what darkened their futures, and began offering advice.

There were, of course, grumblings from those whose sicknesses were incurable or whose

futures remained bleak. One afternoon a police detective came into the store.

"Stephen Devick?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Sergeant Peter Marsh. There's been a complaint filed against you."

"Oh? What for this time?"

"Complainant Dorothy Lausten says you threatened her with a bad future if she didn't pay you a lot of money."

"Dorothy Lausten? Middle-aged, heavysset, brown, thinning hair?"

"Yes. The town has an ordinance prohibiting fortune telling scams like yours."

"Let's back up just a bit, officer. Does she claim to have paid me anything?"

"No, says she refused."

"Does she say that I interfered with her life in any way?"

"Says she can't prove it, but thinks you did."

"Nobody pays me when I first make a prediction, and I don't have the time or ability to interfere with someone else's life. Maybe it's helpful if I show you what I do. Your younger daughter I believe is living with a man you think is bad for her, maybe getting her involved with drugs?"

"Don't try your swindle on me!"

"No swindle, no coercion. Although she's dabbling in cocaine she'll drop the experimentation at the same time she dumps the boyfriend, in about a month."

"She claims she loves him, why would she do that?"

"He's also having relations with her best friend. Don't mention this, just wait. It'll turn out

okay."

"I don't believe you. If I find out you're taking money for these fantasies I'll be back to take you in."

A month later the sergeant returned. "You made a lucky guess."

"You're welcome. The next boyfriend will also be a jerk, but you'll learn to tolerate him."

Between the money he received for his teas and donations made by those whose futures had come fortunately true, Stephen piled up money. But the people came to him half in fear of what he would say, and he was as much an outcast as he'd been in high school. He found that he preferred the company of animals.

Most dusks and dawns Stephen walked out of the town and into the neighbouring woods, listening intently to the fauna. Curious, he thought. Dogs believe the best about even the worst of masters, and cats- no matter how pampered-feel their owners are dolts. And wild animals see humans as tormenters who kill or cage on whims.

One afternoon Chrissie came into the shop. She'd avoided the post high school swelling of many of her friends and was as lissom as he remembered her. "Stephen, you seem to be doing well."

He'd heard from both animals and humans that she'd been engaged, and broken it off. He couldn't resist. "Sorry to hear that the engagement didn't work out. How can I help you?"

"I get terrible migraine headaches, and nothing the doctor prescribers seems to work. I'm desperate enough to try one of your witches' brews."

"That's too bad. I'll give you a tea that seems to work for other people. No charge, if it works you can pay me for the next batch when you come in for a refill."

It did, and she did. "Stephen," she asked on her return, "do you still have those weird delusions?"

He laughed. "More than ever. But I'm comfortable with them now, and they've helped me make a pretty decent living."

"I heard you're paying a fortune to update your grandfather's place."

"It's my place now, and I want it to last a couple more generations." After refilling her order he glanced at the store clock. "It's almost noon, would you like to grab some lunch with me while we catch up?"

Chrissie stared at him as if he was a woodland animal dressed in clothes, but curiosity crept up on her. "Okay, why not."

Lunch lead to a dinner, then another, then other things. Stephen felt sure that Chrissy liked him, even loved him a little. Early one morning Stephen stared at Chrissie as she slept beside him. How delicious she is, and how I enjoy being with her. And she's

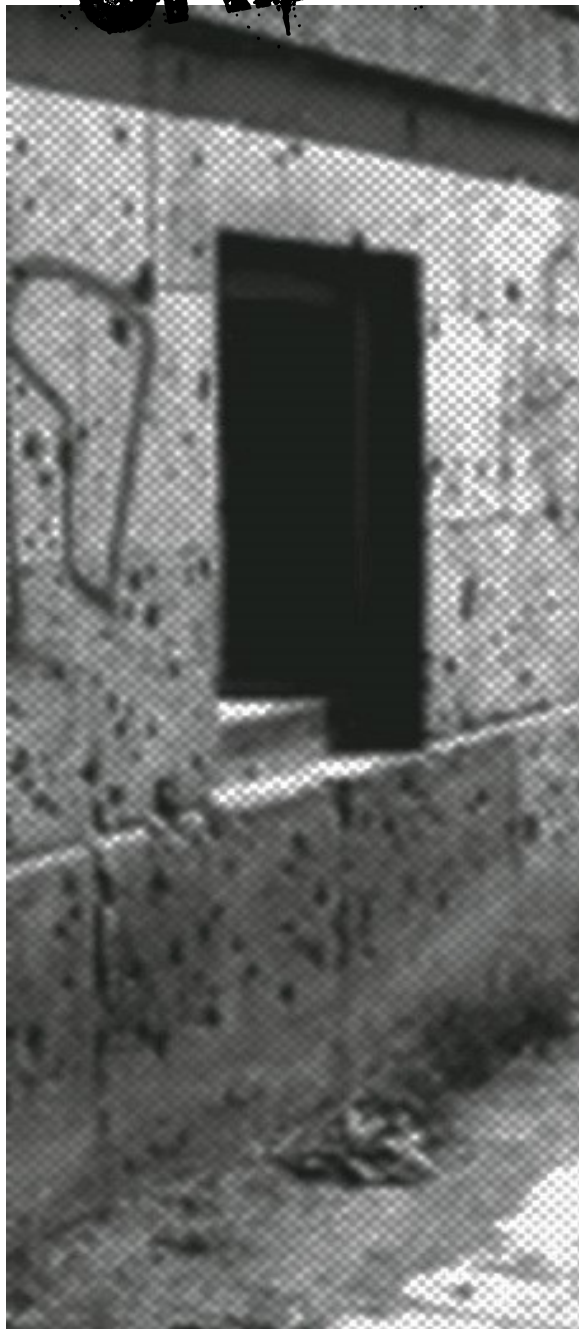
comfortable with me. I know how badly she'll treat me sometimes, how she'll eventually cuckold me with a friend. But I relish her presence, and she's as close as I will be to another human with the exception of our son to be. I understand your story now, granddad. She'll be as good as she can be.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He has his original wife, but advises that after forty seven years they are both out of warranty. Ed has had over fifty stories published thus far.

LESSONS IN THE ART OF URBAN SURVIVAL



By Dave Ludford

After dark we always move around the city streets in groups of three or more.

This minimizes the chance of attack by the Zealots, who prefer to

pick off individuals. Night scavenging is our only chance of survival but we have to anticipate casualties; deep down we all just hope it will be somebody else. The most recent loss was Bailey who had been foolish enough to venture out alone a month ago. Had his eyes on some prize piece of urban junk he didn't want to share, we guessed. Bailey had always been reckless, and just plain greedy.

Lessons: 1) always keep to agreed scouting numbers and 2) always work toward the common good of the group. We survive or die together. Our lives hang by the finest silken thread.

The Zealots are the unofficial bullyboy militia of the ruling upper-class oligarchy, The Government of the Fourth Millennium, who outlawed poverty and criminalized the 'Prole' lower classes on coming to power. They are made up of mostly lower middle class men who hate us just as much as the oligarchs. They are prepared to indulge in wanton acts of urban genocide just for the sheer fun of it.

Lessons: 1) be careful who you vote for

and 2) always speak out against injustice. The government wants to wipe us from the face of the Earth but we aren't prepared to roll over and die without a fight.

Tonight's reclamation mission involves four of us- Judy, Thomas, Saul and myself- in pursuit of an abandoned gas stove outside a house in the Eastern Rich District. It had been spotted on an earlier recce but a Zealot patrol had chosen that moment to pass by in search of Proles, so it still sat by the side of the pavement, waiting... of course we considered it was probably bait but with nerve and cunning this precious treasure would be ours.

Lessons: 1) never pass up an opportunity, but always check the situation carefully first and 2) live by your wits and instincts.

Midnight: we can see the stove is still there and all four of us now experience a heightened sense of danger, but our adrenaline pumps through our bodies keeping us alert. We are conscious that this could still be a trap; the street lights are the only illumination on the otherwise empty street. The dim glow they cast makes us potentially easy targets nonetheless.

Lesson: Never take your eyes from your target but be alert always.

Three of us move forward nervously toward the prize while Judith keeps watch. Just as we are within a couple of feet of it a window rolls open on the top floor of the house and a man I guessed to be in his early seventies peers out into the gloom and down to where we now stand frozen to the spot.

"Ah! I wondered when you'd turn up! Please come in! The door is unlocked. I promise you this isn't a trap. I have some more stuff for you inside."

Judith ran over to join us and we all four looked up at the head and shoulders backlit by a single light bulb in the room behind the speaker. We shared the same thought: *decision time*. But none of us seemed to perceive danger, this guy could be genuine.

Lesson: sometimes your initial gut instinct may well be correct.

As the man disappeared back inside the room we moved as one toward the front door of the house.

"Welcome, come in, do. Please sit- apologies for the mess, I'm afraid that since my wife died I've become rather untidy in my domestic arrangements. That's the spirit- anywhere you can find a place. Oh dear I must get round to having a tidy up. Now then, drinks anyone?"

All four of us declined his offer with simultaneous head shakes. We were still rather nervy and were constantly scanning the shabby front room. I said:

"Sorry to be abrupt, sir, but let's cut to the chase. Why are we here?"

"That's quite OK; I appreciate straight talking. As I said, I have some more stuff you may be interested in taking away with you. I don't really need so much since..."

His last sentence trailed off but we could guess what he was going to say. He continued:

"The stove I left outside was a ruse to get you here I admit, but my intentions are honourable. Not only can you have my...err...other 'junk' shall we call it, but I also have an ulterior motive. I feel I must point out to you that you have a traitor in your midst; a Zealot traitor who is now in this very room."

Lesson: Always be prepared for the unexpected...

Our first reaction was to stare at him dumbfounded, then our heads turned and we looked at each other with astonished glances. One of those astonished glances we knew to be false, if what the man was saying were true. Then he did something surprisingly swift for a man of his years; he moved quickly to a desk drawer and pulled out an ancient-looking service revolver.

"Now this is a relic passed down to me, a souvenir from an ancient war long forgotten. But it still works, I tried it out recently."

Judy was the first of us to find a voice:

"Sir, how do you know we have a traitor? How can you be sure? This is madness."

"Please, you must take my word for it, I'm deadly certain. I've been watching your group for some time now. But you won't have noticed me. Who notices an old man lurking in shadows? I have seen your traitor covertly passing information to the Zealots.

I must also say that I have sympathy with your cause; up until retirement I was a poorly paid but honest working man. My wife and I had struggled with borderline poverty all of our married life. Only a fortunate monetary bequest upon the death of a relative saved me from being rounded up and shot. Believe me, I need to do this."

His next action was to lift the revolver, aim it at Thomas' head, and pull the

trigger. The noise was ear-shattering in the gloomy silence. Thomas stared open mouthed, choked, and fell to the floor, a circular red mark the size of an old half-penny piece in the middle of his forehead, which began to trickle blood. A cleaner shot I had never seen.

Lesson: never trust those you think you can trust...this will make sense in practical situations rather than as an abstract concept...

"There. It's done. Sorry to shock you but I'm sure you'll agree it was necessary. Now don't worry about the body...I'll call the Zealots across and tell them I apprehended a Prole attempting to steal money and food. They'll probably give me a medal.

Now...do you think the three of you can manage the 'junk'?"

Still too dumbstruck to speak, the three of us nodded our heads vigorously.

"Good. I hope this has proved to be a lesson to you all."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Ludford is a 49 year old writer of poetry and speculative fiction living in Nuneaton, Warwickshire. He works for a small company manufacturing luxury soaps for a living. Until recently he wrote fiction entirely as a hobby, but has begun taking his writing more seriously in the past few months.

THE ACCIDENTALS

By Thomas Bird



There's a world outside the hospital door that terrifies me.

It terrifies everyone. Today there's a procession to commemorate the commencement of State Immortal. It's a national holiday, so everyone stays inside. The whole parade is automated, so no one really gets involved anyway. There's not a soul in sight on the ground. We were all warned of the festivities yesterday, via a dream attachment, to deter some unfortunate individual from straying into the path of an android trombonist. The last thing anyone wants is an accident.

Streamers, fireworks – the big band is passing far below John's window and beyond the festivities, the immaculate steel sky-riders of The City, rising out of the ground in perfect metallic symmetry. I can just make out the faces in the windows: silhouettes of fearful curiosity gazing out at the marching pageantbots.

When I was a child my mother told me that most creatures have two eyes so as to be simultaneously curious and careful. But you can never have it both ways. I mean, who wouldn't want to run across a beach or swim in the ocean? But what of the untold hazards that lie in wait in even the most sanguine waters: riptides, jellyfish, obscured rocks... I wouldn't fancy my chances, would you?

John has been in hospital for a week now and it's not the first time. He's five hundred and sixty years old and he's been getting *tendencies*. He's over the mean age, so his reckless behaviour is easy to diagnose. I've seen it many times before. My father, for instance. He attempted all kinds of deaths. He leapt out of the window forgetting the suicide safety nets the Mayor's Office had installed. He sped into a wall neglecting the fact that Ford Securers all come with mandatory

airbags, excellent impact capacities tested at high velocities and anyway, they only go a maximum of thirty-five miles per hour. Dad just came out bruised and in need of a new car.

An accident got him in the end, just like it does for most people. So absurd, unlikely and inexplicable that one could never have prepared for it. He'd bought a coffee, served in one of those polystyrene cups to keep it piping hot. Strolling in the park, he took a big gulp and scorched his mouth with the torrid liquid. Dad ran straight for the pond, jumping between the reeds to cool his scolded lips in the foggy pond water. Unbeknown to him, a number of brooding swans were nesting in the thickets. Defensively they lashed out, pecking at his eyes and ears. He cried out in agony but fearing an accident themselves, nobody came to his rescue. Fleeing the attack, he struggled out to the centre of the pond where, floundering in the mud and sludge, and suffering the pain of his injuries, he disappeared beneath the surface. In the aftermath, due to the public outcry, the Mayor's Office was prompted to put swans on the ever-expanding *dangerous animals list* and hot coffee was banned. Ice coffee is all we have now thanks to my father, but I suppose it's for the best.

John groans laboriously, as if he's trapped within some cruel, senseless dream. His bandaged legs are kept erect in metal stirrups but he is delirious and struggles to move. He can't be very comfortable, even with all the drugs they're feeding him. When he recovers he'll have to go to therapy again. He begins to murmur. "The Community. Mike, let's head out to The Community."

"What are you talking about John?" I say, pressing his morphine release for him. He swiftly grows numb and I feel relieved. All this talk of *The Community*; of those beatniks that refused their immortal rights and live out on their farms with their filthy animals and their children and their old, hopeless folk who wet the bed and can't stand up straight. They live in blatant disregard for the norms of civilization; for our birth control and sanitation procedures – advances that we developed for good reason. You can't just opt out! Life's too short, isn't that what they used to say? Anyway, it's too late for John. He made his

decision half-a-millennia ago.

I share the elevator to the ground floor with a pretty nurse who smells good. You know, you can tell a good genetic match by someone's scent. Suitable partners always smell fine. She gets out at level three hundred. I try to savour the moment – at my age there have been so many *moments* they kind of all blur into one. If I don't focus on something pleasant it just blends in with all the rest. A doctor gets in at two hundred and twenty-five. I recognise him immediately. He's the guy who did my genome operation hundreds of years back. He doesn't look a day older. Neither do I.

"Hi," I say.

"Hello," he replies politely, without diverting his attention from his clipboard. He doesn't recognise me. Well, he must have done thousands of operations in his lifetime.

"Sorry to bother you sir, it's just, you did my DNA replication procedure, some four hundred and seventy years ago. I don't imagine you remember?"

"I'm afraid I don't sir. I haven't worked in genetics for over a century."

"Oh really."

"Yes, I grew tired of it. One can only do a job for so long before he needs a change, don't you agree? I'm in Accident and Emergency now. This is my third career would you believe! I started life as a botanist. It's funny what time enables you to achieve."

"Oh, that must be tough in A and E. All those suicides and accidentals, so tragic."

"Well I spent three centuries giving immortality and I shall spend the rest of my life preserving it as best I can. You know I'm well over the mean age now. An accident is bound to get me, sooner or later."

"You're a noble man," I say, as the lift grinds to a halt. He nods with a hint of gratitude and departs. I am left alone for the descent from ninety to the ground floor. I log onto the lifts broadcast unit.

The Mayor appears before me. It's a documentary or a news programme or

something akin. I load-up the commentary. "... Yesterday, Mayor Macaulay showed off the new, extra-thick, rubber walls the city will be installing in all future public projects. Not only are they great insulators, that can alleviate any concerns over random knocks or bumps you might get from a wall, as the highbred Rubber-Concrete™ is as soft as a pillow. Yet another life-preserving policy to be grateful for..." The lift bell rings and I step into the cold grey foyer of the hospital.

It is but two days before I'm back at the hospital again. John's dead. It was accidental, apparently. He went out on his crutches at night and the warden was absent, fixing a broken pipe goes the story – you can never compensate for human error, what with the cutbacks and all! With no supervision and delirious from the drugs, John staggered through the fire doors and tumbled down the stairwell. He was my oldest friend. We graduated on the same day, celebrated our first and second centuries together. We attended one another's various weddings. And now he's gone. I sit beside his still body and shiver.

After dealing with the paperwork and notifying his only living relatives on Earth – some children from the second century who all live overseas – I head out to Icebucks for a coffee and try to compose myself. But I am irreconcilable. Death is just so unfair. It just gets harder and harder. How did our primitive ancestors cope, surrounded by death at every turn? The twentieth century, bloodiest in human history, must have been intolerable.

As the days go by, I sink deeper and deeper into my despair. I sign off from work; they grant me compassionate leave and appoint Jimmy Ledge to monitor me. He denies it of course but companies always worry when workers get depressed. A suicide could cost them an employee with over a century of experience in any given field.

"What you need is a girl. When was the last time you were married?" he asks.

"Eighty years ago."

"Did she have an accident?"

"No we divorced. After a hundred or so years we just ran out of things to say to each other. I think that's pretty typical. We just grew so weary of one another's company. She moved out to Planet Omnipon-8 about sixty-five years back. She'll be arriving there soon, come to think of it."

"I'm sorry but that's a long time ago now. Maybe that's what you're missing in life. You're showing signs of life fatigue. Isolation and intolerance are symptomatic of that. Get yourself some skirt. You're a good looking young guy."

"I'm nearly five hundred."

"Girls like the wisdom of a mature man."

"No, once you get past three hundred or so they start to detect complacency and cynicism. That seen-it-all-before look. I'm stuck in my ways and girls don't like it. Everyone wants something fresh in this day and age."

"Find something new. Learn a dying language, Spanish perhaps? Or take a trip out of the solar system."

"What for?" I sigh.

Jimmy detects my resignation. They call it *spirit damage*. Over the centuries, people experience so much loss and each loss punches a kind of hole into the individual's spirit or if you'd prefer, his or her will to live. Losing my good friend John was like the alcoholics last drop of liquor, the drop that stops the liver. I know Jimmy will report my behaviour to management who will in turn have to mention my mental state to the Mayor's Office. My calls will be tapped, my mind logged into, my movements traced. But I am helpless. I'm borderline suicidal. It's genetic. Both my parents did themselves in and now it's my turn.

Jimmy leaves and I don't bother seeing him to the door. Instead, I pray for an accident. For him or for me, it wouldn't really matter. We both deserve it.

My mind's spinning. Somehow, I unconsciously log onto the net. There's a sitcom set on one of the outer colonies. I think I've seen this episode before. They are all the

same anyway. The comedy is about a family that live on a remote outpost and must frequently travel to neighbouring star systems to buy groceries or do some other menial task. Each week a different member of the family returns home and when they get back of course, many years have elapsed and things have changed. And so a predictable farce ensues.

"I love you."

"I love you too but you see... I'm your grown-up daughter."

Cue canned laughter.

The next week I find myself back in the city hospital once again. I am voluntarily attending counselling so they don't commit me for mandatory correction. My doctor is from the fourth century. I can tell she's a lot younger than I.

"So you see Mister Anchorage, immortality is essential to the advancement of the species. In order to develop expertise in any field we need many decades to study. In order to travel vast distances across space we need to live much longer. This is not the age of the horse and cart you know!"

I've heard it all before but nod and smile receptively. They've prescribed me happy pills, predictably. I'm sent to the three hundredth floor to collect them.

I stroll up to the pharmacy aimlessly and hand the nurse my prescription. It's only when she turns away from me to retrieve my medication that I recognise her. It's the girl from the elevator! I am suddenly flooded by emotions – the type that belongs to the deepest recesses of my memory. How could this be? I'm hypnotised by her sway, fascinated by her movements. I cannot help but gaze at her perfectly straight black hair, her delicate, modest expression.

"Sir, your pills. Um, what are you staring at? Sir, please..."

"A reason to live," I whisper.

"Sir, here is your medicine."

She is coy, embarrassed, but does not retreat. She pulls her hair behind her ear and I notice something, something from the history books, something I know I should report: A wrinkle.

"You're a beatnik!" I whisper, but my voice is devoid of malice or accusation.

"You'll report me?" she asks calmly.

"I won't, if you do one thing for me."

"What?"

"Meet me at Icebucks. One coffee, that's it."

"I finish at five," she says handing me my medication.

"I'll wait for you in the main foyer."

She meets me as casually as she's provided my pills or stepped deftly into the elevator. Some people, I have found, have natural buoyancy. A kind of balance that can't be learnt in a thousand years on this planet.

We round the corner in silence as we head to the nearest Icebucks franchise. But soon we're in deep conversation, our illicit tête-à-tête masked by the sound of the noisy rubber wall construction-work nearby.

"I was raised on The Community."

"What are you doing here, in The City?"

"I was sent here."

"Are there many of your people, I mean here, amongst the immortals?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Watching, learning."

"You're not tempted?"

"Tempted?"

"To have the operation?"

"Never, I shall live out my life as it was meant to be lived."

"Why?"

"We humans have spent our entire history trying to cheat death and denying the essential practices of nature rather than embracing them. That's why we had to leave the Earth, to search for resources. In The Community we live in balance with nature. We live by her rules."

"But we have always been told that the genome operation was the great breakthrough, the realisation of mankind's oldest dream. The operation removed the unfair limitations set by time. Just imagine if Einstein could have lived several centuries, just think what he'd have achieved!" I drop a pill and sip my coffee.

"I'll agree its mankind's oldest dream. The great Chinese unifier Qin Shihuang spent his last unhappy years pursuing the elixir of life. He visited Zhifu Island several times seeking Mount Penglai and the Eight Immortals. He died, somewhat ironically, by swallowing mercury pills that the imperial alchemists believed would make him immortal. His methods were primitive, but the essence of his dreams has not changed: The Chalice of Christ, old Walt Disney in his fridge-freezer – are mutually two sides of same coin. We don't much like dying. Never did."

"So how can you face death?"

"You too will die, don't forget. City dwellers, you never could beat the random nature of the universe. You'll have an accident one way or another. It's inevitable. Just because your cells replicate perfectly doesn't mean there's any more order in the universe. To face life as it was meant to be is liberating in itself. I live without fear, unlike most people in this Godforsaken age of ours."

I am captivated by her eyes, so untainted, so real. She abounds with a vitality that is so distinctly absent in the stony cold commuters of The City. She brushes her hair behind her ear, once again revealing the subtle wrinkles near the edge of her eyes.

"You're showing," I say gesturing to her cheek then touching it. It feels different from any I have touched before.

"I know," she replies self-consciously.

"What will you do?"

"I'll leave soon. My time is done here, my mission complete."

"You'll return to The Community?"

"Yes." She sips the remains of her coffee. "So, will you report me?"

"No." I reply without hesitation.

"I thought not. I can see you're a good man."

My mind is still burning with questions and my heart, my body, every gene I have, yearns for her. I suppress these urges. They'll be another time.

We leave the café together.

"Meet me again?" I ask her. "Just one more time."

"But why?"

"Before you return, I have to ask you something about The Community. You see my friend John, he, well it's complicated. Just one more coffee, what do you say?"

"Okay, just don't report me. Don't speak of me to anyone."

"I won't."

"Same time tomorrow. And tomorrow will be the last time, got it?"

"Got it."

She begins to walk away.

"Hey wait," I call. "What's your name?"

"It's Claire."

"I'm Mike, nice to meet you."

The next day I arrive at Icebucks early. I purchase a coffee and log on to The Times.

A major accident on The Hyper Bridge, ten dead when gale force winds and heavy rains made driving conditions hazardous... Two workers perish on a city wall-building project – an investigation has been launched...

It gets to half-past five and she still hasn't arrived. I grow nervous. *An accident, surely not!* I scan the obituary section of the paper. Sure enough, two of the deaths recorded are listed under **Identity Unknown**. How could one's identity not be known? We are all registered web users. Our I.D. is bar-coded onto our necks and if this were to fail, a simple genetic test would suffice. I log-on and call the hospital pharmacy.

"Hi, could I speak to Claire please?"

"Who is this?"

Sorry, could I just speak to Claire? It's kind of important. I don't wish to discuss my medical situation with a stranger."

"Sir, we request your I.D. number for all enquiries," says a harsh voice. I realize they're probably running a scan, so I quickly log-off.

I am utterly bewildered. Has she returned to The Community? Has an accident befallen her? I order another large coffee, drop a pill and try to get my mind straight. I feel the caffeine surge through my veins, my thoughts race, panic grips me. I gaze out at the absurd rubber walls being built outside. To protect us! Protect us from what? Ourselves...nature...

the natural passage of time...life...

"Excuse me Sir."

"Yes, what is it?"

"You'll have to leave."

"What?"

"It's ten o'clock, we are closing. You have to leave now." The Icebucks waiter gestures towards the door.

"I'm not going out there, I tell him."

"Why not?"

"An accident, I'll have an accident, danger, danger everywhere. Building sites, rivers, trees, bridges... all danger."

"Are you just out from the hospital? Wait there, I'm calling security."

But I'm not moving, I'm waiting for my friend Claire and I'll wait an eternity if that's what it takes.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Bird is a British freelance writer based in Asis. His articles have appeared in CNN, City Weekend, South China Morning Post and other publications. He is the author of three guidebooks. In his spare time he writes speculative fiction. He dreamt up this story after hearing a BBC Radio 4 show that argued that even if we could stop ageing, we couldn't stop accidents. You can find him online at <http://www.facebook.com/thomasbirdwriter>

On nightwater

by Angus Stewart

Angus Stewart first appearance in Fever Dreams was Issue 3 when we published his story *Whistling Pines*. The following extract is taken from the Chapter 6 of his novel *On Nightwater*, which he is currently working towards finishing.



Galbraith found Oén Redfist sat around the back of the beerhall, leaning on the

wall, whittling a wooden block with his pocket knife. The old postman sidled next to him and stood, huddling his jacket against the wind.

Oén glanced up. "For a man of words," he said, "you're incredibly tall."

"Mother stretched me," said Galbraith.

The young Redfist snorted and spun knife in his palm. He continued whittling. Galbraith let him continue and sniffed the town air. Ripe, he thought. Someone was shifting manure down by the market street, and little further down someone else was dealing with human shit. A forlorn grey shape was perched up on a fence, watching them from across the way.

That bloody cat, thought Galbraith. He looked back down to Oén Refist, an altogether easier creature.

"How many years since you were born, Oén?"

"Twenty four."

"Right. So that places you five older than Finn-Galénn."

"A lot happens in five years."

Galbraith tapped his boots. "Clearly. And a lot happens in a week too."

Oén Redfist grunted approval. "Sit down if you like, postman."

Brennan slid down the wall and produced a little knife of his own. "Is it still sharp?" asked. "Sometimes I can't tell." He passed it by the handle to the Redfist.

Oén compared the two blades. "It's not bad," he concluded eventually.

"Good," said Brennan. He breathed in again and pulled his jacket tighter. He took back the knife. "It's my letter opener," he added.

Oén guffawed. "No-one will tell me, Galbraith. Are you a postman or a diplomat?"

"Simple: I'm both."

"And Kellic or a Dirl?"

"Less simple: I'm neither."

Oén nodded and resumed whittling. "Aye. That's good I suppose. Us Redfists have never been keen on our western neighbours."

"One can't control a bad history," said Galbraith. "But then again, one can do one's bit to rewrite it...or forget. One might argue that the mutual wounds on both sides of the border ought to have healed by now."

Oén bowed his chin. "Perhaps." He paused and let the tool drag along the blade. It produced a thin, scraping noise. The far cat paid notice, and Oén caught its wide black stare.

"You're making a mistake with all this, you know," said Galbraith. "Your voting pattern."

Oén paid no notice. He was watching the cat. His delayed reply came slow and careful.

"I'm still reeling from the messenger's news,

Galbraith. Don't you feel the same, to some extent? Dirlic legions on the border, and my father ready to fight them. It's a grim and foreboding, but at the same time...I find it exciting. It's a chance to set things right for good."

"A single legion," corrected Galbraith, "and it won't be exciting."

"Whatever the outcome?"

"Whatever the outcome. Bloodletting is drudgery, not adventure, and this righteousness that you are chasing can only belong to those left standing at the end of the battle. The righteous are more often than not the cowards, murderers, and thieves who got away. More often than not it's to them we owe our descent. Even Ken-Galénn was a traitor, and the thief of a Dirlic province, if you look at it in a certain way. Wouldn't you say?"

"If you look at it that way," Oén Redfist agreed, grudgingly.

Galbraith continued.

"And then the real twist, the bitterness at the bottom of it all: the victor survives, but only to face down the next set of woes, conflicts, and grievances. And if he survives those too, it just goes on, again and again until he crumbles. So it went with the Galénns. They began strong and near faultless, but the faults accumulate. Their strength now falters. The revolution counts for something, then dissolves into nothing."

"Ken's revolution changed everything," said Oén.

"And yours' won't. Your people can beat back a few of the Dirlic legions with fire and blood, Oén Redfist, I don't doubt it, but you will never chase away the wickedness of the world in a few border scuffles. You'll kill people and cause pain. Nought else."

The young Redfist looked down.

Galbraith wondered whom the young man had lost, if anyone, and continued.

"The world is a rotting tree, filled with putrescence, and mankind is trapped in the trunk. The rot and filth slides slowly to the bottom, Oén, down the cold surface of the bark, and those best accustomed to the filth steel themselves, grip hard on the surface, and climb right to the top. More often than not, anyway. You can turn the sword on the powerful, and all those you see as the oppressor, but you won't purge the filth. Take a look around you, at the shit on the very streets...you can only manage it. Nothing in our world will ever be clean or simple. The world is foul and complex. That's Infheicthe. Let the Border Guard sort out the mess on the border. They are the masters of boredom, and filth."

"Perhaps you have a point," said Oén, after a moment of silence, and the grey cat padded over. "Though...I think life in Serena's courts may have coloured your views for the worse."

Galbraith cackled, and welcomed the cat-begrudgingly- onto his lap. He heard it purr for the first time.

"You have a friend," said the Redfist.

"I met her on arrival," said Galbraith, "and then again, in the aftermath of the raid."

"A resilient animal, then. Or at least persistent."

"No doubt about it."

The grey cat rolled, and Galbraith scruffed at its belly.

"What made you side with the Kestrel?" he said, his eyes casual and on the cat.

Oén hummed and paused before he reached his answer. "He's a friend of the Redfists. And he's good at cutting through the shit."

"Aha. And you think this entire council is shit,

is that it? I wouldn't blame you."

Oén tossed the knife and caught it spinning. "I've seen demos before," he said. "I live in the northwest. I live and breathe demos. So when I see that sad, scruffy council gathered in that dark little room, I know that it is demos done wrong. No offence to you, postman."

"None taken."

"I'm voting alongside the Old Kestrel and that angry fishergirl because I see mess that we are in, like you say, and I want the slate wiped clean. Or...as clean as it can be. Manage the filth, so to speak. I want more riders sent after the king and his gold, and now I know that there's Dirlic soldiers waiting to knock down our doors, and want to see all of the warbands in every county made ready."

"But you don't want war."

Oén froze the tool on its stroke down the knife. "I...I don't. But I will see where the Infheicthe takes us."

"That is a wise enough stance. Just remember that if all the power slides into the hands of Brennan, then we shall have war without any question. He is a man whose wounds have never healed, and worse: who lets his wounds motivate his action. I know that the Redfists are better than him, in that regard. I want you to remember that I feel that way."

"I will." Oén nodded.

Galbraith let a silence pass. He stroked the cat, then spoke again.

"By the by. Now tell me. Do you have a Fjurd in your employ?"

Oén half smiled. "I have a Fjurd, but not in my employ."

"Has she a name or a rank? Anything like that?"

"Tyrra. She is an observer from the Sâlwegen

coast, afflicted with the wanderlust. She says it is a common illness up north-way.”

“Indeed?” said Galbraith. “I know a Fjurd just like that.”

“She’s away from me right now,” said Oén, and Galbraith heard the fondness in his voice. “She’s at the inn you’ve made bed at, actually, speaking to a man she referred to as...what was it? As yes. Culfer.”

“Culfer!” said Galbraith, and he shot up, spilling the strange grey cat onto Oén Redfist’s lap.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Angus is an aspiring writer, hobbyist photographer, and undergraduate student of English and Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is originally from Dundee, Scotland and has been living in Manchester, England since the summer of 2011. He recently self published a collection of short stories to the kindle ebook store, and is now working on his first novel. Rumours are it's in the fantasy genre.

In no particular order Angus enjoys beer, good friends, close family, peculiarities, and his small border collie named Jan. You can find his online hiding places here: www.about.me/angoos

SUBMISSIONS

That is all the fiction for Issue Five Thank you to all the authors who submitted their work and we hope you enjoyed it. If you want to have your story appear in our fiction clinic, have a story that you would like to see appear in a future issue or a novel in development that you would like to share an extract from then please have a look at the submissions guidelines on the web site:

fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html

REVIEWS

In the forest of Fairfold, a boy with horns and pointed ears rests in a glass coffin. He has been there, unconscious, for as long as anyone can remember. The children of Fairfold imagine the horned boy a prince, trapped in the coffin. But one day, he wakes.

This book is written entirely in third person, and focuses on Hazel's viewpoint. She wants to serve, protect and defend. While she does this she kisses a lot of boys, but she doesn't want a

The Darkest Part of the Forest

Holly Black

Little Brown Books

serious relationship with anyone. Yet she's also in love with one of them - Jack, a changeling, brought to the human world by his mother in exchange for a human boy.

If her relationship issues weren't enough there is a creature in Fairfold that must be stopped. There is also a powerful sword, a faerie ritual and a crazed king...

At first, things are pretty slow, because Black was setting up the scene. and there is a lot of flashbacks in this book, but they are marked and very obvious, and don't last long. Black does an excellent job of constructing the world and placing all of the fantasy elements, in her modern world. Excellent work, Holly Black!

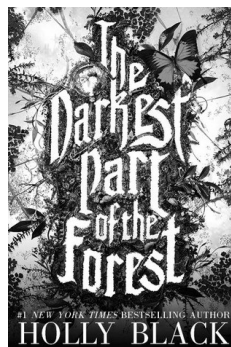
Splintered

A.G. Howard

Amulet Books

Alyssa Gardner hears the whispers of bugs and flowers—precisely the affliction that landed her mother in a mental hospital years before. This family curse stretches back to her ancestor Alice Liddell, the real-life inspiration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alyssa might be crazy, but she manages to keep it together. For now.

When her mother's mental health takes a turn for the worse, Alyssa learns that what she thought was fiction is based in terrifying reality. The real Wonderland is a place far darker and more twisted than Lewis Carroll ever let on. There, Alyssa must pass a series of tests, including draining an ocean of Alice's tears, waking the slumbering tea party, and subduing a vicious bandersnatch, to fix Alice's mistakes and save her family.



REVIEWS by Martin Williams

I was hesitant to read it because of the Alice association but *Splintered* is a great companion read to Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* without disrespecting the original text in any way. It's not a re-telling or re-envisioning but an original work and in A.G. Howard's hands, the allusions to the original story are treated with respect.

A delicious, disturbing, mad and wonderful read. I can't recommend it highly enough. Masterfully done.

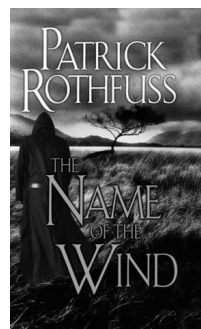
THE NAME OF THE WIND

Patrick Rothfuss

Gollancz

Told in Kvothe's own voice, this is the tale of the magically gifted young man who grows to be the most notorious wizard his world has ever seen. The intimate narrative of his childhood in a troupe of traveling players, his years spent as a near-feral orphan in a crime-ridden city, his daringly brazen yet successful bid to enter a legendary school of magic, and his life as a fugitive after the murder of a king form a gripping coming-of-age story unrivaled in recent literature.

On many levels, the story of Kvothe is a familiar one. Gifted orphan goes off to magical school and becomes a hero. I know I've heard that plotline before. And some of the events of the book were a bit predictable as a result. But it doesn't matter. This isn't a book you read to discover what's go-



ing to happen; you read to discover how things will happen, and to appreciate Rothfuss' storytelling. This is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, though this book doesn't end so much as it simply stops, I don't feel a powerful urge to run out and grab the second book.

The cultures, geography and characters are amazingly well developed but often this doesn't show through because of the writer's simplistic prose style. A near miss but a very near one.

THE WHALE KINGDOM QUEST

Ming Wei

Austin Macauley

The world under the sea is as disparate and conflicted as the human race that once walked the land. Warring factions make tenuous alliances and fight for their right to remain in this new world. The whale Tenby searches for the last remaining humans, but do any remain? And if they do, will he survive long enough to find them?

I'll be honest, the idea of a post apocalyptic science fiction novel written from the point of sealife didn't inspire. That said I enjoyed the story, it makes a nice change to have major characters that are not human.

The story depicts an undersea animal society run by animals which are uncannily human-like in some places. One example of this anthropomorphism is a library where the



whales store their documents. Wei goes to great lengths to details the nature of whale language and documentation in order to prevent this images becoming comical and largely succeeds.

The didacticism was a little jarring with its message about the dangers of environmental change but not so much that it impacted on my enjoyment of the story. The ending leaves a little to be desired, but the idea of the whole story makes up for that

REVIEWS by Martin Williams

FILM REVIEW



THE WOMAN IN BLACK: ANGEL OF DEATH

January 2015

by Andrew Mackay

The Woman in Black 2: Angel of Death is set forty years after the events of the first film. During World War II, a couple of children who have nowhere to go & since their parents can't leave London, are sent to a house in the country. This happens to be Eel Marsh house. The children go there with caretakers, Eve Parkins (Phoebe Fox) & Jean Hogg (Helen McCrory). Once they're in the house, Eve & a child named Edward (Oaklee Pendergast) experience strange events happening in the house presumably caused by an ominous presence that's lurking about.

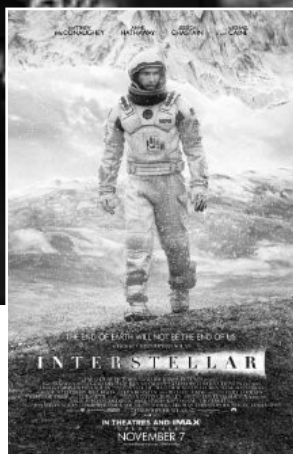
These seems like a promising setup for a second film in the franchise however the movie hardly lives up to the ghost of the first movie and I couldn't believe it was truly a sequel. Despite mixed critical reviews for the first movie, I found *Woman in Black* to have an eerie atmosphere that endeared the movie to me. The mixture of atmosphere, suspense and unpredictability produced

by the movie created genuine scares and an intriguing plot. In contrast this movie solely relies on jump scares to frighten the viewers. Though it works sometimes, it gets repetitive & predictable very quickly. The original has many genuinely scary scenes that are terrifying even without the sudden jolt of a sound effect. This movie didn't have me on the edge of my seat at any point.

Despite the fact the same house was used in both films, it comes across as an anaemic shell that is often fully and over exposed. To be fair to the director, I cannot fathom any story that could possibly continue the much maligned conclusion given to the first movie, and its obvious that the writers of the screenplay couldn't figure it out either. This is less of a sequel and more of a movie set in the same universe with little or no ties to the first save the ghost of the woman in black.

A fun film that fails to live up to its predecessor.

FILM REVIEW



Christopher Nolan is known for making ripples when he tries a new film genre. In *The Dark Knight* he changed a rapidly stagnating superhero genre. So when I first heard that Christopher Nolan was preparing a sci-fi movie, I was very excited. I had high expectations for *Interstellar*.

First, this film is incredibly beautiful. The way Nolan decided to shoot some scenes was reminiscent of Kubrick's classic *2001 A Space Odyssey*. The techniques he used contribute to create that his visual environment in a believable and stunningly attractive way.

Second, Hans Zimmer's soundtrack is mesmerizing. It is as important as any other part of the movie. The scores are breathtaking and epic, as befits a film of this standard.

These two parts create a stunning experience that takes you out of the cinema and sucks you into space.

INTERSTELLAR

NOVEMBER 2014

by Andrew Mackay

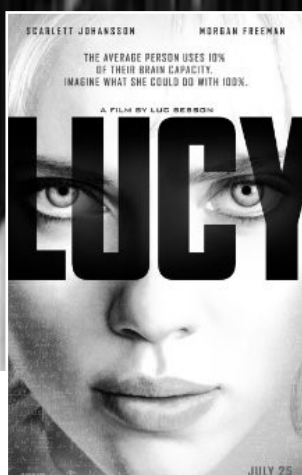
During the fifties, Asimov laid the foundations of modern science fiction. Lucas and Kubrick did the same in cinema. Today, Nolan is laying the new foundations of the genre, simultaneously challenging and proving what can be done.

Beneath the sci-fi, this is a story about humanity. While Matthew McConaughey and Anne Hathaway may seem like unlikely choices they are convincing in their roles and relationship.

As difficult as it may be, I strongly advise people not to compare this film to Kubrick's *2001 Space Odyssey*, nor should you compare Kubrick to Nolan. I have no doubt that many people will say that this film and its director are overrated. I don't think so and only time will tell who is right.

This is the sci-fi movie of the decade, and probably the best movie Nolan ever made.

ON DVD



LUCY

DECEMBER 2014

by Andrew Mackay

When this film arrived in cinemas it received some scathing reviews and I went to this film with very mixed feelings. I certainly knew better than to expect a serious Sci-Fi film but I actually wasn't quite sure what to else expect other than it had been directed by Luc Besson.

Sometimes that's a good thing though. It's because I was expecting to be disappointed that I was so pleasantly surprised. *Lucy* delivers a fast paced, crazy ride from start to finish and I'm sure that if it were based on a comic book that people would be less critical. Let's be honest: from a scientific point of view, the stories of Captain America, Superman, Thor, the Hulk, Iron Man, Spider Man and the X-Men are all as silly as the premise for *Lucy*.

Lets be clear. I love *The Fifth Element* because of the science fiction elements but it was just as over-the-top and most people seemed to have really enjoyed it. The way I see it, *Lucy* is simply Besson's

take on the superhero movie and towards the end of the film, the title character actually comes across like a female version of Dr Manhattan.

While many aspects of *Lucy* are silly, it is also visually stunning. The story is original and attempts to throw in some interesting philosophical concepts and questions. If you watch it for what it is, a fun, fast summer movie with inventive visuals, then its very enjoyable. It may not rank alongside *The Matrix* or *Blade Runner* but *Lucy* is still packed with enough creative ideas and great action scenes that you feel like you got your money's worth.

It's rare enough these days to get an original Fantasy/Sci-Fi tale with a decent budget. This one may not be as good as it could have been but its far from the disaster that some critics make it out to be. Deserving of a place on any DVD shelf.

GAME REVIEWS

THE EVIL WITHIN

TANGO GAMEWORKS

OCTOBER 2014



REVIEW by Dylan Harris

When the closing screen of *The Evil Within* finally appeared on my screen it was to inform me of the number of times I had been eaten alive, had my head shattered, and my torso sliced into pieces. This game does not suffer fools gladly, yet I was compelled to return to it after each death much as I was when I played *Resident Evil 2* so many years ago. That, I believe, is the highest compliment I can pay this game.

The Evil Within is aesthetically, functionally and spiritually the successor to a franchise that director Shinji Mikami's last visited with the iconic *Resident Evil 4*. It's not simply a rehash of the *Resident Evil* franchise though. Mikami and his new development studio Tango Gameworks have delivered a harder, bleaker game this time around that has more in common visually with *Silent Hill* than with *Resident Evil*.

The game is driven by a slow, sustained, and deeply pervasive sense of dread that sets your mind racing at every crunch of glass beneath your feet and every distant groan from an unseen enemy. This tension is thanks to the game's striking use of atmosphere. The game is so dark and gloomy that it often borders on suffocating, but it's also down to a combat system where scant ammunition and the ever present and immediate threat of death is just as demanding as it is satisfying. Its those occasional stumbles into moments of immense frustration that make this game one you will either love or hate.

At the centre of the game is Detective Sebastian Castellanos. He is called in to investigate a vicious multiple homicide at Beacon Mental Hospital. The brief preamble leading up to this investigation is the calm



before *The Evil Within's* storm. Not that the plot is a strikingly original work for the horror genre. Its central mystery starts off as compelling but gradually veers off course, tumbling through a twisted and often incoherent story involving supernatural apparitions and gruesome monsters.

In part, this narrative wrapper is punctured by the wooden Sebastian Castellanos, who is emotionless and cool to the point of parody. He continues to quip "what is going on here?" after hours of facing the kind of monsters that would drive the average person into a jabbering wreck. This detachment is likely put down to his dark past while he claims in an in-game journal that "it's so easy to drown my thoughts in whiskey."

While the world lacks context, it doesn't lack impact. *The Evil Within* is a horror experience built on an outstanding level of design. Whether it has you exploring a derelict hospital ward splattered with blood and overturned wheelchairs, a ravaged urban centre where aquatic monsters patrol its flooded streets, or even that most weathered of survival horror settings, the creepy mansion, *The Evil Within* transports you

through a diverse assortment of places with one theme tying them all together: an absolutely terrifying sense of atmosphere. The usual horror clichés have been twisted and contorted in imaginative ways with the aid of excellent lighting becoming claustrophobic and labyrinthian. Despite a little roughness around the edges the game has been beautifully designed.

There's more to contend with than the environment. *The Evil Within* is full of grotesque, unpredictable and smart creatures just looking for a chance to rend you limb from limb. There are the vaguely human monsters, reminiscent of the ganados of *Resident Evil 4*, that populate early chapters, wielding hatchets and hurling sticks of dynamite, but as the game wears on you are pitted against increasingly nasty and challenging foes heavily inspired by Japanese horror movies.

No matter where you are in the game's lengthy story, death is never far around the corner. *The Evil Within* is a brutal experience where the slightest lapse in concentration can turn you into a pool of viscera on the ground. As a result, caution and patience are your greatest allies in this fight for survival. Every



handgun round is precious and every healing syringe feels like it could be your last. As stingy as the game is with its resources, it's also rich in choice. Will you use that one remaining bullet to go for a headshot, or shoot your foe in the leg before rushing up and burning it with a match? Do you throw a bottle to lure that creature toward a trip wire booby trap, or risk dismantling the trap yourself and using those parts to craft a new crossbow bolt? The whole game is littered with these tense decisions, always forcing you to be creative and resourceful with the way you approach each fight. But when your craftiness pays off and you manage to scrape through an encounter with your body intact, the payoff is immense.

The Evil Within does a remarkable job of pushing you to your limit, but there are moments when it crosses that line and the experience suffers for it. One of the biggest culprits is the autosave system, a finicky and unpredictable thing that doesn't seem to behave by any consistent logic. It generally records your progress after major encounters, but there are times it saves your game mid-battle for no apparent reason, and others when it's been so long since you saw that little

icon on the screen that you often find yourself playing through certain stretches again and again for no clear reason, the game's striking atmosphere becoming a little less impressive each time through.

A similar issue plagues some of the boss battles. The bosses are suitably terrifying, twisted monsters capable of making you shiver at the mere sight of them. Some of them make for great encounters, forcing you to take the same wits and creativity you've been refining in basic combat and dial them up to a whole new level but others require you to perform these very specific, very obtuse secondary goals hidden somewhere in the environment. It's these fights that you need to plow through over and over and over until you figure out the right process, a chore made even more tedious by the game's glacial load times and habit of repeating the same boss introduction cinematic.

All in all, *The Evil Within* is a satisfying if slightly blemished return to classic survival horror.



ARTICLE by Ruaraidh Cresswell

While the games industry loves to imitate and reiterate, it is interesting to notice that many of Nintendo's most renowned series have little or no meaningful competition. Attempts at producing a "Mario 64 killer" during the PS1/N64 era came to nothing and the tide of "casual" shovelware that came to tarnish the image of the DS and Wii was near completely devoid of craft or budget. *The Legend of Zelda* and *Metroid* series are perhaps the best example of this. While plenty of games share superficial themes in common with these, very little attempt is ever made to emulate their core design and gameplay values.

Zelda games may feature high fantasy fairytale worlds and the use of swords and magic, but they have little in common with the popular RPGs they frequently draw comparison with. Indeed the design philosophy underpinning the *Zelda* is completely at odds with the likes of *Final Fantasy*, *Elder Scrolls* and

Diablo. Alongside *Super Metroid*, the 20 year old classics *Link to the Past* and *Link's Awakening* showcased the very finest in 2d level design. The 3D reinvention of *Ocarina of Time* was one of the most anticipated games ever released and was not only the defining 3D *Zelda* game but also set standards and concepts that would be profoundly influential to 3d game development for decades to come, a reputation that was only cemented further by the recent 3DS re-release.

As a series with over 25 years of history, and with Nintendo's refusal to rush new installments, there is considerable experimentation and evolution with each new game. However, the adherence to key design motifs has led to accusations of stagnation leaving a modern *Zelda* game with an impossible balance to strike; to appease both a divided fanbase and a mass market that rewards a mind-set contrary to what made *Zelda* so compelling to begin with. Attempting to

“modernise” the series through incorporating the current obsession with escalating loot and experience systems, as well as the desire for increasingly expansive worlds, would most likely only serve to dilute a carefully honed and delicate formula. About the only major attempt at following the 3D *Zelda* and *Metroid* approach to world design in recent years would be cult favourite *Dark Souls* with its labyrinthine world resembling a dark fantasy *Metroid Prime* as much as *Zelda* or any RPG. Even then this was a game centred almost entirely around combat with very little of the puzzle element crucial to its Nintendo inspirations.

Despite all this, it is generally recognised that the 3D *Zelda* series on Nintendo's home consoles have gone from strength to strength with each new instalment providing a major new twist in control, visual style and world design that has led to consistently great reviews and solid sales. On the other hand, the 2D handheld titles have perhaps lost their way a little since the Game Boys *Link's Awakening*. Many of these games featured strong ideas of their own such as *Oracle of Seasons'* ability to change the time of year and affect the layout of the world, shrinking and exploring a miniature world in *Minish Cap* and *Phantom Hourglass'* recurring time limited stealth based dungeon the Temple of the Ocean King. Sadly, they all felt a little half baked and unfinished and ultimately took a back seat to the 2D classics and the modern 3D adventures. *A Link Between Worlds* rectifies this trend, receiving the full attention of Eiji Aonuma and his team at Nintendo and becoming a game among the very finest of the franchise.

Recent console *Zelda* games like *Twilight Princess* and *Skyward Sword* have shown no lack of brilliant content

but have also suffered a little from feature creep and conflicting ambitions. As flagship console titles they are expected to exhibit cinematic storytelling and large visually impressive worlds. Open world games such as *Elder Scrolls* and Nintendo's own *Xenoblade Chronicles* generally struggle to fill their expansive environments with unique and meaningful content and have to rely on repetitive monster slaying and loot gathering to fill in the space and time. *Wind Waker* and *Twilight Princess* suffered from diluting their otherwise expertly crafted content to chase an illusion of scale and while *Skyward Sword* chose the more condensed approach to world building it still suffered from unnecessary filler, intrusive story scenes and pacing issues. *A Link Between Worlds* has boldly chosen to tackle these issues head on and created a game who's back to basics approach also proves refreshingly forward thinking.

The Legend of Zelda series plays fast and loose with its own continuity with a different Link in a different time exploring a reimagined Hyrule or different setting altogether in each new game. *A Link Between Worlds* is unusual in that it is not only a direct follow up to *A Link to the Past* but also takes place in the same world. This is definitely a sequel and not a remake however while the overworld of Hyrule follows the same basic geography as its predecessor the content is entirely new. Dungeons may be found in familiar locations but have been completely redesigned and the parallel world of Lorule, while taking certain themes from *A Link to the Past's* dark world, is wholly original.

Compared to the popular trend in RPG game design, *A Link Between Worlds* comes as a stark contrast in scale, structure and speed of gameplay. This is a game that makes no attempt to

compete in terms of square mileage or hours of gameplay. Every element has been refined and distilled down with near zero repetition or redundancy and it is immediately obvious that even the most trivial detail has been hand crafted and positioned with utmost care and attention to detail. Gameplay progresses at a much faster pace as well with snappy controls and a refreshing refusal to get bogged down in the time wasting tutorials and cinematics that came to hurt the pacing of the likes of *Twilight Princess* and *Skyward Sword*. Indeed, *A Link Between Worlds* comes to tell an economically presented and touching tale with a surprising and moving ending, even if it suffers from a somewhat weak villain.

Progression in a Zelda game has always been defined by a careful balance of the players evolving toolset, the worlds design as a web of interlocking environmental puzzles and the structure of the story. *A Link Between Worlds* makes some important breaks from tradition in these respects. Whereas previously new equipment was usually found in the dungeons that revolved around their use, here they are acquired by the travelling rabbit-suited entrepreneur and squatter, Ravio, who will initially lend you equipment crucial to progress for a fairly trivial fee. This allows the freedom to access more of the map from the outset than would be usual in a Zelda game. This carries the risk of losing your rented items and having to re-pay the rental fee on death, but this is avoidable unless the player is reckless. After a relatively linear opening act that follows the Zelda tradition of obtaining 3 macguffins to prove your heroism, the remaining majority of the game is left open for the player to approach as they please. Previously rentable equipment is now available for permanent ownership at a heftier fee,

and the player will have acquired villain Yuga's party trick, trapping his victims in 2 dimensional paintings, for use on their own terms thanks to an unassuming bracelet donated by Ravio.

This latter trick is a major contributor to *A Link Between Worlds*'s greatest strength. Zelda games have always made playing with space and time integral to the gameplay and story. *A Link to the Past* laid the groundwork with its multi-layered 2D puzzles and the dark world, a corrupted parallel Hyrule that the player could portal to in order to solve cross dimensional puzzles. *Ocarina of Time* not only reinvented the series in polygonal 3D but added the dimension of time travel with Link alternating between a younger and older self. *Majora's Mask* would take the concept further exploring a repeating 3 day cycle before an impending doomsday that provided both gameplay ramifications and a source of emotional tension in one of Zelda's darkest and most experimental entries.

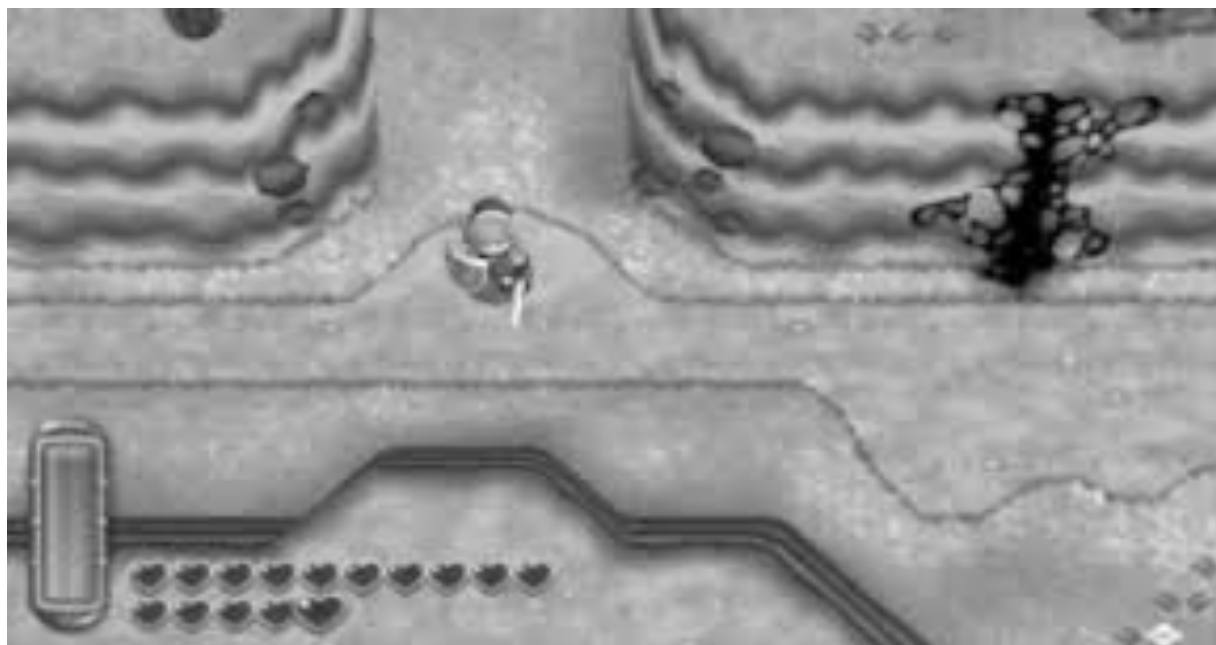
While time is not a factor in *A Link Between Worlds*, and it builds on the 2D framework of *A Link To The Past*, this is perhaps ironically the most 3 dimensional *Zelda* games yet. Being rendered in stereo 3d on the 3DS in an overhead perspective accentuates the layered nature of the world and the ability to judge depth definitely factors into dungeon and puzzle design. Once Link has acquired Ravio's bracelet, he can then merge with any smooth vertical surface and traverse horizontally as a living mural, opening up the worlds very walls for navigation and shifting the camera closer to show the environment from a whole new perspective. This ability is incorporated into exploration and puzzle solving throughout the entire game, and is used to access the fissures serving as portals to and from Lorule.

Lorule is *A Link Between Worlds* equivalent to the dark world in *A Link to the Past* and becomes accessible past the opening chapters of the game. Populated by well meaning if not a little twisted characters as well as the expected monsters, Lorule is suggestive of a world fallen into decline rather than the product of a villains work and plays host to the majority of the games challenge. Most of the major dungeons are to be found here and by this stage the player will find they have freedom to approach the task of breaching their depths and rescuing the sages within them in an order of their choosing.

Zelda dungeons hinge less on monster encounters than they do solving inventive puzzles that can intertwine and encompass the entire dungeon map and these are among the finest the series has ever seen. Each dungeon follows the series tradition of puzzles requiring a particular piece of equipment relevant to the dungeons theme, and while the freedom to tackle them in any order does flatten the difficulty curve, if anything it helps their quality feel even more

uniformly high. Although there is hardly a shortage of monsters to squash, this is not a game intent on punishment and frequent deaths in the vein of *Dark Souls* would probably serve only to break the players train of thought while dungeon puzzling and hurt the pacing and sense of immersion. Dungeon bosses are present more as combat puzzles than damage sponges. A "Hero Mode", unlocked on completion, quadruples enemy damage output and disables health drops for masochistic players making one hit deaths a real danger, but it is probably for the best this is not the default setting for the game.

While not difficult in the punishing sense, *A Link Between Worlds* reigns back the exposition and hand holding modern *Zelda* games have become increasingly prone to and places its confidence firmly in the players intelligence. A hint system exists for use at the players discretion and is kept just out of immediate reach to avoid spoiling the joy of exploration and discovery that makes it all so engaging. It may come as a shock to discover you can cross the overworld in the space of a



minute, but then you spend hours engrossed in plumbing its depths and secrets. Being only a few steps away from something new and potentially useful lends exploration a highly addictive kid-in-a-candy store quality to the extent that taking breaks may prove necessary to pace the experience. Not content to simply tie rewards to mindless killing and looting, each upgrade is tied to its own environmental micro-puzzle and solving these provides a feeling of reward surpassing the value of the items themselves. One advantage of the player driven equipment system is that it allows players to thoroughly explore and kit themselves out with weapon, health and other upgrades before they even step foot in a major dungeon, this is in contrast to earlier *Zelda* games where there was a frustrating tendency to lock off most of the upgrades until well into the latter half of the games.

There is a price, albeit one worth paying, for a game with this quality of design. It stands to reason that if you remove all grinding and repetition, speed up the pace of core gameplay and keep features of interest packed as tightly as possible with no wastage and filler, then you are going to have a game that can't compete in terms of sheer hours of gameplay versus its supposed peers, but this undiluted approach still yields 20 or more hours of gameplay with qualities sadly all too rare in the current gaming climate.

Finally, this is a game that puts function before flashiness in terms of presentation. While it suffers in stills like all 3DS games, the glossy 3D interpretation of *A Link To The Past*'s style means *A Link Between Worlds* is smooth, crisp, colourful and unashamedly gamey looking on its native 3DS display. It feels like a missed opportunity not to follow the 2D cartoon



style of *Wind Waker* and *Minish Cap*, though this is understandable given the need to accentuate the 3D, and the crisp depth and solidity is further enhanced by the decision to run the game at 60 frames per second. Musically it delivers exactly what you would hope. Leaning heavily towards modernised classic tunes while avoiding sounding too dated or twee and also keeping the orchestral bombast on a tight leash.

This is a charmingly modest but fantastically ambitious game that takes every lesson it can from the 25 year history of its series, while jettisoning the baggage it has accumulated along the way. E3 2014 showed us a glimpse into the future of home console *Zelda*, and *A Link Between Worlds* has crafted an excellent template for the series going forward. For gaming to evolve and diversify, it is perhaps more essential than ever that games and their developers build upon the essence that made them special to begin with rather than blindly compromising in order to chase popular trends. *A Link Between Worlds* makes does not try to be a *Final Fantasy* or an *Elder Scrolls* or a *Diablo* or a *Dark Souls*. It completely succeeds at being *Zelda*.