

# The Crow's Quill

AUGUST 2022

ELDRITCH SEAS

## TALES OF GOTHIC DELIGHT

Step onto the ferry and sail through six stories of eldritch horror, where gods and spirits reign, and our earthly bodies warp unbidden.

## SNEAK PEEKS

See what lurks in the dangerous depths of our upcoming anthology, *Tales from Brackish Harbor*.

## Poetry Interludes

The Crow community delves into the watery abyss, towing forth two dark poems for you.

Independent. *Rebellious.* Dreadful.



QUILL & CROW  
PUBLISHING HOUSE

# CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Please be advised that the stories included in our magazine fall under the genres of horror and Gothic fiction. As such, there are elements and themes that may be upsetting or triggering.

You will find an **index of triggers** at the end of the magazine should you wish to apply your own personal discretion. We have done our best to identify potential triggers but we apologize deeply if we missed something.

While we do not promote stories with gratuitous gore or exploitative events, we understand the importance of communicating transparently with our readers and establishing our community as a safe space.

Yours,

**QUILL & CROW  
PUBLISHING HOUSE**



# ABOUT THE HOUSE

Quill & Crow Publishing House is a quaint and curious press dedicated to promoting the integrity of independent literature. Specializing in all things gothic and macabre, we strive to preserve the upmarket prose while lifting up voices often unheard.

Quill & Crow is not your typical publishing house. Not only because we love bleeding heart poetry and all things odd & macabre, but because we are family. Each one of us brings something amazing & unique to the table.

Whether you are joining us as an author, poet, or just want to hang out as a Friend of the Crows, you are welcomed and appreciated...

...and we will probably feed you.



QUILL & CROW PUBLISHING HOUSE

*Independent. Rebellious. Dreadful.*

## EDITOR'S NOTE

When our beloved assistant editor, Damon Barret Roe, asked if I'd write the Editor's Note for our thirteenth issue, I happily accepted. Only moments later did it hit me—we have successfully published *thirteen consecutive issues* of The Crow's Quill.

This would not be possible without some amazing Crows. William Bartlett began the magazine last August after a brainstorming session between him and I, but eventually had to step away. We almost canceled it, when Damon swooped in. It was important to us to keep producing content that was free to read and supported the community we love. So she graciously took it on, and created a version of The Crow's Quill unlike anything I could have imagined. Her sharp eye and brilliant creativity make the magazine the Gothic perfection it is today. Combined with the talents of indie authors, and the dedication of our Editing Team—Kayla, Jay, Eli—our magazine is thriving. I'm so very proud to have The Crow's Quill Magazine as an integral part of Quill & Crow Publishing House.

We hope you enjoy these stories for our unlucky thirteenth issue, and get a thrill out of the *Tales from Brackish Harbor* sneak peeks inside. Hopefully we will whet your appetite for our upcoming anthology—which will surely not disappoint.

See you out on the perilous sea.

Dreadfully yours,  
*Cassandra L. Thompson*  
Cassandra L. Thompson  
Owner, Editor-in-Chief

# CONTENTS

## TALES FROM BRACKISH HARBOR

SNEAK PEEKS BETWEEN EVERY STORY & POEM



09



16

### 09 CLEPSYDRA

A man on a cruise finds a way to free himself of his dysmorphic struggle.

Written by **Jim Horlock.**

### 16 THE WOMAN FROM THE COVE

A man falls for a woman rumored to be a witch.

Written by **Daphne Shawn.**

24

POETRY INTERLUDE BY **WILLIAM BARTLETT**



26

### 26 JOINED WITH THE SEAS

Waiting to walk the plank, a woman reckons with the eldritch unknown.

Written by **K.A. Schultz.**

# CONTENTS



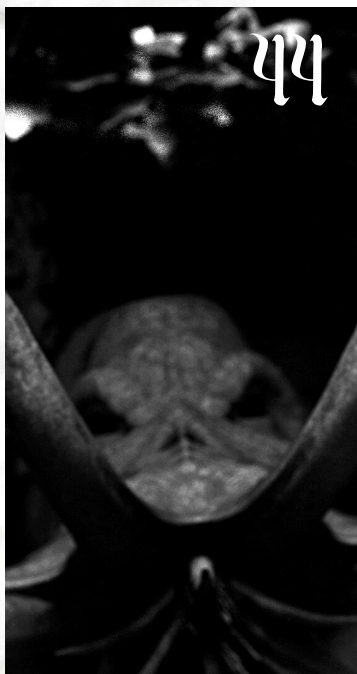
## 34 JOURNAL DISCOVERED, AUTHOR UNKNOWN

The final entries of someone's descent into madness.

Written by **Krista Van Prooyen.**

42

POETRY INTERLUDE BY **LUCAS MANN**



## 44 THE SHADOW FROM THE DEEP

A man recounts a horrifying encounter with the unknown.

Written by **Stephen Veilleux.**



## 51 THE SEA, SHE SINGS

A widow discovers a near-death hallucination may be real and very deadly.

Written by **J.A. Duncan.**

## 60 MERCH MARKET

Learn about the House's ever-growing collection of published works, and how to dress like a Crow.



# CONTENTS

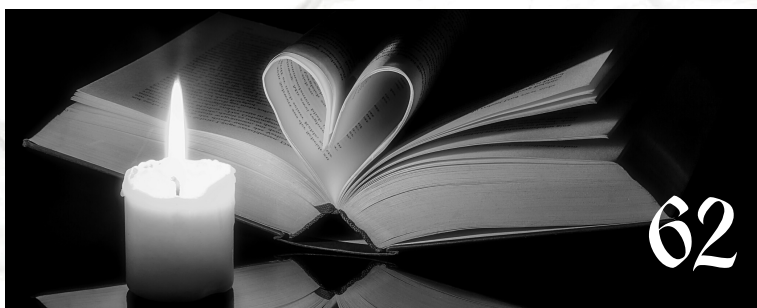
## 61 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A message to our incredible supporters. From associate editors **JayLynn Watkins & K.R. Wieland**.



## 62 TRIGGER INDEX

A comprehensive list of any and all content that may be disturbing to some of our cherished readers.



### SUPPORT US ON BMAC!

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A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

I stared at the sight in front of me. I'd hoped for signs of life on the island. A larger village, if not a vibrant commercial scene. I swallowed back the bitter taste that grew in my mouth as I gazed over the hill. It would be fine, I told myself as a bead of sweat traversed my temple. We could make something of this.

The road curved, and the land to the right of us dropped sharply. Below, a smattering of chimneys reached up like hackles on a dog's back, bordered by a beach the color of ash and strewn with seaweed. Beyond the beach, a rocky spit of land jutted into the sea, the lighthouse standing sentinel atop it. Here, though, the grays of the island had been replaced by greens. The chimneys were shrouded in plant-cover, and an emerald layer of flora grew around the lighthouse like a jacket.

Our steps grew quiet as we descended. I looked down to see a thick, leafy layer stretching across the cobblestones beneath our feet. Fiona's hand tightened in mine, and I thought I heard a whisper of her word on the wind again. *Rotten.*

LURE  
Amanda Casile



A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

Simon stood next to Thomas. The sea was angry and mourning, using the wind to scream and to warn, and the rain was sharp and cold. Simon told Thomas he cared for him, wanted to invite him to the library, show him all his favorite books, discuss Antwerp Johanssen and his uncannily long life, make tea together.

Thomas blinked, turned back towards the canvas. His voice sounded distant and echoed as if underground. *Thank you, but no. I'm here for the fog.*

The sky laughed. The sand laughed.

They pressed Simon above and below, compressing his spine—sliding off, disintegrating cheap glue, poorly made cover—heavy, heavy. The sea didn't laugh, the sea sighed in an un-parsable mélange of irritation and sympathy; the sea *understood*. Simon walked forward, into the embrace of the water, pulled below the surface, and drowned.

Thomas never looked away from the easel.

SALT & FOG  
R. Thursday

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



**Clepsydra**



**WRITTEN BY  
JIM HORLOCK**

All life came from the sea. Before things grew complex, before we diversified and split apart, before limbs and lungs and hate and hurt. Simple origins. Pure.

Sometimes I think about those diagrams of evolution that look like trees, tracing branches back further and further, closer to the core of all things. It helps me sleep.

“What are you thinking about?” Simon asks. Leaning over the prow, the sunset behind him, hair practically floating in the breeze, he is beautiful.

I can’t help but smile as I gesture to the open ocean. “Just enjoying the view.” It would be better without the thunderous churning of the enormous ship we’re on as it breaks its way through the waves.

He grins. “I don’t believe that for a second. That clockwork brain of yours is always whirring away.”

I want to tell him he’s wrong, that it’s not clockwork. It’s fluid, rushing



**I imagine I’m in the  
deepest part of the  
ocean, far from the  
pious light of the  
sun.**

endlessly towards an inevitable terminus. Water always runs downhill. He won't understand. I've never been good at explaining myself. "Did you know that several ancient cultures used water to measure time?" I tell him instead. "A water clock is called a clepsydra."

He rolls his eyes but he's still smiling. "Fascinating."

He doesn't understand. How can I explain? How do I bridge the gap between us? I open my mouth to tell him that the speed of sound is different in water, that my meaning is lost in the ripples.

He puts a finger to my lips. "Did you bring me on this cruise to lecture me or shall we do something fun?" There's a suggestion in the quirk of his mouth that starts my heart racing. He pulls me by the hand, and I follow, drawn by the current towards crashing waves.



Afterwards, he sleeps, and I miss his sea-green eyes.

I move to the window, trying desperately not to hate myself and failing. I pick at my knuckles, wishing things were simpler. It's hopelessly unfair that we're carried on strange and wanton tides, yet expected to stay a course. Why should we be punished for things beyond our control? Not even mountains can resist the ocean forever.

I don't remember walking back out to the deck. I should panic at the lost time and the strange clouds swirling overhead. Instead, I feel calm. It seems natural to return to the sea. I feel the spray on my face and breathe in the salt. I picture water rushing downhill. I picture the tree of evolution in reverse. I hear the call from the depths.

*Come home. Be free.*

"I can't go back," I tell the horizon. "I can't face it. It's too much."

*Be free,* the crashing waves reply.

"Are you alright?"

I come back to myself. The man speaking to me is older, gray-haired and bearded. I frown at him, but he nods at my hands; I've picked my knuckles bloody. Flushing, I hide the shame, just as I always have.

The man stares at me for a while. His eyes are the rolling gray of an oncoming storm. "Almost every primitive culture worshipped the sea," he says, turning to the water. "Is there any wonder? Mesmerizing, isn't she?"

"Yes." I say it and mean it.

“Constant yet transient. Gentle and powerful. Life-giver and -destroyer.” He chuckles. “She is everything. The whole world is in the sea and the sea is in all of us.”

I’m struck by this man, this stranger, who so aptly gives voice to my own thoughts.

He looks at me. “I know that look. You’re devout.”

A sting of religious shame, a reflexive whip-crack of guilt passed down for generations until it’s practically genetic.

“Not to him.” The old man throws a scowl upwards. “To her.” He gestures at the water. “People have always felt the call of the deep. You’re like me, you hear it too. Listen to it, boy.” He grips me suddenly, powerful hands painful on my shoulders. His teeth are pointed and his mouth reeks of brine. “Listen! Listen! I led us here for this!”

“You’re the captain?” My mind is in a fog. I can’t remember why I’m on the deck. The sea is loud in my head.

“The captain is dead.” He takes a deep breath and then bellows like a foghorn. There’s a crown of jagged coral pushing through the skin of his brow. His eyes are whirlpools and I fall in.

I want to fall in.



I dream of dark figures and beating drums. Of blood collected in a stone bowl and poured into the waves. Of a ring of child skulls for protection and screams mixed with gull cries.

I dream of a woman chained in a cave, waiting for the tide to come in, dying so fishermen can gather full nets.

I dream that I’m naked before a swelling storm. I can smell the breath of the old man and the clouds are full of his whirlpool eyes and jagged teeth. As they bite down on me, it’s not blood that gushes out, but brine. I’m glad to see it because it means I’m clean at last.

I wake to the sound of the storm.

“Are you alright?” Simon asks sleepily.

I flinch from his touch by instinct, and my heart boils inside me. In the dark, I hear his frustrated sigh.

“Not this again.”

It seems so important that I hold onto the dream, but it’s already slipping away

from me. "There was a man. I think. I was on the deck. Was I on the deck?"

"Do you have any idea how it makes me feel when the man I love recoils at my touch? I thought we were past all this, Andrew!"

I can't see Simon's sea-green eyes in the darkness, but I know there are tears in them. I want to apologize, I want to tell him it's okay, to explain that it's not his fault. It's not him, it's me. That the revulsion is internal.

The words won't come. I can't stop thinking about the man on the deck, the tree, the call.

"Disgusting." He stabs the word at me like a knife. "Repulsive. Inhuman."

Each word is a wound, familiar as the pain of an old injury that won't heal. I hear them in Simon's voice, in my father's voice, in my own voice.

"I'm going to get some air," he says, leaving the bed and pulling on clothes. "I get enough rejection from my family. From everyone. I don't need it from you."

The door slams behind him and I'm left in the dark.

I curl into a ball and sob. I imagine I'm in the deepest part of the ocean, far from the pious light of the sun. The dark is soothing, not smothering. The weight of water is comforting, not crushing. The pressure of the deep is nothing compared to the brutal mass of the open sky, of being seen, of being judged.

The violence of my heaving sobs causes my stomach to rebel. I stumble to the window, shoving it open in time to vomit over the side. Wiping my mouth, I feel the revulsion redoubling. I am sickened by my own body. The hair, the sweat, the flesh, the crude undulations and abhorrent smells. How can anyone live like this? How can they stand it?

"I can't do this anymore," I sob. "I can't."

*Be free!* the sea calls through the window.

"Listen!" The old man's screeches ride the wind like a gull.

I taste the salt of my own tears and I know what I have to do.



I am the water, rushing towards its terminus. All I have to do is let myself be carried back to that inevitable point. To bliss.

I drift through the ship, head full of rolling waves, following the tree of evolution back to the source. Around me, the people come apart, regressing to a purer state. Limbs fall away, sloughing from bodies. They don't seem to notice.

As I pass the bar, I watch a man collapse as his legs melt. He drags himself to his

table with his arms, as though nothing matters but his destination. He's still smiling as his fingers dissolve, then his hands, then his arms. From the table, his wife laughs as if he's just told a joke. Her jaw slips off, 430 million years undone. He laughs too, a gurgling puddle on the ground. I'm pleased for them.

Soon, I'll be happy too.

I know Simon will be on the deck. I step around discarded organs, now vestigial. A man disgorges his own lungs. His eyes melt in his face. He doesn't need either anymore. He'll see through chemical touches and breathe through the shimmering membrane of his new form. Free of judgment, free of guilt, freed from wretched flesh.

Simon is leaning on the railing. He sees me coming, and his anger quickly turns to concern. "Are you okay?"

Can't he tell his flesh is boiling? Doesn't he know the beautiful metamorphosis that's about to happen?

"I'm not sure what's real anymore," I tell him. That concerned frown of his deepens, but I start laughing. "None of it matters. I don't know if it's this storm or the sea or if it's all a dream, but none of it matters."

His face is a mosaic of emotions. Confusion. Elation. Relief. "You mean...you're going to tell people?"

"Better than that. There won't be any people. They've already started to change, don't you see them?"

"Andrew, you're scaring me."

I seize him by the shoulders. "It's okay! Our bodies will fall away just like theirs and we'll be something purer, something more beautiful!"

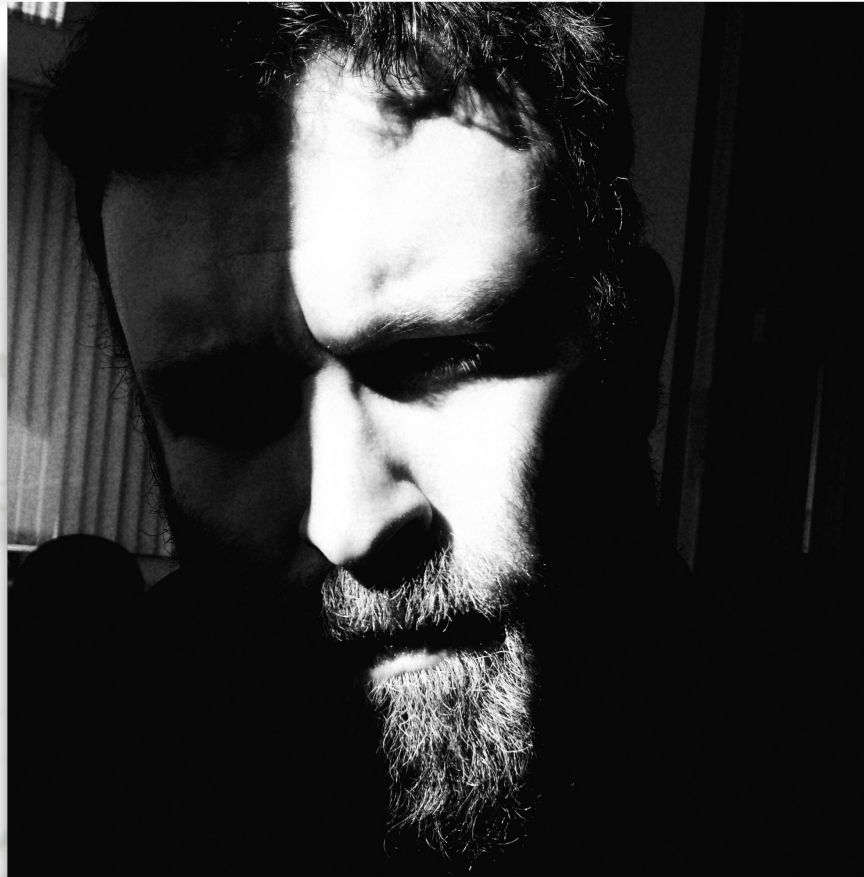
"Stop!"

But it's too late to stop. I've forced us over the railing. We're falling. The sky is surging. The sea is singing. I taste the salt.

I am the water, rushing towards its terminus.



# Jim Horlock



Jim is a UK-based author currently haunting Cardiff. He enjoys scaring people just as much as he enjoys making them laugh and short stories of his have crept their way into a dozen anthologies. He's currently working on a short horror collection of his own.

Jim is a horror movie nerd, an evil dungeon master, a comic book obsessive and a tall tale enthusiast. He likes strong beer and smooth whiskey; please bear this in mind when making your offerings.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

It rises on the bed of dead fish to bring its eyes level with hers. The years have been unkind to both of them, skeletons too prominent, but they're still here, aren't they? Still hungry but here, consuming what they can to fill the emptiness growing hollower by the day.

She brings her hand to its beckoning fingers. They interlock between the rope.

Fever burns hotter in her face, pulses between her thighs, and she remembers how the black secretions coated her neck and shoulders where it tasted without breaking through. She'd furiously scrubbed that off before emerging from the water, legs trembling as though afraid they would merge and their tails would knot around each other, like rat snakes in their season. By the time she climbed back up the cliffs, it was a mere shadow in the lagoon glow as it swam out of the inlet, and with the fading of the song, she forgot, or thinks she forgot. Blood and bruises were from slipping on the rocks, and so were the blank, empty hours lost.

TASTES OF DESPERATION

**Amanda M. Blake**



THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# The Woman from the Cove



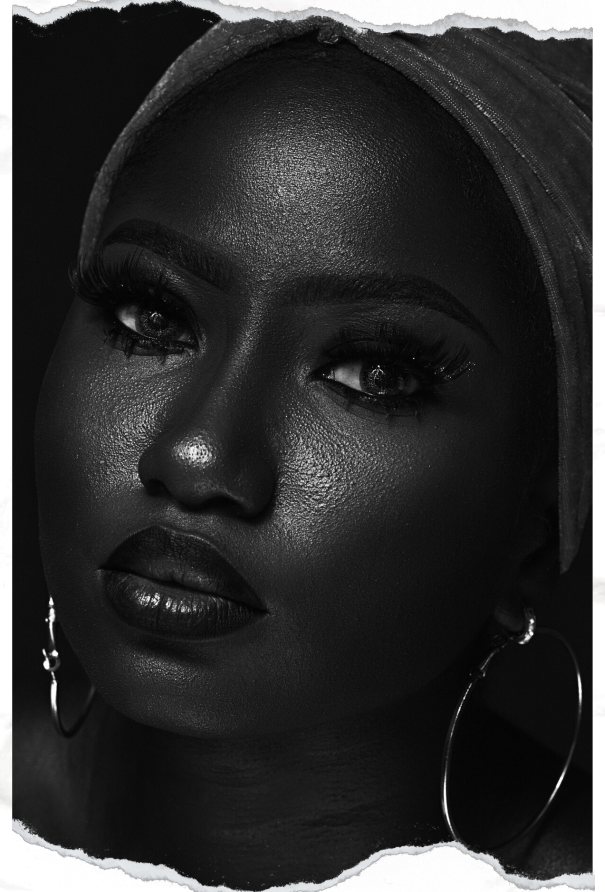
WRITTEN BY  
DAPHNE SHAWN

*A frosty gale swept through the harbor as Edmund Walker moved swiftly on The Vanguard. He stretched and strained, pulling down sails, winding up ropes and packing tools away below deck. Winter, the full brunt of it, was imminent and he'd been charged with securing the vessel until it could be stored inland.*

*Edmund wiped a sheen of sweat from his brow, neck, and chest, then bundled up to head home.*

*He walked from the piers, using the milky moonlight as a guide. From there, he could enter the forest, staying along the leaf-strewn path leading to his house. When he came to the clearing at the edge of the woods, he noticed a lumpy figure prone on the ground, peppered with sand.*

*He drew closer. The figure was covered in seaweed and some sort of gelatinous slime, emitting an odor not unlike charred coals. He was able to make out a head,*



**His father spoke often of *Dhairuga*, some ancient leviathan, lurking deep beneath the waves, ever ready to capsize boats and devour the crew.**

*facedown, with haphazard arms grasping dirt on either side of it. A lone, puckered tentacle wrapped salaciously around an exposed thigh. The shifting clouds revealed long, curly locks against smooth, unmarked skin.*

*This was a woman. Unconscious and alone.*

*Thinking her dead, he rushed over, turning her onto her back. Sabina! From the cottage by the beach. He called her name several times. When she didn't stir he shook her vigorously.*

*As he pinched her nose, readying himself to revive her, she came to, startled and frightened.*

*"Honsu, honsu abedya wonmi!" she shrieked, coughing up a bit of seawater. She winced, pulling swiftly at the tight leaves wrapped around her limbs.*

*Edmund's brow furrowed. What language was that? He tugged the tentacle from her leg, throwing it into the tall grass. He had a thousand questions. He figured it better to preserve her dignity, waiting for her to compose herself, before he silently walked her home.*

*She grinned weakly as she wiped her hair back from her face.*

*"Sure you're alright?" he asked.*

*"M' fine," she said, taking deep steadying breaths.*

*There was much more to tell than she'd ever dare to here and now. Edmund was sure of that. From that moment, he was determined to unravel her mystery.*



Saturdays were hectic affairs in Brackish Harbor. Merchants and customers alike braved the cold to get on with commerce. Bakers popped buttery balls of dough into stone ovens, customers haggled over the price of salmon, smithies fashioned metal into horseshoes and hoes, while loving wives perused the stalls for fresh produce to cook for their families.

One striking woman was among them, her curly hair pulled beneath a bonnet. The walk to town caused her calloused feet to ache. Still, she smoothed down her coat, staving off her discomfort with steely determination.

She pulled a few bills and coins from her pocket, counting them carefully. Weekly work at the Brouwer Mansion left little once rent was paid. Surprisingly, she was able to buy two loaves of bread, a block of cheddar, and three pears.

While bent over a table of greens, she felt a large hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Sabina. Thought I might find you here."

She turned around to see familiar grey eyes, framed by sleepy lids. “Mornin’, Edmund. D’your mother send you out with a list?”

“I memorized everything,” he said.

She chuckled at the burgeoning redness in his cheeks, handing him an empty basket.

They both purchased mustard greens. Sabina accompanied him to the butcher’s shop, patiently waiting as he had a rack of lamb and two pork loins cut.

Sabina remained cordial, his mood brightening once she accepted his offer for an escort home. She chatted about her days at the Brouwer Mansion as Edmund listened greedily. He envisioned her coming home, exhausted, her dark eyes brightening when she saw him there, arms open and ready.

“No good can come from entwining yourself with a woman like that,” Mother once warned him.

“A colored woman?” Taboo in the Harbor held as fast and tight as a hangman’s noose about the neck.

“A witch,” she’d said.

He didn’t care. He simply wanted more. To know her inner thoughts and feelings, whether there was room in her heart for another. For him.

When they arrived at the cottage, he pressed a wrapped pork loin in her arms and she thanked him. Her smile was grateful, but her eyes were slightly ashamed. He squeezed her hand quickly, before mounting his horse.



Like his father, Edmund was a sailor. The family moved south to Brackish Harbor, just before Virginia’s Statehood.

Edmund braved horrendous weather for the joy of trawling for tuna and kingfish. Never bitter when angry waves toppled him overboard into the cold ocean depths.

“Careful. We lost several men a few years back. ‘S not just sharks one has to worry about,” Davies warned him.

His father spoke often of *Dhairuga*, some ancient leviathan, lurking deep beneath the waves, ever ready to capsize boats and devour the crew. *Lurid tales of sleep-deprived sailors*, he’d thought. He had no particular reason to believe those stories were true. Until the day he found her in the Cove.



It was rare for Edmund to run into her. Sabina didn't attend church services or most village gatherings. Like her cottage home on the beach, her life lay on the edge of their town. Shopping was the most convenient time to ever really see her.

Edmund thought of her often, however. The lilt of her voice, the dimples in her cheeks, the gentle sway of her hips as she walked.

Once he happened upon her collecting flowers in the center of a field just off the Cove. She was bent over, plucking them by the handful and shoving them into her wooden basket.

"Folk 'round here know these as hollyhock," she'd said, holding some up for him to see.

Their scent was sweet and smoky, a bit lighter than sandalwood.

"Their petals shine black in the moonlight."

He was too busy watching the way she bit her lower lip, wanting to grab her and taste for himself. Instead, he turned on his heels and excused himself before he blurted out his thoughts.



Weeks later, as temperatures rose, Davies brought *The Vanguard* back to the harbor, charging Edmund with preparing it for the new season. He spent the morning and afternoon patching holes in the wood, unpacking tools, and washing the sails so he could secure them to their masts. He rubbed a thick greasy pomade made from whale blubber and seal oil onto the wooden surfaces, giving them an attractive shine.

By early evening, a light rain began to fall. Edmund was, by this time, a filthy mess. In truth, he'd planned to wander by Sabina's cottage once he was done at the docks. But he'd have to save that visit for another time, when he was more presentable.

The rain became torrential as Edmund climbed out of the boat. He just needed to get further inland to the stables so he could saddle up and ride home. But as he walked up the docks towards the sandy road, he noticed a lone figure walking along the beach. It was Sabina, in nothing but a bright cotton dress. Flimsy from the downpour, it clung tightly to her lovely curves, while her hair hung heavily in thick coils around her face, and her bare feet gathered layers of sand as she moved.

An onslaught of wind whipped through the tops of the trees, shifting sand upwards, causing the docks—even *The Vanguard*—to sway against the rising waves.

Sabina kept nearing, so close now that he noticed her legs and arms were covered in a dark salve with a familiar smoky scent. She was chanting. Foreign words so dark and heavy, they seemed to summon the storm clouds above.

Edmund called out to her several times, but she never answered.

When Sabina turned away and headed towards the ocean, he ran back to *The Vanguard*, hastily unfurling the vessel's sails, and straining to pull up the anchor.

"What in heaven's name are you doing?" he shouted. There was no way she heard him, but once she was safely back home, he could ask all the questions he wanted.

Sabina continued, walking decisively into the water. Edmund steered the craft away from the shoreline and further out to sea, his heart racing, desperate to save her.

Storm clouds gathered above, summoning lightning and thunderous billows that quickened his heartbeat. The ocean became violent; waves rising and crashing into one another and against the side of *The Vanguard*, dousing Edmund over and over. Even as the water obscured his sight, he wiped his hair back, clearing his eyes, intent on reaching her before she could be swallowed whole.

Sabina kept walking, her arms outstretched, reaching for some foothold he could not see.

Edmund pressed closer still. "Sabina! Tread the water 'til I reach you!"

She was chest deep now. She would soon float or sink. He turned the boat at an angle, fighting against the pull of the waves. With the wind in his favor, once he was close enough, he could grab her, or jump in and swim to her if necessary.

"*Abedya wonmi, bonsu Dhairuga!*" The words fell crisp against the air.

An icy shiver pierced the center of Edmund's chest. *What did she just say?*

Sabina turned to look at him then, seemingly resigned, with water at her neck and the thunder crackling all around them.

"Hold on Sabina! Please hold on!" Edmund dropped anchor, diving into the swirling waves. It didn't look like she'd make it without his help.

The water slapped against his skin. Its salty tang stinging his tongue. He saw her head disappear beneath the water, but he kept swimming, refusing to let despair deter him.

As he dove, opening his eyes, ready to grasp her however necessary, he heard a treacherous groan spread from beneath him. It echoed, pulling his heartbeat into its treacherous rhythm. Swaths of water violently rippled away from where she'd just been. Edmund's body was tossed above the surface, then back beneath the waves.

Water pummeled his head, causing several moments of bewilderment. He pulled

himself above the surface, taking a large pull of air into his lungs. She wouldn't be too far down. He could still get her. As he sank down, eyes focused, a whirl of indigo cloud swirled by him.

A large gelatinous eye opened in front of his face. He almost choked on a mouthful of water. Its sickly yellow iris seemed to peer inside him, questioning his resolve. *What in bells' bells are you, demon?*

Edmund sank deliberately, parting the dense wall of water with his arms, swimming away from the creature and back towards the boat. He could last a decent time without air, but he wasn't physically capable of fighting something five times his size.

Hopefully, it would move on soon and he'd still have time to get Sabina. He just needed more air and a few moments of dogged courage. He would find her, of this he was certain.

As he bobbed between the ocean and sky, Edmund opened his eyes against the downpour. A thick tentacle stretched towards the heavens between two mountainous clouds. A random bolt of lightning illuminated its puckers, pulsing lewdly in the air. Rolled up at the end of its coils was Sabina—legs and arms limp, dress torn at the waist, face towards the heavens.

*"Honsu, Dhairuga. Honsu Dhairuga! Abedya wonmi,"* she yelled.

Edmund called out to her.

Then the tentacle straightened and sank below the waves. She smiled at him before the plunge.



# Daphne Shawn



Daphne Shawn was born in the Carolinas where she lived with her parents and younger brother. Ballet lessons, music lessons and camping filled her earliest days. But once her parents enrolled her in her first poetry class, she was drawn to the power of storytelling.

Now residing in NYC, Daphne has performed in regional musical theater. She continues to create, writing short stories, screenplays and music. When not spending time with her friends and family, you can find her catching a Broadway show, uncovering secrets of the ancient world and cavorting with tree fairies on her hikes in the forest.

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A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

Once again, Victor wakes in the dark without having remembered falling asleep. This time he feels no anxiety. He'd been drunk, warm, and exhausted. Drifting off makes sense under the circumstances, and as he opens his eyes, the eager grin remains on his face.

Until his eyes adjust.

In the dark, lurking at low levels, some squatting, some on all fours, some lying on their bellies on the table, are the town's occupants, wearing papier-mâché masks. The masks are poorly made, rough at the edges, and the paint hasn't seeped into all of the cracks, but the resemblance is unmistakable. Eels. Their fangs of sewing needles and glass shards are bared, waiting to strike. As he leans to the right, they move to their left, honed in and vicious.

He laughs at first, ignorant of any genuine malice, waiting for the band to break into song once more and the prank to be over. He looks for Harold and finds him behind one of the nearest masks, recognizing his cream ensemble and veiny, bronzed forearms.

## A BED OF EELS

Fox Claret Hill





## WORTHLESS

I fell  
through the hole of my mind  
and forged my unshaped soul with terror  
as outer darkness chilled my essence  
and endowed upon me its revelation.  
The void froze every dogmatic principle learned.  
Its shattering reverted me to a primal state  
of naivety  
and cloaked me in nihilistic realization.  
The blackness of space was tangible.  
Chaos in the writhing form of potent horror.  
Its slimly tendrils violated my mind with graphic violence  
and suicidal desires.  
My flesh and blood,  
infinitely insignificant,  
a fleck of violet in the screaming twilight of perpetuity.  
Only blood and abysmal despair can restore our existence  
to a semblance of significance.  
Until I possess the courage necessary  
to relinquish physical existence,  
I shall find comfort in the morning's celestial colors  
and rejoice as I breathe the refreshing air of our world's  
greenery  
and exult at the beauty of the sun falling into slumber  
as the world revolves.

WILLIAM BARTLETT



A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM  
**BRACKISH  
HARBOR**

She just stared, the light from the fire brightening her skin, while simultaneously deepening the lines on her face, darkening the circles under her eyes. The corners of her mouth, highlighted by her red lipstick, began to droop in what seemed like an impossibly elongated frown until they dripped, drop by drop off her chin and onto the sand.

She fell to her knees, tumbling over, revealing the ax buried in her back. I dislodged it and wiped the blood on my tattered pants, soiled from years of accumulated filth. “Mother says we must keep it clean,” I whispered.

Bobby broke free of his paralyzed shock and grabbed Monica’s hand, frantically tugging her into the shadows. I turned back to Neil, who had not yet recovered. He merely stood, watching the ax spin through the air, burying itself in his chest with a thud. He groaned and fell backward, landing against one of the posts. His eyes were saucers as he stared at Jen’s lifeless body, life slowly fading from them until they went dark

**REAPING FOR MOTHER**  
**Lucas Mann**

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# Joined with the Seas



**WRITTEN BY  
K.A. SCHULTZ**

When the sun breaks the plain of the ocean, I must die.

He gave me only one choice: walk the plank or be hanged.

I, in my ridiculous fancy, have chosen to walk, for it will be of my volition, and once joined with the seas, what happens next—while the outcome is likely—remains to be seen.

Which means there is a chance.

The rhythmic push of the waves against the boat keeps time; the clang of the ropes against masts keeps time; the thud of the sails, thrust forward, sucked back as the winds inhale, exhale, keeps time. Every limb of this vessel, her wrists, her arms, her ankles, her knees, creaks and bends with the coax of the tidal pulse. Every sound, each gentle lurch, keeps time.

The captain's own clock, a wondrous ebony contraption, commands us from its mantle perch. How ironic; whilst the elite lounge in their berths, raise their glasses



**I wear bracelets  
embedded so deep in  
my flesh, the muscle  
and tendons, dried and  
bloodless, have curled  
up around the metal.**

again and again, they are but an arm's reach from their designated damned, we who languish beneath the very boards upon which they stumble and dance.

My hands, long numb from the iron bands... My skin, just gone. I wear bracelets embedded so deep in my flesh, the muscle and tendons, dried and bloodless, have curled up around the metal, as if to engulf them—what deviously symbiont replacement joints they are. So little else is left of the corporeal me. My spirit barely fills this jaundiced satchel, under which bone and viscera lie asleep, suspended, dead-weighted. Weakly tethered to my torn body, a part of me is ready to let go of the silver strings which, ever more failingly, bind me to them. I hang in limbo, a sad puppet.

To be executed seems almost redundant.

Food? No food. And when did my lips last know the kiss of a blessed drop of water?

There it is! The captain's clock chimes: one, two, three, four, five times. The bell reverberates, lonesome in its somber pitch and tone. In minutes, I know, the first hint of sunrise will announce the day and this final night will be ended.

I sit, and I sit.

The rhythmic push of the waves against the boat keeps time; the clang of the ropes against the masts keeps time; the thud of the sails, thrust forward, sucked back, keeps time...

I sit, and I sit.

And there! The captain's clock chimes one, two, three, four times. The bell reverberates, lonesome in its somber pitch and tone—

But this makes no sense. Am I imagining the count? Had I imagined that of the previous hour?

One hour ago, my execution was imminent. One hour ago, the sun hovered in the wings, ready to take the stage as a luminous, useless bystander. But now? Everyone around me still sleeps. There are no witnesses, no one to ask, no one to count, as I do...

I will stay quiet.

The rhythmic push of the waves against the boat keeps time; the clang of the ropes against masts keeps time; the thud of the sails keeps time, thrust forward, sucked back. The winds ebb and flow, echoing their sibling tides...

I sit, and I sit

And there! The captain's clock chimes once, twice, three times. The bell

reverberates, lonesome in its somber pitch and tone.

Oh, God, what is happening here? Why, now, is it three in the morning when a few minutes ago I know the clock chimed its pre-dawn last?

Mother in heaven, answer me! Has time come to a standstill? Has she reversed herself?

I look down at my shackles—grown enormous, they are the size of small iron wheels. I lower my arms, hold my hands slack, and the rings slip off, fall to the floor. I step out of cruel bands that have ground at my ankles for weeks. I can barely stand upright. I have not stood on my own for days. I venture a step to the left—

The rhythmic push of the waves against the boat keeps time; the clang of the ropes against masts keeps time; the thud of the sails, thrust forward, sucked back, keeps time. Time...

Time?

I look all around me. There is nowhere to go but up. The ladder. Try the hatch...  
And there!

The captain's clock chimes once, twice, and stops. The bell reverberates, wanes.

Something has turned the tides, is afoot, and I alone bear witness to it, aware of some metaphysical reversal that offers up no explanation...

The skies beckon through jagged splits between the hatch's cover.

Dear Savior, guide me now through this spell of unyielding lunacy. What am I to do? There are no waking souls. This galleon, the deck, are devoid of humanity. The only signs of life are that of the ship as she responds to the prompts from the waters, the winds...

The boat keeps time...

I wander stealthily amongst coiled ropes, barrels, salt-encrusted rigging. As far as I can see, no land in sight. Only endless, sleeping seas surround this ship, surround me—

And there!

The captain's clock chimes once. And once only. The bell reverberates...

Do I stand here a free woman? Alive?

Lord, am I still alive?

Or am I already dead, taking my first steps towards eternity? Will a light reveal itself to show me where to tread?

Am I a ghost, the others momentarily suspended, my walk across this deck lasting but a handful of seconds in the time-space of mortals? Where there still resides a sun

that will indeed rise above the distant cusp of the ocean? Where the captain and his crew will awaken, and their guards will descend into the hold for me and find nothing but my stiffening corpse, a ragged urchin trussed in their bracelets, blood-encrusted, foul edges curled with decay, soiled scraps, nit-paved, open sores matted?

Yes! Let it be me as I now stand, a spirit making her way to God's heaven, and pray some light arrives to illuminate my way, perhaps lent by the Christ child itself, to aid this wayward pilgrim's progress to the next realm.

But, where do I go from here?

Aha! A small light flickers on the gangway before me, its skipping cadence catches my eye. It bids me, *follow*. Is it real? Such a beautiful insanity! No, I will not question this now. No explanation, proof, or courage are needed. I have nothing to lose...

Nothing...

Sky-borne trinket, wait for me! Yes, I will follow you. You are a bearer of hope, a lantern for my soul, dear firefly. Take me from this tortured captivity!

Slow down, my angel, I come!

I can barely walk, but I grab what I can, pull my broken form forward. You, silently shimmering, a molten and glowing guide—I will grab you and hold you to my breast. I am yours.

No! The captain's clock now chimes the hour that heralds the day's turn! One, two, three, four, five, and six. Seven, eight, and nine. Ten; yes, and eleven and then twelve; all present, predictable as they are stalwart, duly counted, oddly accounted. Have we been hurled backwards to yesterday, or thrown forward to tomorrow? The bell reverberates, its somber pitch and tone wavers, fades...

And yet, here I stand, as all others remain cradled within its hypnotic, somnambulant call.

Yes, I am alive! My Lord, I am still alive.

Beloved lumière, I take these last steps to reach you, my fingertips but a whisper of a wish, distant from your pulsating, playing, flickering, laughing self...

You laugh!

You laugh.

You laugh?

And look...I have taken one step too many.

I fall.

The seas engulf me, the weight of my skeleton too much for the wasted and

threadbare casing barely keeping these limbs contained, one frail piece linked to another.

I sink beneath the surface, the stars, by churning water, erased. Your light remains, atop the foam of my stolen, last breath.

That laugh...

I remember now.

They warned me about you, but from the chaos, amidst the fog of my decrepit state and all their drunken, slipshod, and violent preening, I forgot about you.

Oh yes, they warned me. Behind that sugarplum façade, you, tiny demon, are more truly colored by shades of a deadly jealousy that has evaded all capture, all correction.

Reptilian and humanoid monsters are but kept creatures, oversized henchmen who do your dirty work. I get it.

So, as one would expect, before I am a full fathom submerged, teeth the size of carving knives pierce my thigh, the soft flesh of a hot tongue tastes of me, pressing against skin so freshly shredded, it flutters like strips of fabric. My left leg is twisted and pulled off in the way a licorice whip is rent.

Blood—mine—warms the water as it bursts forth, pulse by pulse by withering pulse, a sash of red meandering skyward to the underside of the ocean's looking glass table. In the liquified moonlight, it is a stain quickly dissipated. The suspended diamond of you is recast a soft rose, like that of a conch, likewise torn from its once perfect, porcelain housing.

Hovering, sparkling, callous, indifferent you.

Tick... Tick...

I less hear that infernal metronome as now feel it, my right leg pulled into the beast's belly as it swallows. I am drawn down, and in. My foot brushes against a small, hard form. It strikes at me, tap-tap-tapping me. Insistent, Insidious. The rest of me arrives.

Damn you.



# K.A. Schultz



**Author Illustrator K.A. Schultz writes with pictures and draws with words. Ardent Free Speech and freedom of creative expression advocate, K.A. is also an art historian and fan of all things darkly romantic—and romantically dark.**

**To learn more about her, her articles and literary or illustrative works, visit her sites and socials.**

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A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

Grayson's blood froze and his stomach twisted agonizingly. The creature using the wooden vessel like a shell was beyond rational description.

The crab-like legs anchoring its form to the rock projected out from the armored body that was coiled inside the hollow half-ship. Glistening flagella sprang from nearly every visible surface, and larger tentacles whipped through the air, their suckers undulating like a thousand mouths ringed with wicked teeth. The eldritch creature didn't appear to have a distinct head, but was covered in bilateral clusters of ebony eyes, each with a celestial pattern as if each orb contained an entire galaxy of stars. The sound of it wetly sucking air through feathered slitted gills was nauseating, and its labored breathing caused its entire hideous mass to ripple. Grayson watched in horror as a mass of tentacles moved apart to reveal a gigantic humanoid face, sunken within innumerable fleshy folds and surrounded by wriggling, bristled appendages.

LOW TIDE  
Nick Bennett

A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

I laid the rope on the floor and the tarp atop it. I rolled him onto the tarp, tucking his arms in at his sides. The edge of his new tattoo peeked from below his sleeve, and I shoved it under his body, averting my eyes. It was ugly, that squid-dark ink, an angular design that filled me with a creeping itch, like eels sliding under my skin whenever I had to look at it.

*No more.*

I pulled my knife from his head and set it in the sink, avoiding looking into the empty hole it left. I wrapped the tarp and rope around him and tied it up tight, with a knot I could step into it like a horse in harness, dragging him behind me, straining at his weight. Out the kitchen door and down the two steps to the back yard. Bump, bump, went his head. I paused to lock the door. Little Edward slept upstairs, alone. I wished Mother was still alive, or that I had a brother or sister to help me with the grisly task. But there was just me, alone as always.

THE GIFT OF RAKOSKA  
Wendy Vogel

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



Journal Discovered,  
Author Unknown



WRITTEN BY  
KRISTA VAN PROOYEN

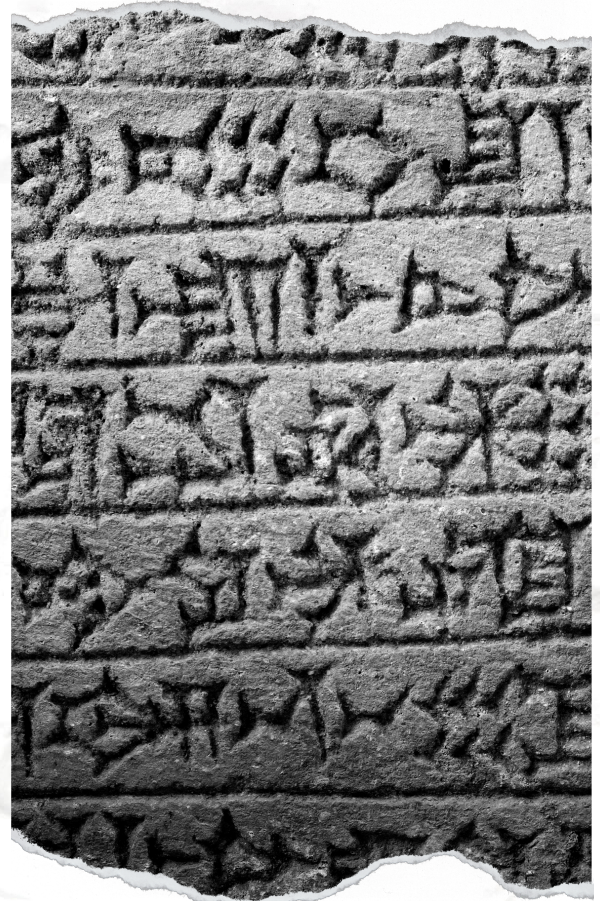
The following comes from a heavily damaged journal unearthed along the north Atlantic coast. The discovery was made by archaeologists excavating wreckage from a catastrophic rogue wave in mid-1948, which decimated the peninsula approximately two hours north of Portland, ME. Recent news of a stone tablet found near the journal and an array of skeletal remains has reignited netizen interest.

Further information is unavailable at this time.

Note: journal entries are un-dated and transcribed as follows:

1. Nothing good happened today. I've returned to the manor, quite reluctantly, and not a single decent thing has occurred since. A list of disappointments:

- The east wing roof collapsed. We've barred the ballroom doors. Gangrene may be stopped by amputation, but this decrepit asylum of a house seems intent on decomposition.



**She rose from the  
water, tossing ships  
out of the channel as  
she stood, her wake  
decorated in bodies  
and foam.**

- Capricorn died. In my roses, of all places!
- Most disappointing: Dr. Aldrez returned my letter months ago and Carl did not forward it, despite explicit instruction to do so.

2. Dr. Aldrez wasted several pages hum-drumming about repatriation laws and elaborating why a stone tablet cannot be dated. But, as I reiterated in a response: finders, keepers. He did confirm the text to be vaguely cuneiform, thus I have concluded the tablet to be a bronze-age artifact. What luck!

3. The weather is unseasonably disagreeable. I wait for rain to break the weight of humidity as the sun stalks across the sky, but refuse to join Marta's barbarian offspring in the pond.

4. Went into town for groceries and the entire area stank of fish guts and rotten kelp. Detoured along the beach peninsula, sure to pass all 12 cairns, just for Carl (superstitious bastard). Upon return, I spotted the tiny island my g.g. grandfather claimed.

Margin note: Remember to survey and respond to offer from oil company.

Margin note: Several vines have broken windows in the drawing room. Hooligans!

5. I miss the city. Kicked a cairn today—think I broke two toes. If the historical society finds out, they'll fine me again. I thought investigating the tablet would entertain me in my retirement. It is unyielding. I am bored.

6. Went for a drink. Bored.

[Several pages stuck together. Damaged beyond legibility.]

7. Read by the pond. Fell asleep watching koi.

Margin note: Cuneiform symbol for *Enlil* similar to glyph on tablet! Why didn't Dr. Aldrez say?

8. Found a translation of *Gilgamesh* in the library, but a spider landed on the book and I dropped it. Marta made Shep get it, but he ran screaming about a ghost. At dinner, I read everyone the story of Enlil flooding the earth. I thought it would be funny, but it was too short and Shep asked too many questions.

9. Spent forty minutes trapped in conversation with a mad sailor raving about a hand reaching out of the sea and snapping a ship in half. Eight tons of steel bent by the will of a monster, he said. What a yuck! I inspected the small crust of land for anything worth keeping, and found it lacking in every way. Bupkis. Accepted offer of Ingraham Oil. Will use profits to restore the east wing. Also: exterminator.

10. Read by pond. Had both feet in the water when a dead raccoon floated by. Nearly died of fright. Used a stick to try and remove it, but it was too heavy. Carl

will do it later.

I've been thinking about the tablet as a map. Cairns as markers? I don't understand Dr. Aldrez's disinterest. Clearly this is profound history!

11. Signed papers. This knobby rock belongs to the oil company, with the assurance that the noise will not disturb my studies. I continue having a crack at the coded tablet, to no avail.

12. They've lied. There's nothing but noise. Note: *Shep* is short for Shepherd. Has Marta named her child after an occupation?

13. Boring day at pond. The house ghoul was caught—turned out to be a family of raccoons intent on multiplying in the solarium. Found a line of ants in my study. Laid poison traps.

14. The clam chowder made us sick. A toxic algae bloom contaminated the shellfish. I've sent a strongly-worded condolence letter to McInnis and his clamdiggers regarding what I assume to be the end of their career.

15. Ants doubled in my study. Found several wandering my desk! Had Marta sweep and set more traps.

**[Several pages of nondescript scribbles, some mathematical additions without context. Scans will be available when archived.]**

16. Hurricane warnings were—thankfully—heeded because Carl's old leg injury was good for it... This is the kind of storm that makes atheists believe in God. What have we done to be swept so fervently?

17. I've stared at the tablet for four days and have decided to take a break.

18. Ants returned. Went a bit mad and hosed down the wall—Shep cheered and helped me lay rocks after we drowned the colony. Oil rig was completed. They've finally gone quiet. All noise below deck, I assume.

19. **[Largely scrawled across two pages with a seemingly unstable hand:]**

**AN INDESCRIBABLE THING CAME OUT OF THE SEA TODAY!**

**\*if survive, add later**

**[Twelve pages of nonsensical drawings, three pages torn away.]**

20. She rose from the water, tossing ships out of the channel as she stood, her wake decorated in bodies and foam. A veil of coral hugged half her visage, the other side a whirlpool of water dripping through a skeleton of leathered flesh, tendrils blowing in the wind like gallows. I inhaled the wicked scent of decay as she shrieked the cacophony of a million dolphins and descended upon us, sinking the world into madness as the sea marched forward at her command. (I heaved down my front and

ruined my shirt.)

21. When priests said I was made in the image of God, I imagined a large man in the sky. I never considered myself as mere parts until I saw her. Incomprehensible... made of pieces: bubbles, and tentacle arms, unblinking eyes, and gaping fish mouths. She eroded our asphalt veins with a sweep of her hand. The smooth surface of the earth shines as town debris sinks into the weedy trenches beside her. Marta hasn't stopped screaming.

22. People followed her retreat with manic laughter. Chickens drowned themselves in the pond while we watched from the refuge of the ballroom staircase. The water continues to rise. There is no understanding what the world has become, there is only survival, madness, or death.

23. This must be a mass extinction.

24. Water poured through broken windows for hours while we raced and gathered supplies. It still rises. I will never again run a faucet without sinking back to this moment.

25. The neighbor's donkey floats beside the chickens. Took all three of us to restrain Carl. None of us venture where the water waits. The ditches between cairns have swelled with brackish swamp, and I think it looks like one of the tablet symbols. Shep disagrees, but he's a child.

26. Marta's gone. There are several humans in the pond. Sent Shep to find food. My skin itches, and Carl won't stop picking at his nails. He's bleeding all over himself and screaming nonsense. I've tied us to the banister.

27. Shep missing.

**[Several damaged pages stuck together.]**

28. I want my parts separated. The symmetry of the world hurts me.

29. I threw a can of beans through a window and the sound of the jagged glass soothed me.

30. Saw a rainbow on the wall. The promise of our God seems easily broken by another.

**[A heavily stained page, seeping into two more.]**

31. I pulled a hangnail and ripped the skin all the way down my finger before I felt pain. I tried to write about Carl using a piece of broken glass to cut himself instead of the leash, but it smeared. The bleeding stopped enough now, but it hurts too much to

32. I caught myself with a foot in the pond today, the useless rope trailing in a

frayed fan behind me. Marta's corpse touched me and I came to my senses, sprinting back. Carl was still here. I can't stop thinking about her bloated, slopping face. There is only madness outside and I have endured it!

33. I blinked blood out of my eye to find a bald patch picked over half my skull. Already my hair was thinning. The water recedes. I watched a line of ants march into a puddle and drown. I desire weightlessness among the deer and goats and squirrels that huddle together in the pond. I am jealous there is no room for me.

34. Our most ancient mother has scolded us and I want it to have meaning, but I fear we are ants. She has no vengeance; her indifference haunts me.

**[Four pages of geometric drawings etched deeply. Several tore through, leaving impressions on successive pages.]**

35. I don't know what the world looks like. Perhaps we are all that remain. If any resist her call...if they remember to survive death and madness, they must, above all, remember never to wake her again. It should be carved into stone as it has been carved on our hearts.

36. I caught myself drinking mud today. I don't know how I escaped my bindings. Tiny shells cut my mouth, and I choked on seaweed as I guzzled mouthfuls of salt. Is there anyone to save us?

37. A fly buzzes at a window of the ballroom, tinkling against the glass despite the gaping hole in the roof. Carl hums along like it's music. I am a fly. A gnat, an ant. I only wait for her to return. I have seen god and been made to understand that I look nothing like her.

38. Hungry.

39. Found Shep. He'd carved off six toes. I couldn't save him, but he didn't drown. The dead all share the same fragile smile. Ate beans.

40. Went into the sea today, nearly drowned. Had to wait for the journal to dry to record anything. People from town float by in neat lines, waving contentedly as they bob through the waves. I've tied myself to the cairn closest to her. I keep the tablet in my lap.

41. Carl drowned and I didn't reach for him. The sea brought him back to me and I held his hand.

42. How naive we were to think of the sea as anything but a place we'd pushed our most restless gods to sleep undisturbed.

43. An ant crawled on my leg. Squashed it.

44. The gulls have picked Carl's backside clean and he looks much better now.

Misshapen and lumpy, an unbalanced mound of bone and tissue, rubbery, oozing. He looks like the handsomest man I've ever seen.

45. I want the kindness of the crabs to carry my sorted parts to her, too—consumed, that I might finally resemble her. I want to be sucked into mollusks and nibbled apart by fish. I want to be barnacled and shellacked with shells and anemones, a shrimp or starfish for decoration. I want to be a tidepool for her children who say such nice things about Carl's delicious eyes.

46. She is The Great Depths. Aphrodite, exquisite goddess rising from the foam in a disarray of sargassum and silt. I am a priest, begging my goddess to answer my call: I wish only to admire you again!

[Transcriber's endnote: The last of the preserved pages are marked with clear impression lines mirroring the glyphs of previous entries, as if the writing utensil ran out of ink. Further analysis required.]





# Krista Van Prooyen



**Krista Van Prooyen is a writer returning to fiction after nearly a decade in business- and travel-writing, with degrees in Creative Writing and Anthropology.**

**She currently lives in Rhode Island with her fiancé, too many plants, and unrealistic language-learning goals.**

**Instagram: @kri5tava**

A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

Beth grimaced, and her brown cheeks flushed with shame. “No. No, of course not. I’m sorry, that was a rotten thing to say. Let’s find you a doctor. Tomorrow, though, okay? It’s late.”

There was no clock in the room, but the sky was a dark, bruised purple, and the streetlamps had come on. Amy caught their reflections in the window. In her brightly-colored shift dress with her fiery red hair, she reminded herself of a small, frightened bird, blown in on an unforgiving wind from some warmer, friendlier climate. Beth stood behind her, staring at the back of her head. Her curly black hair was mussed and frizzy from the humidity, and her dark eyes were as unreadable as calm water. Amy thought she detected a small flicker of something beneath the surface—some stronger emotion Beth wasn’t expressing—but she couldn’t be sure. Couldn’t trust what she saw. As she watched Beth watching her, she didn’t notice the thin gray mist that crept along the road outside, blanketing the town.

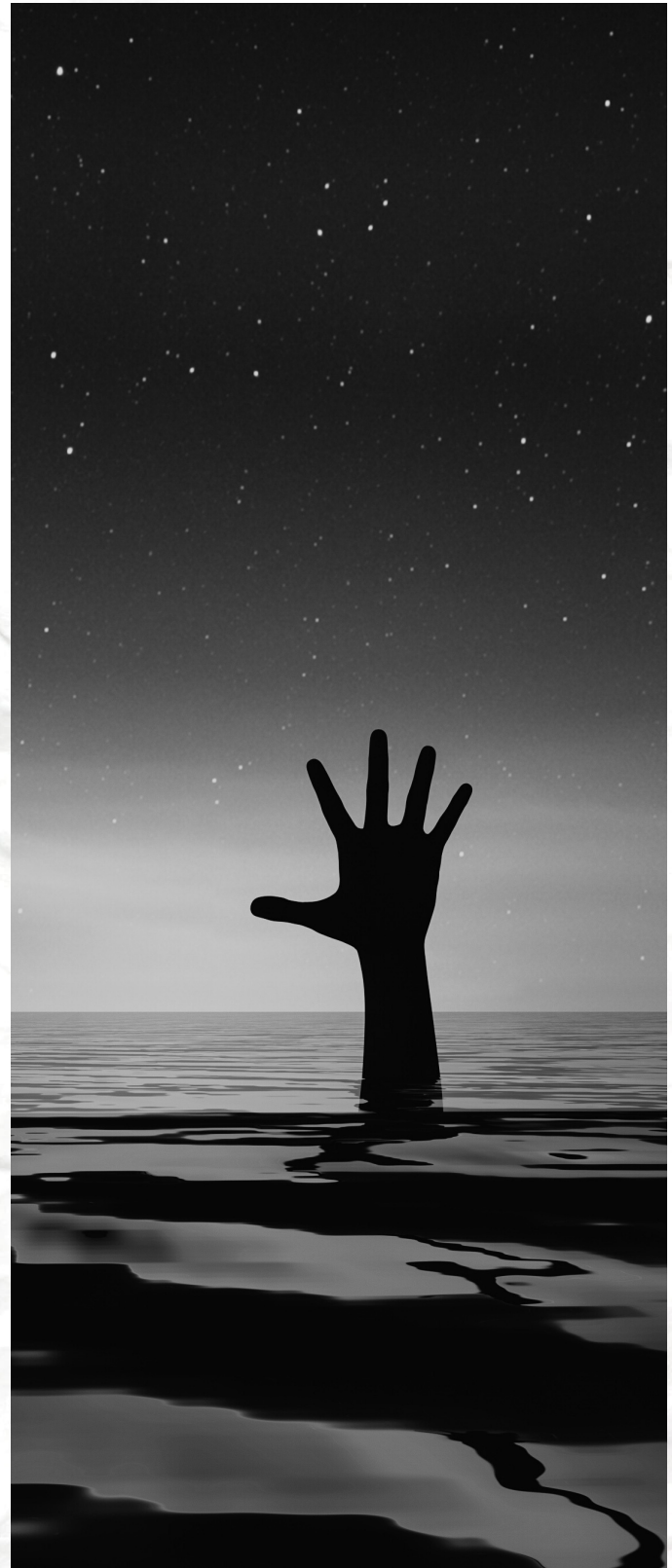
FROM BELOW  
R.B. Thorne



## THE DEPTHS

Vexingly vague  
Vespertine waters  
Singing their midnight song  
Stare at the surface  
Tauntingly translucent  
Sinking to Stygian depths  
Mellifluous melody  
Calling me closer  
The sea washes my feet  
Ascending tension  
Reaching my back  
Icy tendrils on my skin  
Drawing the breath  
From between my ribs  
Lungs suffocated in silence  
My pounding heart  
Paralyzed by venom  
Sown from seeds of doubt  
Extricate this paranoia  
Flooding my brain  
Insanity infiltrates all thought  
My will evaporates  
I signal surrender  
Take me, sinister sea

LUCAS MANN



A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

It laughed.

Langford's cigarette nearly jumped from his mouth, and he drew the fork away.

It laughed again, stretching into an uncomfortable squeal like it was being squeezed.

The other heads in the stargazy pie joined it, wiggling in their butter crust pockets. Their squeals leapt octaves as the unsettled diners left their seats.

The stargazy fish screamed, as did the rest of the fish in the restaurant. Whether roasted, fried, or preserved, every bit and piece of fish made noise—even their flesh cried out, hoarse voices roaring between flaky layers like stifled mouths.

The servers rushed to clear the tables, only to hear a din rise from the kitchen. The noise trickled down the halls and into bedrooms as every fish in the hotel moaned and shrieked. Bones left over from room service squalled. The waste bins rattled with the flesh and discarded innards, their bellows echoing down the halls.

BLOOD UPON BLOOD

Mary Tait

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# The Shadow from the Deep



WRITTEN BY  
STEPHEN VEILLEUX

I have seen the truth. The sea sits as a bulwark to a multitude of unspeakable horrors of which only the blessed may remain ignorant. I hesitate to relay the damnable sight we bore witness to, on that final voyage aboard the *Thellas Tera*, for fear of drawing the curious to such a treacherous haunt, but some record must be kept.

Four weeks into our voyage, I awoke to the hull of the ship shuddering around me. The barracks of the old whaler remained darkened, save for a single lantern in the back corner. The jolt I had felt seemed to have only stirred me, as the rest of the crew remained still. I scanned the room and found that Goggins's cot was empty. I slipped on my breeches and a shirt, and made my way above deck.

The sun had just begun to rise above the misty horizon where clouds gathered, casting the ocean a murky hue. No gulls called and no wind blew through the sails. We sat dead in the water.

I found Goggins kneeling on the deck's starboard side, praying. As I



**There was a wet,  
sickening crunch,  
and the figure  
unfolded itself.  
Another body fell to  
the floor...**

approached, he turned. His eyes were wide and stared into my soul with fear and a hint of mania.

“This place,” he said, his voice wavering, “is cursed. We should not be here.”

I could feel panic crawl up my spine. Captain Hardig had brought on a strange traveler with us, and we had been on edge already. I had thought it odd that any man not intent on making his wages would want aboard a Whaleship.

And this man, Kallstrom, indeed proved to be odd. His eyes would stare at us with lifeless contempt, and I never saw the man sleep. He spoke as a scholar and would be found studying books I did not recognize. Though a layman, I spent what little time I had at port in Boston’s various libraries and considered myself well read. From the sketches and mad scrawlings I spied across the room, Kallstrom’s tomes looked to be from a place and age forgotten by any modern civilization. Some of the covers even seemed to be cast from leather that could have been skin. I had read of such things happening centuries ago. What was worse, he had the Captain’s ear and was the reason we broke from our original course. The man stank of bad omens.

I swallowed my fear and placed my hand on Goggins’s shoulder. “We’ll just have to tide over, pay no mind to the wind. Nothing more we can do than wait now.”

“S’not the wind. The water’s wrong here. Can’t you feel it?”

I breathed deeply of the sea air, a scent I usually found reinvigorating even after so many years. The air here, though, smelled rotten and tasted stale.

Below the surface, a shadow began to spread toward us. It expanded until it passed beneath us. I felt another vibration as something brushed the bottom of the hull. Then it was silent, and the incredible mass was resting below us.

Finally, words escaped my lips. “What in God’s name?”

Goggins stood. “I’d venture to say God’s got no part in this.”

“Certainly,” Kallstrom said, startling us both. “And what do you think you two are doing up here?” He strolled across the deck toward us, his piercing blue eyes glowing in the dull morning light.

“I could ask the same of you,” I said. “Where have you brought us?”

Kallstrom chuckled and patted my shoulder. I jerked away from him like his touch was a brand. “Son, there are many things I wish to show you, but you are not yet prepared. Your captain has relayed the hardships you’ve endured in your profession, and I am simply here to make all of your lives a bit easier.”

“I seen those books you been readin’,” Goggins said. “I know of their origin, you witch doctor. You plan on sacrificing us to some unholy being...or worse.”

There was a sparkle in Kallstrom's eye. "Oh, ye of little faith."

"Oy!" Captain Hardig's voice boomed from the doorway of his cabin as he stormed over. "What's the meanin' of this? Are ye harassing our venerable guest?"

"Not at all." Kallstrom moved over to Goggins and wrapped an arm around him. "In fact, I've decided Sir Goggins will join us on our expedition."

Goggins's eyes grew wide with horror. "Please, Captain..."

Hardig's brow furrowed. "Aye, I suppose he shall."

Kallstrom looked down at Goggins and tightened his grip. "Oh, the things you shall see." He was disturbingly gleeful.

Hardig turned to me. "Clarke, get back below deck. I'll call upon ye when needed."

The three men then made their way to the small whaleboat hoisted above the starboard side. Goggins was ordered to lower it, and he did so with trepidation.

"Below deck now with ye," Hardig barked at me.

I obliged, a great pit forming in my gut. Once below deck, I made my way to Goggin's cot and sat. On the thin bit of fabric that was his pillow was a rosary. I took it and recited the Act of Contrition, a sad attempt to find comfort in whatever madness they were partaking in.

After a moment, I realized someone else should have stirred by then. I walked over to Bennet, still lying on his bunk across from me, to shake him awake. My hand met cold, stiff flesh, and when I turned him toward me, his eyes were gone, his face contorted into a silent cry of agony.

I stumbled back and cried out. With growing horror, I discovered the rest of the crew had shared the same fate. All lifeless husks with rictus wails of their own, no eyes to be found.

Had Kallstrom gone mad in the middle of the night and done this? That seemed unlikely, as someone would have surely been awakened by whatever had caused such an expression to sculpt itself onto their faces.

I collapsed next to one of the beds, trying to fight the panic threatening to envelop me. I needed to get off the ship. Then I remembered there was a small whaleboat on the port side of the *Tera* that, as long as it had not been sabotaged, could at least get me free of the terror here with Kallstrom and a crew of dead.

Something moved in the dark. A sudden rustle and squelching.

I dashed to my bunk and snatched the whittling knife I kept there. The lantern in the corner cast enough light to see a figure shuddering in the shadows. There was

a wet, sickening crunch, and the figure unfolded itself. Another body fell to the floor before it, the face mangled, translucent ropes leading from it back to the shadow. A chitinous clicking began, arrhythmic and stuttering.

I held the knife in front of me to show my intentions, letting out a growl to try to intimidate who or whatever it might be. The shadow continued to unravel itself, until it stood a full foot taller than my six. Appendages that could have been arms, if not for their uneven length, and the smaller protuberances coming off of them bent and curled. The clicking accelerated to a high-pitched squeal.

Fear and cowardice took over as I fled up the stairs. The screech followed me, but the creature did not, for reasons I question, even now.

I looked out to see what had become of the men in the boat. They had only ventured several hundred feet from the ship. They were close enough that I saw the blank expressions on Goggins and Hardig's faces as they stared at Kallstrom. He had one of his hands around Goggins's throat as he knelt before him, while the other held a large ornamental knife.

Kallstrom screamed into the sky, a mad prophet before his small congregation. Two words struck through the air. "Zaahat Kall."

As they were spoken, they pierced my mind. I saw them clearly, scrawled on ancient stone, somewhere dark and secret.

Then the blade fell into Goggins's face. As it did, Hardig let out a pathetic, moaning cry. Kallstrom let Goggins fall over the side to disappear into the shadowy depths.

The sea became unnaturally placid, like a pane of glass atop a void. Kallstrom looked about the water. He turned and I saw his face twisted with fear. He yelled out to me but was cut short by a thunderous crash.

The ocean erupted, a geyser of foam and shadow. The ship reeled beneath my feet, and I found myself lying on my back, staring into a sky that had become inexplicably dark.

When my vision cleared of the water raining down, I saw something that made no sense.

A massive pillar had erected itself in the middle of the sea. The column of pitted and carved stone stretched into the sky only feet from the side of the ship, the top of which passed out of sight through the clouds.

I found my way to my feet, unsteady, and approached the pillar. Horror washed over me as the pillar quivered and twitched. I backed away as I realized I was staring



at the leathered hide of a being eons old. Had this been what Kallstrom was appealing to? Some ancient, mad god?

Clicking sounded from below deck. Whatever had been hiding in the barracks had grown restless.

I dashed for the port side and whispered my last Christian prayer of thanks that Kallstrom had not thought to vandalize the other boat. I cut through the ropes with my knife and jumped after the boat as it plummeted to the water. I landed on my shoulder but paid the pain no mind as I grabbed at the oars and began feverishly paddling away from the *Tera*.

As I fled, a great tentacular maw emerged from the other side of the *Tera*. I don't know if it was the mass's mouth, arm, or perhaps an entirely different entity, but it rose well above the mast and was nearly a third of the ship's size. It drove down into the deck and the ship buckled beneath the betentacled mass of gnashing teeth. The sea shuddered and the mountainous pillar bellowed from far above. I feared the thing in the barracks would emerge from the depths below me, puncture a hole in my boat and drag me into the screaming abyss. Leagues from light and sanity.

But I continued to row.

The words Kallstrom had said, and had been written into the eye of my mind and escaped my lips. "Zaahat Kall, Zaahat Kall."

The bellowing ceased as more appendages emerged and began to dismantle the ship before me. I repeated the phrase in rhythm with my rowing. It somehow brought me comfort in the presence of such unspeakable majesty.

I continued to recite the two-word prayer for the seven days and six nights it took me to return to port. I never stopped rowing. And I never stopped praying.



That final voyage is six months gone and I have no stomach for stepping on a boat again. Even now, as I stare out the window on this winter morning at the black parlous water, I fantasize of what eyes may watch that remain unseen and what hands may reach that remain unfelt.



# Stephen Veilleux



Stephen Veilleux dwells in the swamps of Florida where he writes of the cosmic and strange.

When not writing he enjoys playing guitar, the taste of a good bourbon, and watching *The Thing* on repeat.

Twitter: @stepsvayoo

A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

He screamed again, and again, until he was not certain if he fell silent to the bursting of his vocal cords, or if he still made noise that his ears could not register. Might be that he'd never know, the permanence of the silence unknowable. Not that it mattered. His mind could not comprehend ever having been able to hear, nor could he fathom hearing again. If he had once thought the quiet of that ear infection had been impossible to bear, this was so much worse.

The silence became absolute.

The presence above had more eyes than he could count, more everything than he dared even try to understand. He recoiled as it opened its mouth in a mirror image of Jacobs's scream. What came out shook the very ocean beneath him.

A sound unlike anything he had ever heard. It ripped through him, leaving his senses numb as visions poured through his mind.

The jumbled snippets of his life filtered through what little was left of his mind, assaulting those parts that had not retreated from the horror in the cloud, like a wounded, whimpering animal.

## THE SILENT SONATA

**Matthew Siadak**

THE CROW'S QUILL  
presents



# The Sea, She Sings



WRITTEN BY  
J.A. DUNCAN

Marna licked salt from sea-chapped lips and closed her eyes to the rush of waves below. Her shawl did little to keep the frost from her bones, but she needed this—the mystic ebb and flow of the tide, the crashing against the rocks. It hollowed and filled her at once, a strange echo in her soul.

Her lids opened to the churning gray expanse, and she stepped back. Her skirts swirled about her feet as the gale threatened to hurl her from the cliffside, yet she did not heed its blustering. *Are you there?* she asked silently. *Can you feel me watching?*

The sea never answered, and neither did the dead it took.



“I’ve seen them, you know,” said the same rusty voice she’d heard outside the inn for the last two years. Where the old mariner came from, she knew not. The



**Wet, dark tresses  
draped the woman’s  
shoulders, and from  
her hand dangled a  
shining silver locket.**

man never disclosed his name, content to let folks hurl all manner of insults at him. Marna did not mind his presence and often smuggled him half her midday meal or, if she'd made good coin that day, an ale to share.

She took a draught of one before passing it to the weather-beaten bard. His clothing bore the scars of his horrible attempts at mending, but it was the ones Marna couldn't see that tugged at her most. "Aye, you told me yesterday," she replied. "And the day afore that, and—"

"Pah." He snatched the pint from her and tossed back the dregs. "Ale's still shite."

Marna smiled. "Tell me: if the dead sail the waters, why does no one else see them? How did you?"

The man hesitated as he scratched at his silvered beard. "I've thought of that. Many a time. It's the days my mind's addled that I remember it best." He lifted the empty pint for emphasis, and Marna chuckled. "But I suppose..." The mariner sighed and set the mug aside before resting against the inn wall. He'd refused her offer of a stool twice now, but she did not miss the wince when he shifted to relieve pressure on his hips. "I suppose because I was on the brink of death and so lost to the sea that no living creature could find me."

Marna's brow furrowed. "What of your crew?"

"As good as dead too." He dragged a thumb around the mug's rim and stared at the ground. "And then they were." He would say no more—he never did.

Marna gazed out at the surrounding village, at the children shouting as they chased one another, not a care that the bleak sky hailed a coming rain. "How can you stand to be close to it?" she whispered. "To the thing that took so much from you?"

A wry smile twisted the man's lips, but he kept his eyes downcast. "I've no choice. It's part of my curse. I cannot forget them, cannot forget *her*."

Marna blinked at him. He'd never mentioned a woman. "Her?"

"Life-in-Death. Lady Misfortune. Death's bride."

*He's rambling again.* Sympathy tightened Marna's face as she stood. "You'll catch a cold out here. There's a spot by the fire if you'd like. I'll thrash anyone who gives you trouble."

He did not laugh or acknowledge her, his thoughts already far away.



Marna hissed and sucked at her fingers. The candle's flame lapped like an eager dog when she struck the match. Perhaps it, too, was desperate for some light and heat.

She carried the candle to a window and looked out through the mist-soaked panes. The fog clung to the ocean like a shroud, absorbing the moon's pallor—an ominous, spectral sight that had Marna rubbing her arms for warmth.

Though she typically paid no mind to the mariner's mutterings, his words would not stop returning to her. *Life-in-Death*.

What did that mean? Nonsense, surely, but something about it gripped her. When she asked the old man why he stayed, it was partly for herself. To understand why, when the sea nearly claimed her life once, when it had stolen so much from her already, she was still drawn to it so.

*Life-in-Death. My curse.*

She spun away from the window, vexed. It meant nothing. She loved the sea, always had, and could not bear to part with it—with what it had meant to her, to them.

She hugged herself in the dimming firelight and wished the cottage did not feel so unbearably empty.



“Soup again?” the mariner grumbled when Marna handed him a bowl.

She snorted. “What’s the matter, Seamus? Tired of fish?”

He bared his yellowed teeth in a mock grimace. “That’s a worse name than the last. I knew a Seamus, and he was a right—a terrible man.”

“Oh, that won’t do.” She gathered her skirts and arranged them about her as she sat. “But you won’t tell me your real one, and I’d like to call you *something*.”

Between slurps, he said, “You can call me friend.”

A twinge went through her, followed by melancholic fondness. “All right. Then tell me, friend, this ‘Life-in-Death’ woman you spoke of. Who is she truly? A ghost? A demon?”

“Both. And neither.”

She chewed her lip. “What does she look like?”

The man set his spoon down to appraise her. “Why so interested? Thought you’d grown tired of the same old tale.”

“The parts you’ve recounted time and again,” she said with a wave of her hand. “This is something new. Please. I’d like to know.”

He grunted and returned to his soup. “Everyone sees her different. For me, she was the most beautiful woman I ever set eyes on. And the most terrifying. A cruel

mistress, like the sea; calm one instant, murderous the next. She offers no solace or mercy once you're in her clutches. Death takes what he pleases and leaves the rest to her."

Marna swallowed at the gravity in the mariner's words. "Surely, time has eased the horrors." It could not erase it; she knew it could not. But she had to believe in hope. In a future with joy.

His eyes caught hers, and for the first time, she noticed they were as blue as the ocean's depths—and as foreboding. "She won't let me. I've done too much."

Frustration prickled under Marna's skin. "What have you done to deserve this? You didn't kill your crew...did you?"

"...as good as."

Shame and dread coursed through her. *As good as*. The words she'd repeated to herself since the day she nearly drowned. *My fault*. Her hand instinctively went to the delicate chain that disappeared beneath her bodice—the silly trinket she risked her life for, a constant reminder and burden around her neck.

He would not have been in the water if not for her. She should have taken his necklace off before going near the ocean, or let the damned thing float to the bottom. She should have known better than to drift so far from the shoreline.

*It was meant to be me.*

She left the mariner to his meal without another word.



Marna clutched the palm-warmed locket to her chest, letting the salt spray mingle with the tears on her cheeks. The ocean roared, whether furious or valiant, she could not tell. "What do you want?" she murmured, but the waves swallowed her small voice. "*What do you want?*" she tried again, louder, screaming over the tumult.

Even that was lost.

A sob broke from deep within her. "I want him back. I want him *home*. He was not yours to take."

The plea felt insignificant in the face of such a great entity. One that had existed before her. One that would outlive her still. But she had to try. If Life-in-Death truly had been the woman who reached for her in those fathomless waters, the one Marna swore to herself she did not see, then perhaps Marna could undo whatever bargain she'd unwittingly made.

Perhaps Lady Misfortune would agree to a trade.

Marna stroked the engraved silver locket once more in farewell before hurling it into the sea. She did not see where it landed but felt her heart sink with it nonetheless.

When the sun began to dip behind the horizon, she turned from the shore in defeat. More futile yearning.

She made it no more than twenty paces when a faint melody caressed her senses.

Marna cast about for the source. The humming became a song—a mellifluous and heart-rending lament fit for a damned angel: ageless and celestial in its grief.

Fear threaded through Marna's sorrow, but she stood her ground, searching for—

There. A woman strolled along the beach where none had been before. A sheer white gown molded to her lithe body, which swayed like the current as she stalked toward Marna. Wet, dark tresses draped the woman's shoulders, and from her hand dangled a shining silver locket.

Marna's mouth went dry. The woman's inky eyes roved over her as she halted within arm's length. She was the most beautiful woman in existence—if she existed at all.

The woman finally spoke, though it flowed like a song. “Does my gift mean so little to you? After the trouble I went through retrieving it.” She *tsked*.

Marna blinked away tears. “*Your* gift?” Realization opened a sickening pit in her stomach. *No...* “Keep it. I want only my husband returned.” She meant to say it with conviction, but it sounded like a question.

The woman smiled, exposing dainty, pointed teeth. “Then you should not have given him to me.”

Marna gaped. “I did no such—” She snapped her jaw shut. “Please. He is all I have. I've done nothing wrong.”

“Have you not?” The creature circled her. “Did you not reject my affections when I sought to claim you? Did he not offer himself in your place?”

Marna gritted her teeth. How were they to know a monstrous entity guarded the waters? “What must I do? Tell me and I'll do it.”

“Nothing,” the creature purred as she ran a hand through Marna's hair. “You can do nothing. I have made my decision.”

Her fists clenched, nails biting into flesh. “Have you never loved? Can you imagine what it's like? Or do you take pride in ripping people's hearts out?”

The woman stilled. A predatory sneer curved her lips.

Before Marna realized it was happening, the woman's fist ripped through her



chest. Agony tore through her as the woman took hold and pulled.

A dripping, bloody pulp slowly beating in the woman's palm.

Marna gasped uncontrollably, unable to comprehend how she lived while the gory mass pulsed in the woman's clutches. The crushing pain alone should have ended her.

The woman squeezed.

Marna shrieked and fell to her knees. A clawed hand tipped her chin up. She glared at the inhumanly perfect face through tears.

"A year and a day," the woman said. "That's how long you will wait each. And every. Time. When next you see him, you will feel nothing. You will be as cold as I, truly life in death." She snarled. "I *gave* you life, yet you wanted more. Humans will always be ungrateful."

Marna whimpered as the woman squeezed that vital, beating organ.

Could she survive without it? How did one do that?

"I do not care," Marna spat. "Destroy it, scatter it to dust. But I've known love, which is more than you'll ever have." Talons pierced Marna's heart, and she screamed. "*Do it!* I will be here in a year and a day, *with or without it.*"

With no more expression than a marble statue, the creature obliterated the heart. Blood poured from her hand. She shook it onto the rocks before licking the remnants from her fingers. "A year and a day," she hummed.

Marna remained crouched on the beach as the creature resumed her haunting melody and waded into the sea, disappearing beneath its waves, impassive and eternal.

As Marna now was.



# J.A. Duncan



Armed with a BA in English and tankards of coffee, Jordan pens dark fantasy tales and poetry, some of which can be found in Quill & Crow anthologies. When not at her day job, Jordan edits and markets for indie authors, cavorts with nature spirits, and moonlights as a Goblin Queen who enjoys tarot and baking at odd hours of the night. You can find more of her witchy shenanigans on her book blog and bookstagram [Coffee, Book, & Candle](#).

Twitter & Instagram: [@J\\_A\\_Duncan](#)  
Blog: [www.coffeebookandcandle.com](http://www.coffeebookandcandle.com)

A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

A smile hints at her lips. She will take the rest of the day to relax, warm up, dig into her plans and equipment and, tomorrow, she will uncover whatever it is that keeps this town so quiet, so isolated—and she will make it her own.



The sound happens sometime in the early hours of gray dawn, breaking Cora from her sleep. For a moment, as she clutches the bedcovers with cramping fingers, she reminds herself of where she is, what she is there for. *An island somewhere off the coast of Massachusetts...to discover what sea creature plagues the town...*

Again, the sound rips the morning air, and Cora feels a shiver run the length of her spine like spider silk. She tosses the blankets off and sets her feet on the thick blue rug beside the bed. Her head feels heavy as she looks about the room, eyes snagging on the strange pattern in the damask wallpaper. Despite the cold, sweat beads on the back of her neck.

*Something is not right.*

## THE ORIGINS OF CORA DEERING

Teagan Olivia Sturmer

A SNEAK PEEK AT

TALES FROM

# BRACKISH HARBOR

“You are all here because of a specific talent or expertise. A round of applause for your success.”

Everyone clapped and cheered, long and loud.

“Enjoy that praise, for it will be the last, should you accept my invitation.”

The guests exchanged glances.

“I have a proposition for each of you. I offer you unfettered greatness!” He lifted his outstretched arms dramatically.

The guests looked nervous, but provided obligatory clapping.

“I am Doctor Walter Cunningham, entrepreneur, investor, and most importantly, scientist,” the man continued. “I have a hypothesis that I know to be plausible and lucrative. But the governing forces of this world—specifically that of morality and religion—seek to prevent that which is inevitable. I am proposing domination over the magic the universe uses to create!”

Everyone clapped to hide their confusion.

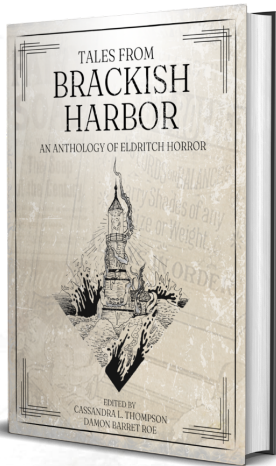
“Immortality,” Eleanor muttered.

## UNFETTERED GREATNESS

**William Bartlett**

QUILL & CROW  
**MERCHANDISE MARKET**

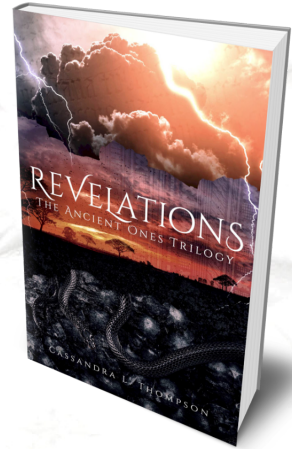
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*Tales from Brackish Harbor* is available for preorder, releasing August 13th!

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Celebrate *Tales from Brackish Harbor* with our brand new eldritch merch! Don't forget that you can still find Q&C classics like baseball caps, mugs, and more in our shop.

**FEATURED GEAR**



An ornate hourglass design on a cotton tee.



An iron- or sew-on patch to brag about your survival.



A lightweight cotton tee, available in pale colors.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are so grateful for the stories written by our talented authors, and we hope you enjoyed the poetry contributed by two of our House's poets. Thank you, Crow family, for your continued enthusiasm and support!

A deep thank you to everyone who submitted a story. It is truly special for us when you share your works, regardless of their acceptance. While your story may not have been chosen, next month's theme is *Thrones of Blood* and it could be your chance to spin us a dark tale. If you are interested in seeing your story published in *The Crow's Quill*, please check our website for more details. We'd be honored to have a look.

Are you a poet?

Participate in our daily poetry prompts and use #PoetryIsNotDead for a chance to be featured! We want to shine a light on more dark poets. Keep calling and we Crows may answer.

Sincerely, from Quill & Crow's Associate Editors,

*Jay Lynn Watkins*

*L.R. Wieland*



# TRIGGER INDEX

- **Animal death**
  - mentioned.....*Journal Discovered*
- **Body horror**
  - mentioned.....*Clepsydra*
- **Depression**
  - implied..... *The Depths (poem)*
- **Drowning**
  - mentioned.....*Journal Discovered*
- **Gore**
  - mentioned.....*Joined with the Seas*  
*The Sea, She Sings*  
*The Shadow from the Deep*
- **Racial discrimination**
  - implied violence.....*The Woman from the Cove*
  - mentioned.....*The Woman from the Cove*
- **Self-harm or -mutilation**
  - mentioned.....*Journal Discovered*
- **Stabbing**
  - mentioned..... *The Gift of Rakoska (excerpt)*
- **Suicide**
  - ideation.....*The Depths (poem)*  
*Worthless (poem)*
  - implied.....*Clepsydra*
- **Possible trigger:**
  - A partially nude woman is found unconscious but is not harmed.....*The Woman from the Cove*



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