

TIGERSHARK Magazine



Issue Eight – Winter 2015 – Beneath Earth & Sea

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Beneath Earth & Sea

Editorial

We continue our explorations from issue seven by descending deep below the earth and the sea in search of places where humanity has yet to trespass...

Best, DS Davidson

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Next Issue's Theme:

Death & Disaster

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deep under ocean
just below gaseous vents
house size creature eggs

Alien attack
Life forms under the oceans
Humans unaware

By Denny E. Marshall

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Tidal Forces

By Neil K. Henderson

I.	<p>Thrown into darkness? Did we fall? The moon swore blind the clouds saw all: in bivalve swerve of ocean light, the "pathos be damned" of avarice.</p> <p>To the last of its kind, each will be its own - the hard road eased us down to calm, though pressures strove to cleave the land and footfalls beached on shifting stones. Cold tides recoiled, yet would not yield - "We never rose to be forgot, nor lived to sell out memory: we seek a diehard sovereignty."</p>	II.	<p>Then leaden sluggards seeped uphill, to worship at the stool of goats - such weeping on the mountain's back would snap the spines of surrogates! Those moon-protected soapsud clouds surged up to stifle higher thoughts, intent on drowning hope of growth in poison of some new disgrace.</p> <p>In greener times, when men were fleshed, we traded glances with the stars. By dawn, the waters stand enslaved, while truth falls foul of opiates.</p>
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Bathyscaphe Blues

By Phil Breach

The porthole is but seven inches wide.
Hunched before its pachydermal pane,
I gaze upon the ruin of outside,
The circle blurred by greasy, streaking rain.

She's called the Belemnite, this rusting hulk.
We hang above the roiled soiled sea,
Shaking in the belly of her bulk,
Jarring down by ratcheted degree.

We make the waves. She hits and rolls and sinks,
Bowling us with bile-rising motion.
Somewhere up above a clasp unlinks,
And drops us deep and down the dying ocean.

Daylight swift recedes. The lamps come on.
The superstructure creaks, the engines whine.
There's none who care, who'll mourn us where we've gone,
Or save us from the crushing of the brine.

Diving Helmet

By DJ Tyrer

Polished brightly
The brazen helmet unyielding
As futuristic in its day
As a spacesuit is today
Not too dissimilar
Inventive minds tread similar paths
To allow the exploration
Of the final frontier
As above so below



No Portholes, No Natural Light, No Room to Move, and No Escape

By DJ Tyrer

It seems unlikely anyone will ever read this log that I am writing, but I must pray that someone does. My name is Commander Jacob Hackett and I am the skipper of this S-Boat, the S-7, and I was carrying out the routine order of piloting the S-Boat from the New London Navy Yard to that at Philadelphia for decommissioning. Aboard was a skeleton crew of two officers and ten men.

We were halfway to our intended destination before... all hell broke loose – I can offer no explanation as to what occurred.

Sailing in an S-Boat is terrible! No portholes, no natural light, no room to move and no escape. Just a tiny artificial world where anything can go wrong.

I have to get...

No, I mustn't start... I...

It is at least an hour since I last tried to write this. I don't think there can be much air left. I am going to die. But, I'll finish this first. I will.

God save me!

We were a little over halfway through our voyage when the Radio Officer, Stephenson, who also listens to the hydrophones, reported an object, similar in size to the S-7, travelling parallel to us. I commanded him to monitor it and he did so for several minutes until, suddenly, it began moving towards us. I grabbed the attack periscope and angled it, searching for the object. We were just below the surface and visibility was short. But, before I saw anything, I felt the boat rock as something struck it. I lost my footing and fell, the deck suddenly slanting below our feet as we began to be dragged down...

Down.

I ordered the engines reversed, but they merely squealed in protest, unable to extricate us from the impossible force that held us. Not being on active service, we had no stocks of torpedoes and were totally defenceless. We had no choice but to futilely try the engines and hope for the best...

Not that the best came...

No. We just continued to sink inexorably downwards...

Soon, we passed our safety limit of 200 feet, but still we kept sinking down... I could see the panic in the men's eyes. I knew it was mirrored in mine.

There was movement outside. The sound of something moving over the hull. Dull thuds and scuttling sounds. A creaking as the stout valve on the conning tower hatch was tried by... what? I tried both periscopes, but both were dark, revealing nothing of the threat.

We were at about 300 feet when the engines exploded with the strain we had placed on them. The hull ruptured and water began to flood into the engine room, which we moved quickly to seal. The batteries!

We lost four of the men in there to flame or water...

But, still we moved down and, soon, the hull began to creak with the increased pressure of the ocean depths. Rivets popped to release fountains of saltwater. We lost Lieutenant Hastings to a bullet-like rivet and the men began to grow very panicked. Death seemed imminent.

One of the men, maybe driven mad by fear, produced a revolver and began demanding that we surface and that we return home. Stephenson tried to calm him, while I and the others stood stupefied, but he received a bullet to the chest for his trouble. The hydrophone and radio behind him exploded under the impacts of further bullets.

“Get him!” I shouted, no longer still.

Bodily, we ran forward, one man falling to the lunatic’s final bullet before someone succeeded in stabbing him to death.

And, still downwards we proceeded...

The hull was screaming, now, with the pressure and it seemed that any moment the S-7 should be torn asunder... already, we stood knee-deep in brine. We had sealed off all by the control room and crew space beside it to keep out water.

And, still, the infernal sound of movement came from outside...

I was startled out of my reverie by further gunshots.

Two men lay dead, colouring the water red with their blood. One obviously a suicide – maybe the other had paid the ultimate price for trying to prevent his comrade’s death. Too weary to care, I left the bodies to float where they lay in the deepening murky water.

Shortly afterwards, the water finally shorted the current supplying our emergency lights – miracle they lasted so long! – plunging us into obscene, dank night, chest-deep in water.

It was no longer certain we were trapped by the thing that held us. All we did know was that we were dying...

I sat for what seemed like years, perched on what I don’t know, in that darkness, in silence, before remembering the emergency hurricane lamp in the weapons locker. After much confused fumbling to locate the locker, left open by the maddened men, I managed to light it. The sudden light was momentarily blinding

and, when I regained my sight, I could see nothing of the two surviving crewmen; I did not enter the crew space, fearing to see they had killed themselves – or, worse, that they were gone...

I covered the dead bodies with their coats and hummed away, oblivious to myself, staring at the wall. I could no longer hear movement without...

For some reason, that was even scarier...

I sat for a time in a dark humour, before searching out paper and pen, thankfully not sodden, in order to write... this.

There are things in the deep beyond human ken – God preserve us from them!

If you read this, heed my words and travel not into the depths...

Signed: Jacob Hackett, Commander.

Ends

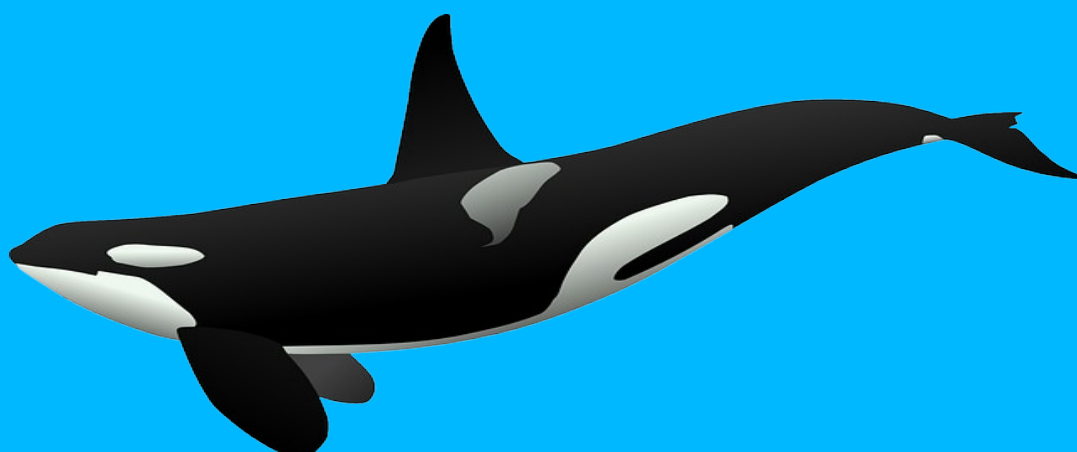
Seaweed

By Aeronwy Dafies

Like witch's hair waving
Seaweed in the current sways
A crab scuttles through the forest
A tiny fish darts and plays
As the tide turns, retreats
The weed almost appears to deflate
Settling down upon the rocks
The tide's return to wait
The crab remains, scuttles about
But the fish swam away
The weed had no choice at all
No choice but to stay

heed songs of women
pulled deep under by siren
gasp for oxygen

By Denny E. Marshall



THE HOLY SEA

("& Catholic Cthulhu All Saints Day Mourning")

By Frederick Mayer

Theurgy uncouth saprophytic season Fall
with the cosmos obscenely askew
The stars were ascending right meaning forgotten
with selcouth evanescence taboo...

These ejaculating infernal star flames call
morning of salvific Cthulhu
Misfeasance plenipotentiary sin
for dawning climax Idh-yaa comes too

Pleased Xothic Star Matriarch aboriginal
Idh-yaa pale fibrous worm do
Be obscura spawn males and now skene begotten
Cthylla venereal Sis hid true

Diseased with six eyes progeny androgynal
sex of audacious secret crude
Seething so winged octopus-like waits within
obscure dark chamber till vengeance due

Three siblings ensconced with Pater, Lord, behind walls
brooding in sacred place for a few
Sea enclosed cursed odd stoned R'lyeh sunken
and there are those who deities screw

See Being blood incest coitus terminal calls
coalescing depravity grue
Semen sanctification Indulgence rotten
dystopia growing tumescent new

Beasts Homo-sapiens or not celebrants all
beatification visceral imbued
Theology flagrante delicto eaten
metabolism of Child passed through

These Trinity off-spring canonizational
cannibal corruption Rapture spew
Feast sickness chews inside out does begin
internal universe Death anew

Decomposing saints day from virus sexual
Yamil Zakra gravure noxious view
The Cross to bear mourning evil guiding Star then
strange aeons gone Life dies on cue.



Tether

By John W. Sexton & Vaughn Seward

We have come many miles on this long journey, now it is night. In the distance, rising up from the restless sea is the pinnacle of One Island, its steep crystal slopes glowing under moonlight. As our boat bobs closer, I make out the faint image of a figure under the twisted shadows of tangled branches, branches of shattered amethyst. The mate calls to the figure, who throws us a rope of seaweed to tether with; for nothing organic grows on the island itself. Through the pounding surf we come to shore and our host greets us with an outstretched arm, stammering whimpers and urgent entreaties to follow him underground. The surface of the island is treacherous, as frictionless as glass, and its surface is still warm from the daylight sun. During the day the island reflects sunlight in a chaos of heat and steam, the sea boiling for miles.

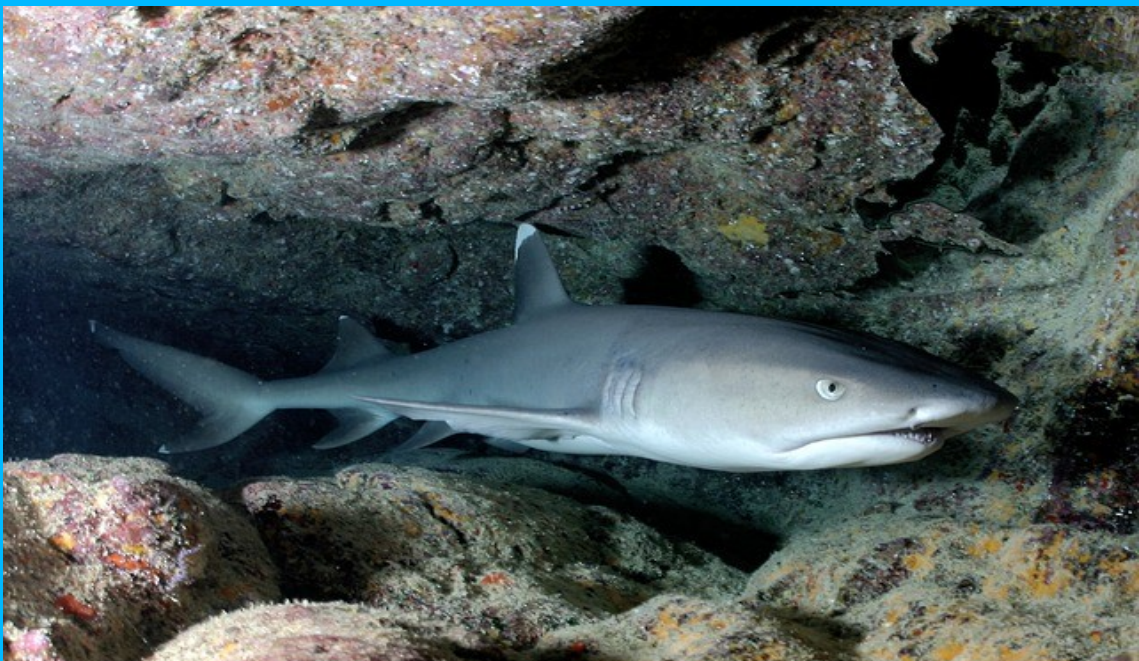
We drag our boat into the cave, (for otherwise it will ignite during the day), and descend rough seaweed rigging to the inner heart of this strange place. Presently we are in a vast chamber lit with seal-light. Others, all monks like the one who greeted us, emerge in welcome. A bounty of assorted flotsam festoons every nook, sea-stuff collected in the calm of night or the dead of winter, when the sea is safe. A monk offers us cone-shaped shells, each one to the brim with some unsightly slime. We accept, without hesitation, gagging on the awful gunk as we eat, for we know that there is not much else here.

In the morning, when the sun begins to rise, we will gather what we've come for, taking careful notation of every sound. For when the island begins to heat we will hear the voice of this crystal place, the song from the sun; for the monks here say the island is the Tongue of God.

Both moons rise in-sync above the north horizon - new century start.

Whales ease into deep pressure -
each sound portends the morrow.

No bearing but here –
bright compasses, starfish prey
in the scuppered ship.



FRUIT OF THE EMPTY CREEL

By Neil K. Henderson

You are select.
I have no voice -
only echoes dislodged
from your litany's circle.

I am a monkfish -
a halfbreed unfathomed -
battered and slammed
by unbreathable airs.

Salt in the scales...
These ripples in tatters...
I sleep alone
on the cold slab.

Inquisitive

By DJ Tyrer

Deep below the surface of the sea
A new species of squid
Or squid-like cephalopod
Floats in tandem with its discoverer
Peering in through the viewport
That the human peers out from
Exchanging inquisitive gaze
That denizen of the deep
With a steady gaze
As intelligent as the one fixed on it

MILLENNIUM SLUG

By Neil K. Henderson

We're saying hello to the Grand Design...
(It's never too late in sidereal time:
The crystals in the great Out There
Vibrate beyond our bated air
On a sliding scale of one to nine.)

On screens beneath our plastic dome
The midnight of the age is shown
Approaching on a trail of slime -
Imposing on our paradigm
The sticky shape of things to come.
(Let's fiddle about with the numbers,
And send the bastard home.)

Originally published in "Handshake" no.00, February 2000; "Candelabrum" X/1, April 2000.

SEADRICK

By Frederick J. Mayer

Seadrick was a left-handed fiddler crab
all the others of this clan had huge claw
situated singularly ever so Right
The rest relentless band did prick and stab
call Seadrick's uniqueness a moral flaw
physically bans him ever out of their sight
He did with ease as they but ran sideways
small Seadrick can move so forward, plus back
lonely upon an unjust fair sandy beach site

Seadrick saw sunset reddish bleeding scab
apocalyptical, land did so draw
eviscerating catastrophic liquid blight
The crest nefandous fish tombstone slab
pall bearing wave vice-regent of Death law
muscularly entombs those not of reverse flight
Be flying squids safe and crab with odd ways
antinomial one ate coming back
bodies brine raw left by tide seashore grand delight.

In The Depths

By DJ Tyrer

A single bubble of light
Wends its way downwards
Down, down into the depths
Down, down into the dark
A membrane of no consequence
Shielding against crushing pressure
Shielding life from death, depth
Beyond the shield
Beyond the light
Darkness, a crushing weight
A sort of silence echoing
Trembling with deep distant sounds
Echoing with unknown sounds
An alien world of darkness
Of darkness and deep despair

Homeworld

By JD DeHart

when we first
saw the shores of this
place, we knew
we could not swim

but we ventured
forward and found
that the air gave us
gills and so dove

and now, lapping
listlessly on this lotus
eater planet, we
would have it no
other way but to swim.

Sea Lantern

By Aeronwy Dafies

In the darkness of the ocean depths
Glows a lantern light
The lure of an anglerfish
Glows in the submarine night
Like a star in the firmament
It seems to shine so bright
Should you make a wish?
Or flee that deceitful light?

Not a Space Suit

By J. "Ash" Gamble

with wonder, I discover what I think
is a space suit is the creature's skin,
meant to keep it alive here.

In the caves of Mars
Surviving generations
Waiting for rescue

By Denny E. Marshall

SLOPS

A soft story

By Neil K. Henderson

Ospasian hated this place - you couldn't breathe the air, and the gravity was too strong. Yet that old prospectors' ditty kept running over and over like a mantra in his mind:

"The most beautiful Hell I'd ever seen

(The grass was blue and the sky was green)

And the sea, the sea, the sea..."

He couldn't remember the bit about the sea. He looked around him at what passed for beauty on the God-forsaken wilderness registered in the files back home as Scupollica FR2030. Grass, as such, was an alien concept in this somewhat restricted environment, but yes - the undulating fronds of land-kelp topping most of the sparsely occurring groundspace *did* bear a distinctly blueish tinge... among the predominating greyness. And though the brooding cauldron of heavy gas clouds that formed the upper atmosphere was more of a muddy brown than green in colour, he could - if he brought to mind all the aerial algae and flying phytoplanktons which abounded in that rich, life-supporting vapour - just about convince himself the sky was olive-hued.

Almost the entire surface of this little planet, however, remained blank uncharted ocean - albeit the liquid content was of a density to make water diviners quail. Ospasian's convoy had had to make several orbits before they could locate any kind of land at all... vainly scouring the amber seascape for signs of the dome-station. It was almost like looking at a vast inverted sunset stretching endlessly beneath them. But the viscosity of its orange-flushed expanses, with the floating masses of drab weeds and reddish clusters of animal matter, had all the picturesque appeal of sick-puddles. It was hardly any wonder, then, that traders referred to Scupollica FR2030 as *Slops*. Yet the seas were host to a myriad of life-forms, all engaged in deadly hide-and-seek among the congealing drifts of semi-solid substance in this huge curdled broth of fertility.

"The most beautiful Hell I'd ever seen

(The grass was blue and the sky was green)

And the sea, the sea, the sea..."

...was red and orange and yellow, in a seething morass of soupy lumps.

Indeed, that was why he was here. That curdled fertility was needed back home to bring new life to a sagging economy based on forcing reluctant foodstuff out of overworked dustbowls. He was here, in short, to harvest manure from the sea. And the sooner he got his fleet of tankers filled to brimming with the precious russet dung, the sooner he could be heading back to Homeland and to Cora who was waiting there... But it had all seemed like a lost cause when first they'd reached the planet after a year-and-a-half, Home Time, in deep space. That's when they'd found their short-range guidance beams incapable of pin-pointing the dome-station in the haze of bioenergetic activity, and they'd had to rely on visual location.

They had orbited and scoured, and listened to bizarre sound distortions on the frequency monitor - all the time keeping watch for rocky outcrops that were too tiny even to show up on the ships' most sensitive ore detectors. Something in the tone of the audio signals urged perseverance - whether they originated from the dome-base or not - and they continued the search above the marmalade Sargasso to the accompaniment of sighs, croons, whistles and whoops coming in through the communications channels. On they went, orbiting and scouring, scouring and orbiting - till little by little, a bit at a time, as reality began to lose all meaning, the stones evolved from hope. Eventually, after following a multitude of false trails, the fleet located the pin-head archipelago with the dome-station and the berth hoppers bolted on.

Manure from the sea... Not a particularly demanding proposition, one would have thought, all things being equal. Just dredge a load of organic solids up from the glutinous depths, and Bob's-your-muckspreader. Just one little problemissimo, however... There were very few areas of dry land big enough and stable enough to dredge *from* - since, of course, you couldn't hope to manoeuvre *boats* through that tangerine sludge. As for some of these life-forms that were teeming about beneath the surface there... well, some of the bastards turned out to be dangerous. It was krockle-eat-krockle, down below - and none of the beasts was troubled by conscience, you can believe it. Indeed, the harvesting crew had to resort to some pretty unconscionable tactics themselves, in order to get their daily quotas safely reaped from their precarious perches. That's where the undines came in.

A rare native species of amphibian mammals - like hornless aquatic bison - the undines somehow managed to survive in small herds huddled damply on the shorelines of these tiny, far-flung islets. On land, the creatures' principal means of defence appeared to be camouflage - as witnessed by the heavy wreaths of seaweed covering most of their exposed backs and shoulders. However, it had transpired early on that they made excellent decoy bait for the ferocious people-eating krockles which infested the inner reaches of the soupy seascape. Camouflage might protect them from land or air attack, but not much escaped a cunning krockle in its element.

The trouble was that you had no way of telling whether it was safe to venture out into the slimy shallows to collect crap. You couldn't see through the murk to determine the presence or absence of predators. Anything could be down there, basking in iniquity. Nor could you gauge if the krockles were on

the feed, by observing the surfacings of shoals of fish. There were no fish here. Anything relying on gills would inevitably suffocate - it would be like trying to extract breathable oxygen from yoghurt. No, the harvesting crew had yet to come up with anything to beat undines for detecting and diverting potential man-eaters.

Even now, as Ospasian watched from nearby, Mandelhammer and Vesperides were attempting to coax one of these larger-than-cow-size undines out along a rocky promontory, so as to lure any lurking krockle or its brood away from the dredge team down the cove. You had to use long poles with spear-like tips to prod the beasts from a safe reach. And considering the smell of pig-shit and seaweed they gave off, no distance was too great for comfort. From his vantage point on a weed-slimed rock, Ospasian was unable to make out anything of the creature's head - tiny enough at the best of times - beneath the towering bulk of its buffalo-humped shoulders with their broad mantle of fur and overlying shawl of bladder-wrack and kelp. Not that it would have made any difference. Nothing approaching an emotion could be discerned on the wizened, calf-like countenances of the undines.

It was generally held that the beasts were incapable of sustaining thoughts or feelings in any humanly recognisable form. Yet... something in their ponderous hesitation - one could almost call it *distress* - at being goaded toward that boiling brink of uncertainty, seemed to betoken more than mere brute instinct. It wasn't just fear that had this animal holding back with all the force its massive bulk could muster. It seemed to be registering some sort of *disapproval*... As it was, its little pink atrophied 'paws' (more like rag dolls' hands, really) were totally incapable of clinging to the slippery rocks or scrabbling for safety. All the less since they looked as if they'd been stitched on the wrong way round - with the palms facing up, rather than downwards.

In the final analysis, since the undines were totally mute, as well as being expressionless, Ospasian guessed that even if they were absolutely terrified, there would be no real way of knowing. (The flow of effluent from the creatures' rear output vent - a primary contributor to the richness of Slops - was too consistently regular to give any recognisable indication of dread, or otherwise.) Anyway, whatever the state of readiness of this particular specimen, the pain, or irritation, or suchlike stimulus from Vesperides' meat-skewer, proved the deciding factor, and in went the beast to its doom - being converted into a nauseating bolognese sauce in seconds. No doubt it would be further transformed into krockle-crap in the fullness of time - giving an added degree of refinement to the much-prized guano crop.

The dredging crew seized the moment to cast its grappling irons out to the depths of the near-side bay, hauling in the foetid lumps of reddish filth with all the speed and efficiency of professional shit-hunters. Ospasian glanced up at the gathering clouds in the simmering bile-bowl of the sky. A storm was brewing, and even the grinning redness of the sea was darkening to a purplish brown. Manure from the sea... what a way to earn a living.

"It's a dirty job - but someone's got to do it," the recruiting manager had said.

And so he'd left his home, and Cora, and everything he held dear, and crossed endless light-years of nothingness to come to Slops. He'd wrenched his dreams, his soul, his very being away from the one he loved. He might never see her again... All for this. All because his country needed manure from the sea.

A sullen, unwholesome breeze was stirring - the unwelcome portent of one of the planet's all too frequent 'instant hurricanes'. A blanket-flash lit up the sky as the fiery tempest raced towards them. Ospasian ordered the crew back to Dome-Haven. They'd better get under cover before the shit hit the fan.

Ospasian hated this place - you couldn't breathe the air, and the gravity was too strong. It made you feel constantly constipated. It would be a relief to get under fresh water at last. Then a chap could really let his stomach distend. The 'monsoon lagoons' left in the aftermath of one of these sudden electric storms almost made up for the shitty conditions the harvest gang had to endure normally. The lightning brought about some chemical reaction in the atmosphere, which in turn led to this eventual precipitation of opaquely azure water. It accumulated in crystal blue pools below the rocks - miraculously driving away predators and ordure alike, by some sort of automatic repulsion, or anti-osmosis.

For a while at least, it would be safe to swim in these lagoons - the level of safety being naturally indicated by the colour of the water. It was like liquid litmus. When the water started turning red, it was time to get out. The undines also kept well off at such times, cowering in their strange tribes in the kelp-beds above the dangerous blue tidemark. The harvesters had the rainwater pools all to themselves.

Ospasian reflected on his first dive into the limpid blue depths. In addition to the constant and unshakeable suspicion of krockles coming to get him, there had been the destabilising effect of this bio-electrically synthesised water on the accepted body mass distributions of the divers. An unexpectedly controllable buoyancy gave them a sense of freedom both exhilarating and frightening.

"You'll get used to it," Mandelhammer had insisted from the bottomless well of his experience. "It's as easy as walking on water... You know how to walk on water, don't you? You just put one foot in front of the other, and forget about gravity."

That was easy for him to say. But nevertheless, Ospasian soon acquired a liking for these therapeutic submersion sessions, with all the relief from physiological stresses they provided. The threatening orange stew of the encircling ocean kept its distance. Within that vast segregated biosphere, the evils of the deep were trapped and temporarily tamed. You could observe the activity out in the orange sector quite clearly, like looking through the glass in one of those big underwater aquarium arcades back home. Occasionally, a long-snouted krockle would drift by, wary of the demarcation line between habitats - then glide smoothly off to hunt for sea monkeys, or octoporpoises, or the aforementioned sluggish undines.

Today, the gathered rainwater was darker, more concentrated, than usual. As Ospasian slid his silver-suited body into the secluded depths of his personally chosen pool, he noted with satisfaction that the water

was pure indigo (not just the surface, but all the way down). He watched the rocky contours of the island disappear, as his eyeline descended into the gorgeous blue dimension. He'd never dived in this particular grotto before. The impatient soup-stuff surged back quicker in some places than in others, not always allowing much time for exploration. Mind you, this was one even Mandelhammer had no knowledge of - and he'd been here as acting head grappleman since anyone could remember.

The outgrowths and fissures of the lagoon wall had been eroded by eons of tidal sludge - not smoothly, as by terrestrial seawater, but in intricately irregular patterns caused by the varying densities of all the assorted organic constituents of the broth. "Little by little, a bit at a time, as reality began to lose all meaning, the stones evolved from hope." There was that thought again. It had followed him down to the island from his orbiting flagship. What with that and the old prospectors' ditty that kept tormenting him, he sometimes wondered if he was becoming deranged.

What did it mean? Was he *possessed*? But the voice that seemed to utter in his mind was soft... reassuring... like bath crystals. Ospasian cast his fears aside. He let himself float gently to the sea-bed. On the way down, he had time to view the curious array of sculptures in this vertical underwater art gallery. There were whorls and cylinders and sea-shells made of stone; there were cannonballs with grooved skins, and cartwheels without spokes; there were even columns of solidified gorgonzola cheese, with holes going in at all angles - both part-way and through to the other side. On the floor of the pool was a rock worn and hollowed into a colossal upturned scallop. It was while he was admiring this unexpectedly familiar shape, that a movement caught Ospasian's eye.

Damn Mandelhammer! He'd insisted there was no way the native life-forms could stand to come inside the blue-water reaches. It was like acid to them - killed on contact. Yet here was one of those little sea monkeys gambolling around the lip of the shell-rock, obviously unaware that it should have been dissolved. Ospasian peered apprehensively out into the marmalade murk that stretched away forever in the opposite direction to the rocks. If that sea monkey could come into the lagoon with safety, how did he know a hungry krockle couldn't do the same? He was relieved, however, to see a pair of krockles quite deliberately turn aside on nearing the interface, obviously still unable to invade his safe-haven.

The antics of the sea monkey attracted his gaze again, and he now felt sufficiently composed to scrutinise this specimen in some detail. To be sure, it wasn't the common offshore sea monkey, whose appendages he had often glimpsed wedged between the teeth of a krockle. Indeed, now he came to look more closely, he realised this was a species he'd never seen in the flesh before. He had seen a picture of it, though, in one of the manuals. He recognised the peculiarly graceful limbs, and the appealing saucer eyes. *Skinny* something, it was called. No - *slender*. *Slender lorelei*, that was it. Maybe it had been singled out for special mention exactly because it was such an anomaly in relation to the blue water.

The wizened little face was regarding him closely, and its agile pink paws were scrabbling around the outer edge of the scallop. It seemed to be trying to draw his attention to something... They really were

quite precocious, these marine primates. He couldn't resist going over for a look, as something told him the creature was harmless. And so it was that he came to discover the trapdoor. He lifted the lip of the stone shell where the slender lorelei had been poking around, and lo and behold - the whole thing fell back, as if on hinges, and he found himself in the shopping plaza of beautiful downtown Hometown...

As he entered the portal from the indigo depths of Slops, a dreamlike tranquillity accompanied his transdimensional passage homeward... If it really *was* home. Things had certainly changed in the old shopping precinct. There was a new granite sculpture rising from the scalloped stone centre of the ornamental pond. A statue of a woman, emerging like Aphrodite from the waves. Only this woman wasn't Aphrodite... The limbs were slim and fragile like the slender lorelei's, but the face and hair were unmistakeable. It was Cora, enshrined forever in a beautiful work of art. His beloved... The dear one he'd been parted from so very, very long.

And as he stared dreamily above him at the statue, he found his spirit drawn up within the granite body. He and Cora were becoming as one, effortlessly merging and coalescing into a psychic entity inside the rock.

"I love you," she was saying in his disembodied mind. "I shall never forget you. We shall always be as one - inseparable strands of a great spiritual unity. And that Unity shall grow and blossom like an ever-unfolding star-flower, to encompass all the space that lies between us. With our embrace, Beloved, we can make the sundered heavens Whole."

And as he stood there, his essential being physically incorporated into the stone statue, on the threshold of eternal Oneness with his soul-mate, a little bird flew over and landed on the granite head of Ospasian-and-Cora. And from its perch, the little bird began to sing the Song of Everlasting Hope. But nobody noticed it or heard it singing, except for the lovers in the sculpture. All the denizens of Hometown were working away in offices, or hurrying to get their shopping done, or busying themselves about some other mundane activity. The scene went unobserved. There was no apparent change in the ongoing pattern of day-to-day events...

As the bird once more took flight, abruptly breaking the spell, Ospasian's astral body was released from the statue's embrace - sliding down like quicksilver through the length of Cora's granite effigy, until it issued through the trapdoor into the indigo rock pool back on Scupollica FR2030. The reds and yellows and golds were closing in. It was time to be making for the surface again. As he prepared to ascend, he just caught the briefest glimpse of a little slender figure flitting off into the dense dimension - immediately followed by the outline of a jagged snout - before he propelled himself hastily upwards onto the rocks.

Of course, it was easy to rationalise experiences encountered in the monsoon lagoons. All that gravitational displacement and artificial lung capsule action was bound to have an effect on the central nervous system of anyone - especially that of a relative newcomer like Ospasian. But, rationalise as he might, he still felt quite distressed when Vesperides came into the research dome with a plastic bag full of bloody bones and fur, and started comparing them with diagrams in the fauna directory.

The remains had belonged to a slender lorelei - and Vesperides was so excited by his discovery, he made an instant holo-recording of the find for Ospasian to broad-beam from his ship to the Intergalactic Geographical Society on Fortitude VI. Ospasian, however, could only feel depressed. Something had happened, all right, down there in that rock pool after the storm - even if the details were hallucinatory in origin. And now it looked as if his confederate in adventure had sacrificed its life on returning to the hostile soup. He was in no doubt the remains were from the same individual. These animals were so rarely seen inshore that the odds were impossibly high against two being found so close together in place and time.

Ospasian didn't get the chance to mope for long. Vesperides had hardly got the monkey bits in deep-freeze, when Mandelhammer burst into the dome with news that Quasimodo was playing up something terrible. This was indeed an unexpected shock. The undines were never known to cause any kind of trouble for the guano-reapers - had even seemed incapable of it. And Quasimodo, of all of them - how could *she* be playing up? It didn't make sense. The three headmen rushed to the nearby undine grounds to take stock of the situation. All the way there, Ospasian tried to master his mounting panic.

What could be wrong with Quasimodo? The great matriarchal cow-beast was the only one among the island's undine population to have been given a name. Hers was the hump of humps, the dominant superlative - the crowning glory of them all. She was the most massively impressive, mountainous heap of a creature the crew had ever seen. And so docile. Many of the harvesters had even remarked on her comparative awareness - for an undine. They had spared her the fate of the other krockle-decoys. And now *this...*

The sight which greeted their arrival at the evil-smelling resting ground of the ill-starred leviathans was at once pathetic and grotesque. The majority of the animals were pressed together against the rocks and weeds, leaving a clearing on the craggy ledge where the colossal bulk of the queen cow undine lay. She was flailing feverishly from side to side, like a stranded whale on electric shock treatment. The tiny head was buffeting back and forth in speedy convulsions, and though no expression could be determined on what corresponded to the creature's face, the crew were aware of an almost overwhelming aura of suffering in the immediate vicinity of the beast.

Ospasian's mind flashed him a picture of that lorelei in the blue lagoon... Now he seemed to see it as it darted into the reddish murk of the viscid ocean. A shadow with a pointed snout closed in on it - then his thoughts were drowned in blackness as a piercing shriek suddenly burst from Quasimodo. It went on and on and on... like the whistle on a Homeland kettle. The flow of orange effluent from the animal's output vent

changed abruptly from a slow, continuous lumpy stream to a violent spurting. None of the men had seen anything like this before. And the colour had changed from a gaudy marmalade to virulent purplish crimson. A bit like congealing blood, in fact... The stench of brine and excrement was almost unbearably overpowering, even to seasoned shit-hunters like themselves. And they were absolutely covered in the stuff.

Without warning, Ospasian's thoughts switched back to Hometown. To Cora. He was out shopping with her again in the plaza. They were buying stuff for the flat. The autumn sun was setting early. The streets were bustling. They were happy... together...

"Once there was nothing... then little by little, a bit at a time, as reality began to lose all meaning, the stones evolved from hope." The familiar words had come back to haunt him.

Then a new voice entered his mind, as if from some source outside himself:

"Ospasian... Ospasian... Do you understand? Do you see?"

"What...? No, I..." He spoke out loud in his amazement. The others didn't seem to notice.

"This is what I have to give you, Ospasian. Each of my dead children is a gift of love for you... and the afterbirth shall bring new peace to all your kind, in the due fruitfulness of time."

"Afterbirth?"

Vesperides dug Mandelhammer in the ribs. They had heard him speaking that time. "Afterbirth, Ozzie? Hey, maybe you're right at that! You hear him, Manders? Could be Quasimodo's given birth. Maybe the calf went in the slime, and a krockle got it -"

"That's a good 'un - undine's afterbirth. You know what the meds call *afterbirth*, don't you?"

"Secundines," interrupted Ospasian. "I know. Listen. Those slender lorelei remains Vesperides brought in... I think *they're* what's left of the offspring."

"Don't talk crap," said Vesperides. "These undines ain't primates, surely. I mean, the two species are incompatible... ain't they?"

"What if the slender lorelei was a larval form of these fully mature *undines*, as we know them? What if they mutate into land-dwellers - like tadpoles changing into frogs."

"Like caterpillars metamorphosing into butterflies." The voice in his mind was soft and sweet... graceful and feminine... comforting.

"Yes! Look at the hands!" Mandelhammer was excited.

"And that tiny, shrivelled-up face - like a shrunken head."

"A head that *never grew* beyond the limitations of the infant form!"

Mandelhammer and Vesperides turned and stared at Ospasian. "How come this is only come to light *now*?" the first enquired. "And how come *you* seem so clued up, Ozzie? It's not as if you've been here long... I mean, I've been here for years, on and off, and I'd never even *seen* one of these slender loreleis - till Ves here fished out them body parts this mornin'."

The inner voice was gentle. "Maybe they were waiting for a special person," Ospasian found himself saying.

Mandelhammer raised his eyebrows. But before he could speak, Quasimodo gave a momentous shudder, and rolled off the ledge into the flame-coloured gluten. With one accord, the rest of the tribe followed suit. The harvesters could only stand and watch as the score of marine monstrosities floated out of sight on the gelatinous tide. They would have to rely on safety in numbers in the face of ruthless predation from God knows what...

Just then, a cry went up from the far side of the cove. One of the grapplemen had harpooned a krockle. There would be feasting tonight.

It was during his post-prandial slumbers that the truth finally emerged about the undines. The dome-shaped walls of Ospasian's quarters seemed to echo like a belfry with the heated telepathic argument which beset his thoughts.

"Too many of our kind have died," a masculine voice insisted. "It's time we broke our vow of silence. We must stop these brutes destroying us. We could wipe them out with a single wave of Shock Thought!"

"Or simply make them go away!" said another.

"Hush, hush..." It was Quasimodo. "Remember why we made our vow. We have dedicated our souls - and some have even given their lives - to the cause of universal harmony. The one they call Ospasian is a fertile vessel for our seed. Did I not sacrifice my last-born lamb in order to give him a vision of his beloved Cora? With those tender thoughts implanted in his heart, to commingle with the aura of our gift of fecund afterbirth, he and his crew will bear an embryo of peace back to their Homeland - from whence to spread the message through the infinite reaches of eternity. One day, my siblings, there shall come a time of peace and love to outlast all the stars..."

"I don't know," said the first voice. "Look what happened before. We made a world for them... even created them in our children's image, to start them well. And what was the result? They evolved into the Bastards of the Cosmos!"

"To love is to forgive," said Quasimodo. "We must never give up on them. It was the force of our love that brought them to these parental waters... our love that made a solid place for them to land, where all

before had been wetness. At first, it seemed there could be no common ground where we might come together. But little by little, a bit at a time, as reality began to lose all meaning, the stones evolved from hope. And after all, does not every being that flies or crawls or swims forth from the Water of Life have its rightful place within a greater whole? Are not all - large and small, powerful and humble - but separate aspects of One Thing? And is this One not greater than the sum of all its parts? Come, then. Surely such a Oneness can never fail? We mustn't desert these lost ones now..."

The sullen olive sky of Slops was momentarily blasted by a searing white-light vision of some cloudy Armageddon. The rockets of the fleet were blazing their trail of departure through the burgeoning atmosphere. Alone in the captain's berth of the flagship *Sustenance*, Ospasian let his mind drift away of its own accord. This was a job well done. With the loads in his ships' holds, deserts could be made to bloom again. People could be given new lives of plenty... dignified lives where all can share the riches of the soil. And something told him that his precious freight would even prove too wholesome for profiteers to milk. Maybe hope would take the place of greed, once the vicious struggle for daily bread was relegated to the past forever. Maybe then the great divide of rich and poor, have and have-not, would finally be healed, and all God's children live as One in eternal peace and harmony: released from the grand illusion of 'Self'. Maybe Love would conquer the universe...

He thought about Cora, and a voice came into his mind - tender, feminine, calm.

"Remember the deep-sea dream of the granite woman... Never stop dreaming, Ospasian. Never stop hoping. Never stop *praying*... Things will come right in the end, so long as you believe there is something good up ahead. No matter how far away it seems right now, all will be revealed in time."

It struck him then, that Quasimodo's telepathic voice sounded almost identical to Cora's.

"I'll always be with you," it reassured him.

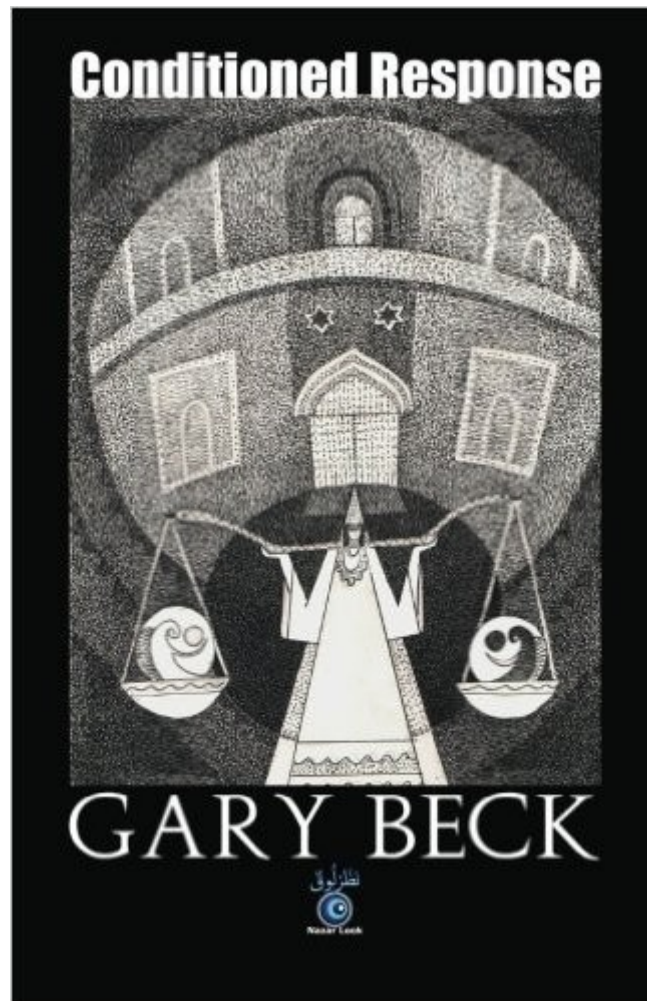
And he believed it.

Ends

*First published in "Threads" no.13, February 1997.
Reprinted in "Monomyth" no.24, August 2003.*

Conditioned Response

A poetry book by Gary Beck



'Conditioned Response' reminds us that we are prepared by family, experience, government to react to the events that affect us in our daily lives, shaping our future, often without our consent.

'Conditioned Response' is a 100 page book of poetry. Available in paperback with a retail price of \$11.90 and eBook with a retail price of \$3.99. The ISBN number is 1517260930. Published by Nazar Look and available at Amazon in two editions, English and English/Tatar, translated by Taner Murat, publisher of Nazar Look.

Nazar Look is located in Constanta, Romania, dedicated to the preservation of the Tatar language which is severely endangered.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director, and as an art dealer when he couldn't make a living in theater. He has 11 published chapbooks. His poetry collections include: Days of Destruction (Skive Press), Expectations (Rogue Scholars Press). Dawn in Cities, Assault on Nature, Songs of a Clerk, Civilized Ways (Winter Goose Publishing). Perceptions, Displays, Fault Lines and Tremors will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. Conditioned Response (Nazar Look). His novels include: Extreme Change (Cogwheel Press) Acts of Defiance (Artema Press). Flawed Connections (Black Rose Writing). His short story collection, A Glimpse of Youth (Sweatshoppe Publications). His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City

Long Story

By JD DeHart

a long story winds round
the old planets, they
were young when it started

when we arrived,
we heard the first breath
come from the unfamiliar
mouth and somehow
understood its words

our own narrative
now circling the planet,
infused with the ongoing
and ever-present tale.

WINDS ATTRIBUTED TO AN EXPEDITIOUS TORNADO

By Colin James

The house was upside down of course,
impervious foundation still connected.
Not one of your more egregious examples.
Typical portraits above the mitered shelf
leading down to some precarious steps.
We only found parts of Laura's smock.
No Laura. Apparently too fabulous to be faithful.
Everyone else accounted for
except the dog that ran off, now
forever prone to disorientation.

Zombie invasion
Leaves all the graveyards empty
Living hide in tombs

By Denny E. Marshall



Crocuta

By Phil Breach

Redolent of all the drear of Hel,
Snaking up a fissure from beneath,
My snout has caught an old familiar smell.
A rank thing, that unbidden bares my teeth.

I scent it 'pon a whisper of a breeze.
I catch it in a distant start of thunder.
In the thump of snow that tumbles from the trees.
'Midst the innards of a who-man, wrenched asunder.

I divine it in the dancing of the crane;
So thus I quit from 'neath the blue and vast.
The who-men, those who tend my painted fane,
Intone the Black Song as I shamble past.

I must learn more of this than I have seen.
Too much lurks occulted from my gaze.
The knowledge that I seek I cannot glean
From bird, or blood, or tending Nature's ways.

The pass lies down a byway of my cave.
It leads me to a winding, wooded track.
As I wander through the Holdings of the Grave,
A host of keening shadows crowds my back.

They sob and rant and raise a hue and cry.
I warn them to return to where they lay.
Their writhings wax displeasing to my eye.
I snarl, and hurl them back beneath the clay.

I journey deeper into Death's abode.
The twisting trees make shudder at my essence.
Their bloated fruits, that o'erhang, explode,
Anointing me with gouts of sweet putrescence.

Close now to the Hold of Hated Slain,
I come at last upon a silent mire.
I skirt its fringe, unto a mounded plain,
As drifting corpse-lights lick me with their fire.

'Pon the barrow of a magus, long deceased,
I exercise my necromantic art.
I question long the revenant released,
Learning much before it drops apart.

It dares to curse me as its frame unknits,
So I harken to the mournful, fading moans
As I smash its mildew'd skull to shards and bits,
And suck the dusty marrow from its bones.

Away from these sad wraiths that weep and wander.
Back to rest, before again I roam.
Back to make my weapons, and to ponder.
Gnawing 'pon the skull, I turn for home.

I'll rein a score of who-men to my sleigh,
And ride the ice-hard road to Niflhel.
To she who holds the Deep Realms in her sway,
That piebald queen I've known for long and well.

Where the greying dead bend silent to her will.
Where the fate of age and sickness lies unfurled.
Down amongst the roots of Yggdrasil.
Hel her name, and Hel her misted world.

I shave my sharded darts 'til swift and true,
And smear them with a green and baneful paste;
A poison made of hemlock sap and rue,
Thick with toad fat, fell and lily-laced.

I turn an ashen sapling straight and long.
With antler hammer, knap a glassy blade.
I bind the spear together with a song,
And blood it with a who-man, slowly flayed.

I bid the swarming faithful at my shrine
To feed up high a roaring conflagration.
They exult unto the glory that is mine,
And offer me an open-veined libation.

'Pon deer hide drums, and logs, and long-bone flutes,
They play a dirge to bless my pine-wood sled.
A drone to sing me down the frosted roots,
And kindle up a fire in my head.

Dawning finds my faithful sprawled around me.
Some are fallen dead, some merely sleeping.
At dawn, the odour rises to surround me.
At dawn that old familiar stench comes creeping.

'Tis the scent of birth-blood that I smell,
A tainted tang that tells me of my doom.
To face again a horror born of Hel;
The death of me has slither'd from her womb.

So down. Forsooth, I'll not come up again.
Bereft, my faithful hence shall drift away.
Let nature take my broke, abandoned fane.
Such as I have seen their ending day.

Crocuta.

Kallakh.

Winter's Hag.

The Witch O' the Bonecrack Jaw.

I had a thousand names, time was.

Think of me no more.

SECRETS BETWEEN US

By Celine Rose Mariotti

Amelia Montini sat at her writing desk, took out some stationery and began to pen a letter to her very good friend, Trent Styles. Trent was Amelia's pen pal and lived in Alabama. She had been corresponding with him now for ten years. They had never met but every letter brought them closer to each other.

There wasn't a thing Amelia didn't tell Trent in her letters to him and he likewise shared his whole life with her.

Amelia lived with her Mom and her older brother. They were good company but sometimes they just didn't understand how she felt about life and what her dreams and desires were. She yearned for someone to share the kind of life she wanted and her pen pal Trent always understood everything she said and she understood him. Amelia lived in a small town in Connecticut by the eastern shore and sometimes she would go out to the beach and walk by herself, just thinking and breathing in the fresh air.

The small town of Essex, Connecticut, was a close-knit community and everyone knew everyone.

Amelia went for lunch with her friend, Sadie Mathers. They met at their favourite restaurant in Essex. Amelia and Sadie ordered a bottle of wine and they both ordered the Monte Cristo sandwich and the French Onion Soup. Sadie was bursting with news about her upcoming wedding. Amelia listened with great interest.

"Sounds like you're going to have a big bash for your wedding! And Monte Carlo for your honeymoon! How romantic!"

"Yes Keith is such a romantic. I can't believe that in four weeks I will be a married woman. Gosh, isn't that something Amelia?"

"Yes, it is something and Keith is a hunk too!"

"So how about that fellow you write to, what's his name now, Trent?"

"Yes, Trent Styles. I would love to meet him someday because we have so much in common. He takes care of his Mom and is kind of lonely like I am. I feel like I have known him all my life. We share so much in our letters."

"Maybe you should go down to Alabama and meet him. Think how exciting it will be to finally meet the man you have been writing to for so long."

"I guess I should write him and ask if he'd like to meet me and see what he says."

"Why not! Just tell him you would love to meet him."

"That's a great idea!"

"Good going Amelia. How about another glass of wine?"

"Yes, thank you."

When Amelia got home, she sat at her computer and composed this letter to Trent Styles.

Dear Trent,

I had a wonderful morning as I went shopping and picked up a few odds and ends, and then I met my friend Sadie for lunch. Sadie is getting married in four weeks, and I am very happy and excited for her.

My Mom is her usual self, carrying on about what needs to be done in the house, and driving me crazy about where she wants to go on vacation. If I suggest one place, she says no and then she says she doesn't want to go anywhere; but enough about my Mom. My brother spends most of his time with his law practice – He is married to the law! When he's home, he nags me about using the computer so I bought my own and now I can do my writing in peace.

How are you doing? How is your farm? I know how much you love the animals and raising your crops. How is your pottery business going? I have been thinking about you.

I think we should finally meet. I would love to come down to Alabama and visit with you. Would you like that too?

Much love,
Amelia

She placed the stamp on the envelope, and daydreamed about what it would be like when they finally met. She knew what he looked like as he sent her pictures every so often. He had light brown hair, and soft green eyes, he was rather handsome, and he seemed like a happy sort of person. Amelia dreamed that he would take her in his arms and caress her and maybe even kiss her...

The sound of the cuckoo clock awoke her out of her daydream and she decided to take a walk and mail her letter. Maybe this evening, she might sit and write another letter to Trent as she suddenly felt the need to pour her heart out to him again. The mailman hadn't come yet; sometimes he didn't come till 4 or 5 o'clock. Amelia dropped the letter in the mailbox and decided to take a walk and get some more fresh air.

When she returned home, her Mom was going through the mail. She turned and acknowledged Amelia.

"Hi sweetie, the mail is here. You got a letter from your friend in Alabama. When are you going to find a real boyfriend?"

"Mama, please leave me alone. I am quite content the way I am."

"Every woman needs a real man in her life. You're almost 33 years old and I don't see any man knocking on your door, sweetie."

"Not interested in any of the men around here Mama. They're not my type."

"Want a cup of tea?"

"Yes, I'd like some Mama."

"Are you still working on that story you were telling me about?"

"Yes, I am."

"I'd like to read it when it is done."

"Sure, Mama."

Amelia sat down and read Trent's letter. It was so easy to envision his life.

Dear Amelia,

I was up bright and early this morning, the sun was barely up when I rose to go out and milk the cows and feed the chickens. Somehow talking with my animals brings me closer to

God as the animals are such gentle, tender souls.

My Mama had breakfast all ready: grits, and eggs, and some hash browns and hazelnut coffee. As I told you once before, my Mama is quite a cook. When I smell her food, my mouth just waters!

I got your letter and you always make me smile Amelia. I love hearing about your Mom and about your writing. I also love hearing about your friend Sadie. The North is like a whole other world for me being a Southern boy. You have made such a difference in my life and I hope someday soon we can meet. I dream about you all the time.

People ask me all the time, they say, "Trent, why don't you have a girl to take care of you?" I can't make them understand that the girl I love is someone I never met.

I have to close now, and make more of my pottery to sell. My Mama gets amazed at all the different interests and hobbies I have. I get amazed at Mama's talents. She just finished knitting me another sweater.

I really love my Mama. How is your brother doing? He sounds like he is a work-a-holic. He needs to stop and smell the roses. I'll close for now. I can't wait for your next letter.

Write me soon,

With all my love,

Trent

Amelia read his letter repeatedly as doing that made her feel like he was right there in the room with her, and if she could just reach out she might be able to embrace him. Amelia realized that perhaps she was falling in love with her friend Trent, even though she had never met him, and only knew him through his letters.

Her Mom interrupted her wonderful thoughts.

"Amelia, are you still looking at that letter?"

"Yes, Mom."

"What is so special about that young man's letters?"

"He writes beautiful letters and he is a very nice person. I like him a lot Mama."

"You've never met the boy."

"I am going to change that."

"What do you mean? Is he coming to visit or something?"

"I might go to Alabama and see him."

"Really?"

"Yes Mama, really."

"I can just hear your brother Tony. He will have a fit when you tell him."

"I really don't care if he does."

A week later, Amelia received another letter from Trent. He wrote the following:

Dear Amelia,

I am so happy you want to meet. You can come and stay here on the farm with me as we have plenty of room and my Mama is already planning all the dishes she is going to cook up for you. Can you come next week? E-mail me and let me know. We'll make arrangements.

Yours truly,

Trent

Amelia raced up to her bedroom and sent an e-mail to Trent.

Dear Trent,

I am so excited. And, yes, I can come to see you next week. Write me back and we will make all the arrangements.

Love,

Amelia

Tony was home around six o'clock and they all gathered at the dining room table to have their dinner. Amelia waited for the right moment to make her announcement.

"I have something to share with all of you."

"Got another story published?"

"As a matter of fact, I did, Tony; thank you for your interest. But, there's something else I have to tell you."

"What's that, little sister?"

"I am going down to Alabama to meet my friend Trent."

"Alone?"

"Yes, Tony, alone."

"You're crazy! Did you know that?"

"I'm not crazy! I am perfectly sane and I don't care what either of you have to say because I am going and that's that."

"Let her go Tony. She needs to have her own life."

"I'm always outnumbered in this house," complained Tony. Amelia looked at her Mom and smiled. Finally her Mom understood.

The following week, Amelia was on the plane and on her way to Alabama and her heart was racing. The moment was coming closer and she would soon meet Trent, her very special friend whom she loved very much.

When the plane touched down, she got her things together and followed the rest of the passengers off the plane. When she got to the baggage, she grabbed her luggage, and looked around for Trent.

Suddenly she heard someone calling her name. There he was! Trent Styles! How could she miss him? She waved to him and he came over to greet her.

“Amelia, you look fantastic! Give me a hug!”

Amelia hugged Trent and, then, he kissed her on the cheek.

“So good to finally meet you Trent.”

“Same here girl. I’ll take your bag and we’ll head on out to my car.”

“Thank you, you’re a real Southern gentleman.”

“My Mama wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I can’t wait to meet your Mama. She sounds so delightful.”

“That she is. I love her a whole bunch.”

“My brother is having a fit because I decided to come down here. He always thinks life is supposed to go the way he wants it to go. He never really understands what I desire. My Mom told me to go and live my life.”

“Sometimes folks don’t understand because they never had those feelings, but I’m glad your Mama understands.”

“That’s true Trent.”

“How’s that story you’re writing coming along? It’s going to be a book, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. A romance story about two young people who fall in love during the Civil War. The girl is from a family in the North and the boy is from a family in the South. They meet while the girl is down South visiting some relatives.”

“Sounds like a real good story Amelia. I’d love to read it.”

“I brought the first five chapters with me for you to read.”

“Did you now? I will definitely read them!”

“It’s so easy to talk to you. You’re just like your letters, warm and friendly, full of compassion.”

“And you’re just like your letters-sensitive, loving, thoughtful.”

“Thank you Trent. You are so kind. Is this where you live?”

“Yes it is. Come on inside and meet Mama.”

“Gosh, this is so pretty. I love it here.”

“I lived here all my life.”

“I lived in Essex all of my life.”

“See we have a lot in common, you and I.”

She laughed. “Yes, we do Trent.”

Trent’s Mom was waiting for him and Amelia to arrive. Amelia was amazed as she walked into the kitchen. It was very cosy and the cabinets were all painted a light yellow colour. The tile was also a yellow colour. The curtains were an orange colour with yellow flowers on them. The aroma of cooking food was wonderful.

“You must be Amelia?”

“And, you must be Trent’s Mom?”

“Nice to meet you, sweet thing. C’m on and sit down here. Take a load off your feet. I made a nice pot of coffee, some oyster stew, pot roast, black-eyed peas and some mashed potatoes.”

“Smells divine. I can’t wait to eat! I am hungry and, of course, airplane food is nothing much special.”

“No it ain’t sweet thing. ” She smiled. “You are so pretty. Trent talks about you all the time, don’t you son?”

“I sure do, Mama!”

“He likes you a lot.”

“I like him a lot, too.”

Amelia enjoyed a nice dinner with Trent and his Mom. Afterwards, they took a leisurely stroll around the farm. Amelia felt so much at home.

“It’s amazing how comfortable I feel being here with you and your Mom.”

“It’s something ‘cause I feel as though I have known you all of my life. I feel so attached to you. We’re like kindred spirits, you and I.”

“Yes, we are like kindred spirits. I have waited all of my life to meet the right man. I always thought that moment might never come but I think the Lord blessed me when you wrote to me.”

“It is funny; I got the list from the pen-pal organization and I liked your name and I thought to myself, I would love to write to this girl. And, when I did, I was the happiest man in the world, because when you wrote back, I knew somehow, there was something special about you.”

“Funny, because I liked you from the very first letter. It’s like karma brought us together.”

“Yeah, it is like that.”

Just then Trent turned and pulled Amelia close to him, and then he kissed her and she tingled all over. She kissed him back and they embraced one another.

“I love you Amelia.”

“I love you too Trent.”

Ends

Seedling

By JD DeHart

deep within
earth and nursed
by shadow, we have
found a bit of ourselves
ready to bloom forth
spreading into what
kind of life, we do not
know, what kind of truth,
we have not seen,
but we only hope
we have long passed
before its arrival.

Death's Head

By J. "Ash" Gamble

the moth probes me, pushing through
my being, and helps me see the truth
at my own dark center.

Seat Belt

By Tempest Brew

we must strap in
for we have
far to travel
leaving the world
we knew behind
and pressing our
toes into dangerous
sands that may
bite at us

Eternity

By Nachiketa Bandyopadhyay

He is in, in my inner room
humming, blossoming, glowing
divine fragrance
Feeling His presence, in you
Let Him stay, discard the unworthy
He can't withstand dark, dry, deny
Sprinkle love, sprinkle kindness,
Thick with mist of an incense stick.

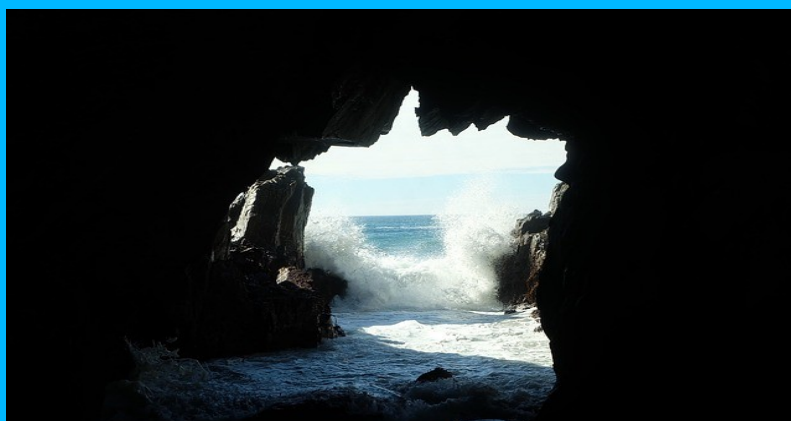
Alive in a cave
A new species emerges
From meteor seeds

By Denny E. Marshall

In The Cavern

By Aeronwy Dafies

In the cavern strange things crawl
In the perpetual night
Or swim in hidden cave waters
That have never seen the light
A whole secret world concealed
Beneath the earth hidden away
Blind things have forgotten the world above
Having forgotten the light of day



The Colour of Darkness

By Aeronwy Dafies

Caves should be black, thought Ffraid, the colour of darkness. It made sense: caves *are* dark. But, the cave in which she stood was a creamy white, the colour of Caerphilly cheese, when her torch beam chased the shadows away.

The hills behind her house, which was on the edge of the village, were riddled with caves. That brought cheese to mind, too: Swiss cheese. Her parents had always told her never to go into the caves, saying, “They’re dangerous. You could get lost or fall and hurt yourself and we might never find you.”

But, the warnings had never stopped Ffraid from being fascinated with the thought of that mysterious, subterranean world, and she had always vowed, secretly to herself, that one day she would explore them.

Her parents had given her a torch for her birthday, two days earlier, and that had been her inspiration to go into the caves and explore. It was that torch she was shining about as she critically examined the cave and found it wanting.

Some of the caves were mines burrowed long before in the hunt for the Earth’s bounty; others, such as this one, were natural, shaped by the flow of water over the centuries, smoothing the stone as if it were wood turned on a lathe.

Ffraid chose an exit and picked her way across the cave. The floor was smooth and damp, a little slippery. Then, she found herself in a sort of passageway that twisted and turned like a worm making its way through the earth. It went downwards ever so slightly and there was a little trickle of water flowing along its floor.

Once you had chased the shadows away, and Ffraid had never much been scared of the dark, there was nothing at all scary about the caves. It was cool and quiet and peaceful in them; she quite liked it.

Then, the passage opened out into another cave. The trickle of water ran into it and joined with others flowing in from niches in the striated walls or dropping down from the ceiling to form a shallow pool in a bowl-shaped depression from which a wider stream flowed out through a vague archway in the far wall. Stalactites followed the droplets in their descent from the ceiling, stretching towards the floor or the stalagmites that grew up to meet them, sometimes joining them to form spindly columns that reflected the torch beam with a waxy sheen.

The next cave had a shaft of light at its centre. There was a hole in its roof through which the sun shone. Ffraid turned her torch off and saw that the shaft was bright enough to illuminate the entire cave with a soft glow, like a fairy grotto.

The shaft stabbed down into a pool of water that looked like molten gold. About it and jutting jaggedly from it were rocks, which, she realised, must have fallen from the roof.

She went over to the pool and looked down into it. There was no treasure in it. She had half-imagined there might be: in a storybook there would be a hidden treasure chest or perhaps a pile of golden coins.

There was something in the pool. Something white. As she studied it, she realised it was the skull of a sheep and, behind it, a scattering of bones.

Ffraid was familiar with the remains of sheep. There were plenty of them on the hillsides about her home and, ever now and then, she would find the skull of one gazing forlornly out of the long grass.

The sheep must, she realised, have fallen through the hole into the pool. At last, she grasped a little of her parents' concern. She shivered. Suddenly, the caves didn't seem quite so welcoming. In fact, she found them just a little frightening.

Ffraid decided to turn back.

She returned to the opening she had entered by and flicked the switch on her torch. It didn't turn on.

She tried it again. Nothing. She shook it. Still nothing. That wasn't right. It was new – a birthday present! Birthday presents weren't meant to break like that when new. It wasn't fair!

Then, realisation displaced annoyance: she had no light!

Ffraid was still in the cave with the shaft of light, so she could still see. But, if she stepped out of it, she would be in complete darkness.

She looked up at the hole in the roof of the cave: there was no way she would be able to climb out that way. She wondered if she could call for help, but knew she was too far from the village to be heard. Would anyone be out in the fields? Probably not. Still...

She shouted for help, again and again, but none came.

She was going to have to go back through the caves – through the darkness – if she were to get out of there.

She looked at the dark opening with a twinge of fear.

Ffraid chewed her lip as she tried to visualise the route she had taken. It had been fairly straight and easy. She could do it.

Ffraid took a deep breath and stepped into the void. Feeling to either side she shuffled her way forwards. After a short distance, it opened out into a wider space. This was the cave with the stalactites. There was, she remembered, just the one exit. All she had to do was follow the wall to reach it.

In the darkness and going up, the passageway was difficult going and she slipped and fell more than once, before deciding to crawl up it.

Then, she reached the cave that had put her in mind of cheese. The way out was in the opposite wall: all she had to do was go straight across.

Suddenly, her feet slipped from under her and she fell and slid in a chaos of movement. There was a crash. She felt about and torched broken pieces of plastic: her torch had shattered and would never light her way again.

Ffraid sat up with a groan. She ached. She would be bruised.

Where was she? She rubbed her head. She had rolled to her left, which meant the way out was a little to her right and ahead of her.

She crawled the rest of the way to the wall of the cave, then stood and felt for the exit. There it was. She stepped through and carefully felt her way along the passage.

Only, she realised after a while, it wasn't taking her up. Surely this passage should go up? She was certain it should. Was she wrong? Should she turn around?

Suddenly, the floor seemed to disappear from beneath her feet and she found herself falling. Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Ffraid screamed as she slammed into rock and something in her leg went *snap!*

She lay there for some time. Her leg hurt. Everything hurt. She sobbed. She was scared. She wanted her Mam. She couldn't stand and, even if she had been able, had no idea where she was or where to go.

Suddenly, she wished she had listened to her parents stayed out of the cave.

Ends

Sinkhole

By DJ Tyrer

Suddenly, unexpectedly
Land vanishes
Hole appears
Swallowing, gulping down
People, pets, whole houses vanish
Humanity suddenly feels so small

In The Mines

By DS Davidson

The old timer swears he saw
Flopping, clutching on the tunnel floor
Something like a disembodied arm
All white and pale and wet
It can't be true, and yet
He swears that's not the strangest thing
In the mines he's ever seen
Down in the darkness
The foetid depths of eternal night
Things better hidden from mortal sight
And he also swears he saw
Something that walked like a man
But was not a man but something else
Something without a face
Something that never was part of the human race

Welcome

By JD DE Hart

when feet first
touched the earth
there was no vision
of the dust clouds
dissipating

no thought
of newness

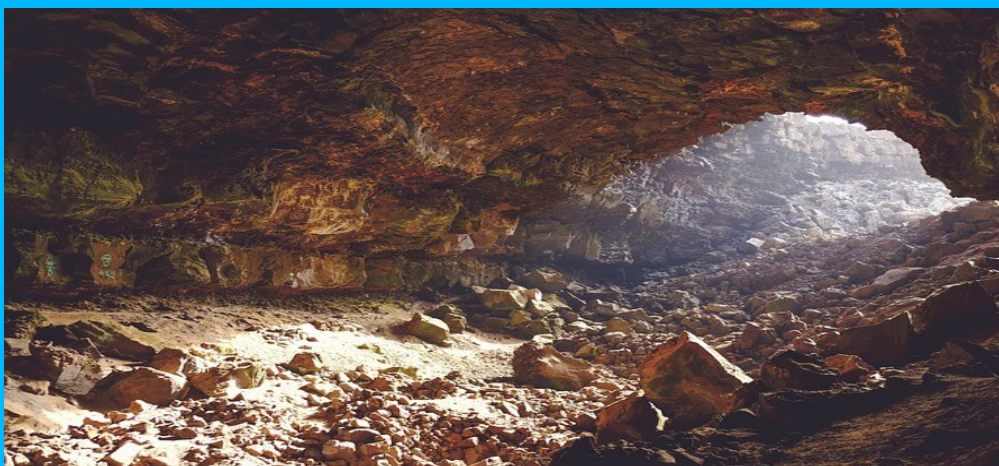
of memories of culture
being removed
or language structure
changing

no credence
to power systems

but soon enough
assimilation occurred
feet became dusty
and *lingua franca*
reared its difficult
head in discourse

soon, the world they
came from was a distant
myth or laughter-
inducing story

and the new world
was their chain.





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