

Corner Bar Magazine

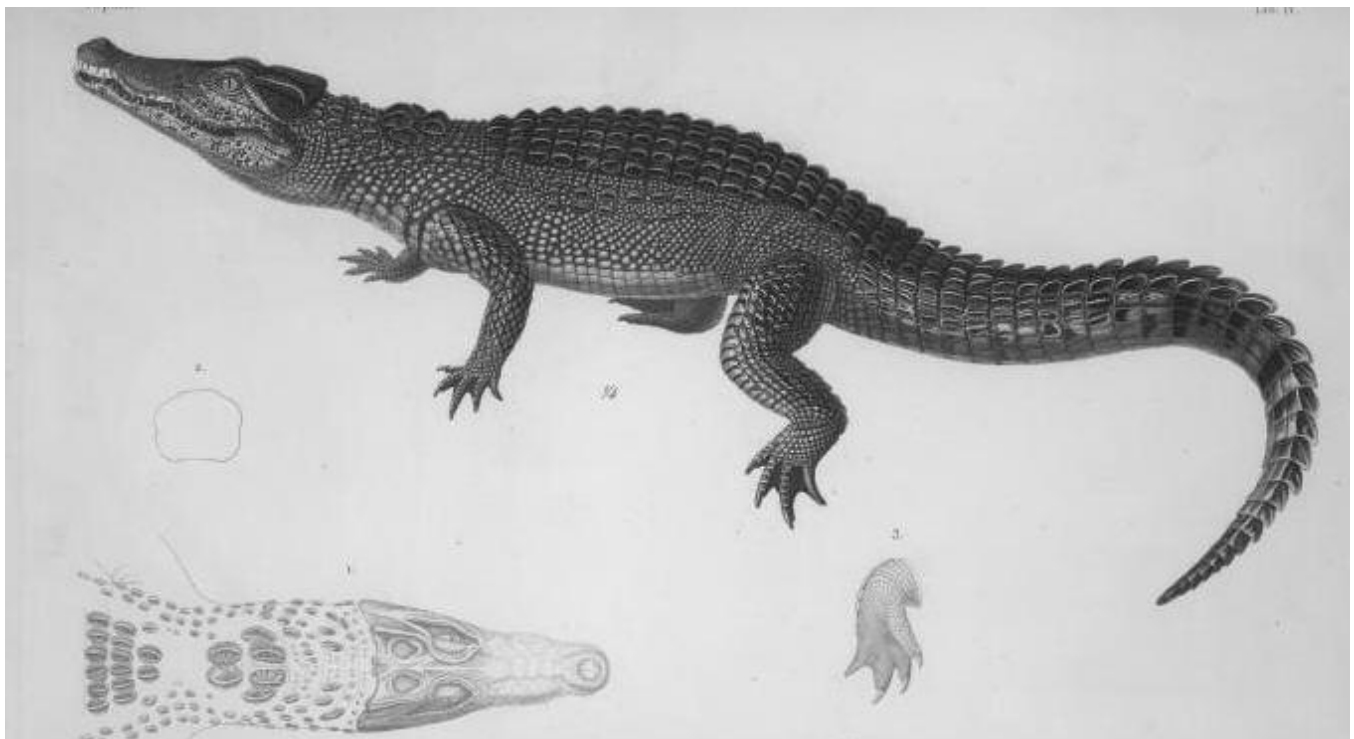
Volume 4 Number 7

Page 1 – BREAKING FREE by Ed Kratz. Mr. Kratz lives in Philadelphia, PA. He writes, “I’m a retired computer specialist who has been published in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Literally Fiction*, and *Bards and Sages Quarterly*”

Page 4– THE FLYING DUTCHMAN by Max Griffin. Mr. Griffin of Tulsa has novels published with Dreamspinner Press and Purple Sage Publications.

Page 11 – NEITHER FISH NOR FLESH by Hayden Moore. Mr. Moore writes, “Briefly, I am 37 years old and live in Brooklyn, New York with my wife and cat and have so for the past twelve years. I was born and raised in Georgia and Tennessee. I graduated from The University of Tennessee with a major in Journalism and a minor in Theater. I experience a sort of bifurcation of myself in terms of coming from the South and living in Brooklyn which heavily influences my writing. I have worked as a freelance researcher and am in the process of transitioning a play derived from Dante’s *Inferno* to the stage.”

Page 22 – THE WEEK OF THREE FINGERS by Scáth Beorh. Mr. Beorh is a writer of Childhood Trauma, Horror in all of its forms, and Dark Fantasy. His books include **Haunted By Benevolence**, **Hollow Boy**, **The Vampires of Dreach Fola**, and **Dreams of Flying**. He also helms the publishing endeavor *Twelve House*.



“BREAKING FREE”

by ED KRATZ

I’m sitting in my neighborhood bar, drinking away the hassles of married life when someone says “Being married’s a trap, isn’t it?”

I turn to the man who has spoken my mind.

The regulars in Sam’s are suburban types like me. This guy looks like he’s from a fifties rebel teen movie. Thin as a rail. Jet black hair, long, swept back. He’s wearing an undershirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve and dark tattoos of skulls and bleeding hearts decorate his arms.

“I said, ‘Being married’s a trap, isn’t it?’”

“I guess,” I say, trying to sound as tough as he does, and dimly recalling snatches from a poem I read a thousand years ago.

“Love seeketh only self to please and builds a hell in heaven despite. William Blake. Eighteenth-century poet. Man knew what he was saying.”

That’s the line. This is creepy. I glance around to see if any of my drinking buddies are nearby, but that cowboy James Dean and I stand alone at our end of the bar.

“Buy you a drink?”

“I should be going.”

“Two shots and two beers here.”

I’ve never seen Sam the bartender move so fast. Two shots and beers stand before us as soon as the sentence ends.

I’m not much of a shot and beer man. In fact, if you listen to my wife, I’m not much of a man.

“What does she know? Drink up.” The guy shoves the drinks at me. Hitting me on the back and smiling, he gulps his shot. I do the same with mine, washing the burning booze down with half the beer.

A few more of these and I’ll stop worrying about finding the money for Bernard’s piano lessons.

“Here’s to little boys who play baseball instead of taking piano lessons.”

That does it. I’m going to leave.

“I think you need another drink.”

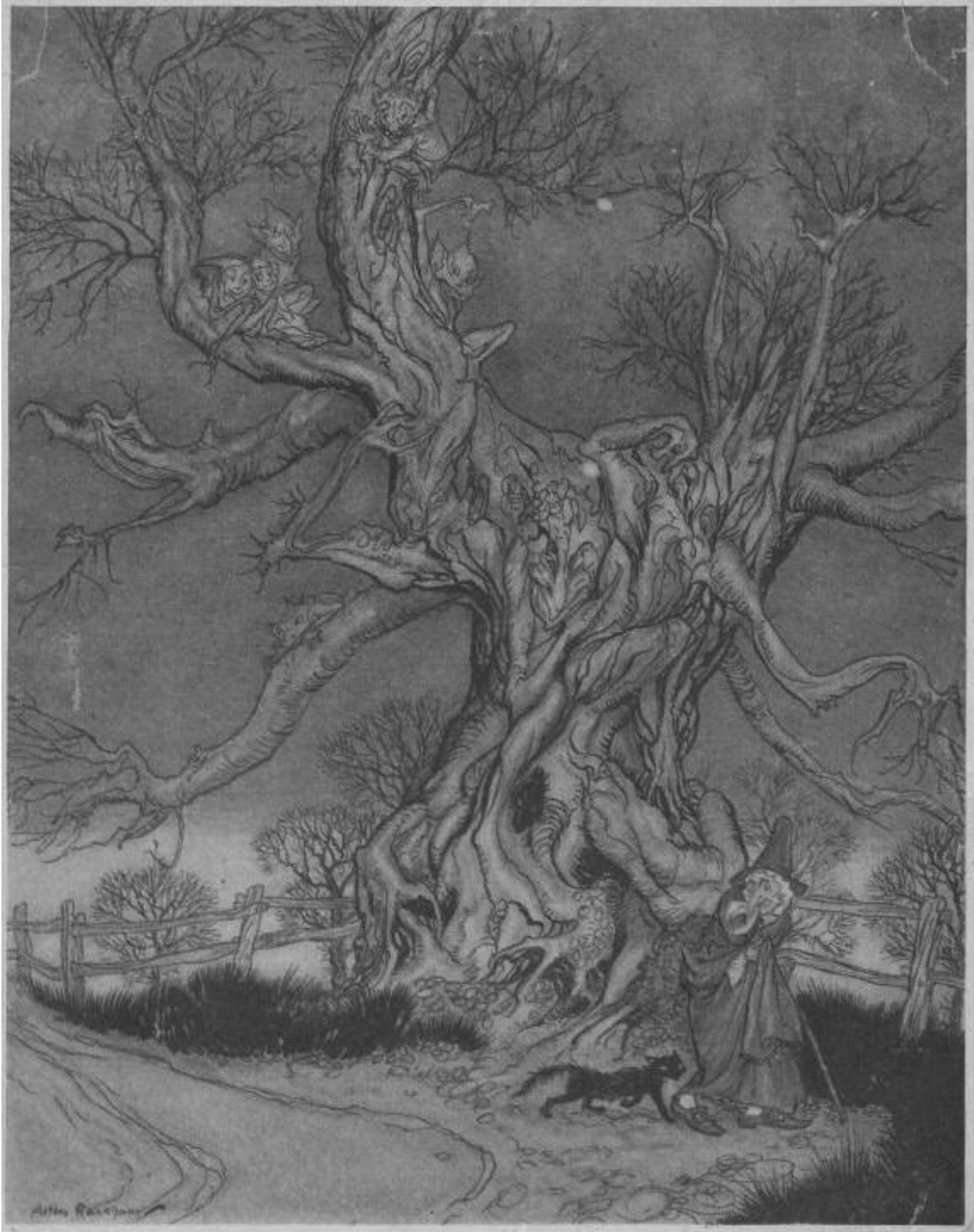
A tiny voice in my head warns, *Be Careful*, but we down a few more quick shots and that voice grows quiet.

We talk for an hour. I think something and the cowboy answers. He spins tales of fast cars, faster woman and an independent life. No strings on him.

“How’d you like to be like me?”

That little voice in me is crying, *Watch It*, but it’s weak and fading from the shore like a drowning swimmer calling for help. “Yes. I’d like to be like you.”

“You bowl?”



“What’s that got to do with this?”

“I know a place, Nate’s Alley. Will change your life.”

“How’s rolling a ball down an alley going to change my life?”

“Ain’t no ordinary alley, and this ain’t no ordinary offer.”

“Five minutes. When these dummies start up, you turn to me, and you say, ‘I want to change my life. I’ll go with you to Nate’s.’”

I want to laugh, but I don’t, because all the customers stand as frozen as statues in a wax museum.

I contemplate for five minutes, then when I hear the buzz of noises from the other end of the bar, I give him back his speech.

The next thing I know we’re in the cowboy’s pickup truck, and the next thing after that I’m getting bowling shoes from Nate.

Nate’s a greaser version of the fat happy Buddha. He has a monstrous, sweaty bald head. He’s wearing a dirty white T-shirt, baggy brown pants held up by a knotted old rope.

The cowboy and I start tossing balls. Soon I’m getting into it.

Pow! A strike!

Here’s to you, boss, you fat oppressive old slob!

Here’s to you, wife and kids and responsibilities!

Pow! The pins go flying.

I’m alone now. Nate and the cowboy are feeding me balls so fast I can hardly keep up. How are the pins being set so

fast?

“He’s okay,” the cowboy says, “Ain’t he?”

Nate nods yes, and the cowboy jumps in the air and laughs and dances like someone saved in a tent revival.

Suddenly, the ball isn’t a ball anymore. I’m holding my son’s head. “Daddy!” he screams.

I run down the alley. I’m two feet away when I see Jerome’s head making for the strike zone. One foot away when he hits. Close enough to hear the thud of bone. Close enough to have my shirt splattered with blood. Close enough to see the flesh sticking to pins before I faint.

I wake the next morning in the cowboy’s pickup. I’m madder than hell. They must have drugged me.

“You bum. Take me home.”

The cowboy doesn’t answer. I’m alone in the cab. I slide over to the driver’s side. If I can find the keys, I’ll drive myself home.

The keys aren’t in the ignition. Strangely, instinctively, I reach into the pocket of my -- jeans? The keys are there. Then I see my face in the rear-view mirror – his face – and I knew I need more than a simple ride home. ❖

“THE FLYING DUTCHMAN”

by MAX GRIFFIN

When Hank stepped out of his car, the heat smacked him with the hellish wallop of a July day in Oklahoma. Sweat erupted from all his pores, streamed down his forehead and burned his eyes. He squinted at what was left of the town of Carl’s Corner: a boarded-up gas station with no pumps, a house with a collapsed roof, and a row of abandoned and rusted-out mobile homes. Only the Last Chance Café, with its dusty neon sign and wheezing air conditioner, provided any sign of human habitation.

Hank used his phone to snap a half dozen photos of the empty street and abandoned structures. Later, back in Tulsa, he’d research the history of this place for his planned book on Dust Bowl era ghost towns. For now, though, job number one was filling the hole that hunger had gnawed in his belly.

He paused as he stepped inside the diner to let his eyes adjust to the dim light. Dust particles shimmered in a momentary shaft of sunlight, while his skin turned clammy from the cold breath of the air conditioner. The mutter of conversation stopped and the diners, no more than a dozen in number, turned to inspect him. Suspicion etched their craggy features. Hank frowned. Where did they come from? There had been no cars on the

street, and surely no one still lived in the weathered shells of the dwellings that were within walking distance.

A waitress hulking behind the counter called out in a shrill monotone, “Welcome to the Last Chance.” It was as though her words broke a spell: flatware clinked, people looked away, and the murmur of conversation resumed.

Hank headed toward the counter, the waitress, and food.

A man watched him from the shadows near where the waitress stood. He was different in every way from the hard scrabble of the farmers and roughnecks who huddled about the tables. He wore a rumpled white suit and a floppy, Indiana Jones style hat. His wide, florid necktie hung loosened around an unbuttoned collar. As Hank approached, he rose to stand on the balls of his feet, with the cocky confidence of an athlete, but a modest paunch revealed he’d let himself go to seed. In his right hand he clutched a battered, old-fashioned leather briefcase, like Sydney Greenstreet might have used in *The Maltese Falcon*.

Hank made for the opposite end of the counter. He just wanted to eat and get out of here, not chit-chat with some local doofus.

As soon as he sat, the waitress slapped



a menu in front of him and snarled, “Ya want coffee?” A wiry strand of hennaed hair escaped the bun at her crown and dribbled down one cheek. With a toss of her head, she flicked it aside.

Hank read her name tag. “Thank you, Ruby. Yes, please.”

She poured steaming brew into a cup and retreated back to the other end of the counter. Her jaws worked while she chewed a wad of gum like a cow with a cud, except she was too wraith-like to be a cow. Maybe like a zombie chewing brains.

Hank glanced at the menu. Fried hamburgers. French fries. Fried onion rings. Chicken fried steak. Just what his cholesterol needed.

The goofy-looking guy with the *Maltese Falcon* briefcase fidgeted at the other end of the bar, then seemed to make up his mind and shambled toward Hank.

Please, dear lord, no. Not me. Hank stared at the menu, at the fry cook, at the waitress, even at the grimy photographs that lined the wall by the counter. Anything but look at this creep. He’d had his fill for the day of interviewing hicks and recording their overblown versions of local legends.

The man heaved a sigh and flopped his briefcase onto the counter next to Hank. When he spoke, his Southern drawl was soft as molasses and warm as the blood oozing from a rare T-bone. “You mind if I join you?” His watery blue eyes raked across Hank’s features.

Hank frowned and his throat tightened in irritation. “Well, actually—”

The waitress chose that moment to return, pulled a pencil from behind her ear, and asked, “Ya ready to order?”

The stranger settled onto the next stool. Still ignoring him, Hank asked, “What’s good, Ruby?”

“Our Lord and Savior’s good. My ma and pa, they’s good. Can’t say what else’s good and what ‘tishn’t. Take your pick and name your poison.”

Hank hesitated. He was having second thoughts about eating at this dingy pit, but it was at least an hour to Tulsa and a real restaurant. He shrugged. “I’ll have a hamburger, then, Ruby. With lettuce, tomato, and onion. Oh, and a coke, too.”

“No coke. Pepsi.”

Hank suppressed a grin and couldn’t resist commenting. “Just like on Saturday Night Live?”

Ruby shot him a blank look. She scowled and sneered, “What ya talkin’ about? Nothin’ happened here last Saturday night. Nothin’ never happens here, alive nor dead.”

Annoyance at her obdurate response heated Hank’s cheeks. *Whatever.* “Pepsi will be fine.”

“Fries with that?”

“Sure.” He could already imagine his blood turning to sludge in his arteries.

Ruby scrawled on her notepad and shrieked, “Burn one, take it through the garden and put a rose on it. Frog sticks on the side.” She sashayed away, making the rounds of the tables with her coffee pot.

The stranger turned to face him and a gap-toothed smile split his lips. “The

name's Carl, Carl Vanderdrecken." He stuck out his hand.

Hank tried to not recoil at the stench of the man's breath. That couldn't possibly be green mold on his teeth—it must be a trick of the light. He accepted the offer to shake. "I'm Hank." Carl tried for the bone-crushing grip, but Hank was pretty sure he got the better of it.

Carl narrowed his eyes and peered at him. "So, you ain't from around these parts, is you?"

Hank's mouth turned down. These damned Okies. They didn't trust anyone who wasn't at least a second cousin. "I'm from Tulsa." No reason to tell him he moved there from Fresno.

"I thought so. Tulsa, huh? Ya know Mr. Getty? I heard that he lives at that fancy hotel, the Mayo."

Hank frowned. "Who?" Hank didn't know anyone wealthy enough to live in the loft apartments at the restored Art Deco landmark.

"Jean Paul Getty. He was gonna buy the oil wells here 'bouts, afore them eastern bankers swooped in and swindled everybody." Carl scowled at the counter and he ran nervous fingers over his briefcase.

Hank didn't quite roll his eyes. All these little towns had legends of get-rich-quick schemes that went afoul, usually due to crooks who "weren't from around here." Hank ignored him, sipped his coffee, and didn't quite gag. Ruby must have made it this morning and left it simmering on the burner all day in order to reach this state of carbonization. He rinsed his mouth with

ice water that tasted of iron. Meanwhile, his hamburger sizzled on the burner. The cook slathered butter onto a bun and put it on the grill, too. Apparently even that came fried, like everything else.

Carl leaned back and stretched, cracking his knuckles.

Hank cringed.

The juke box started to play a scratchy version of "Dream a Little Dream of Me." Carl closed his eyes and hummed along, and then muttered, "*The Last Chance* is the Ziegfeld Follies for these hayseeds. There's even dancin' here on Saturday nights. Live dancin', like you said."

He turned to stare at Hank again, and this time something about his gaze sent an electric tingle zinging down Hank's back. Carl's voice sharpened. "You didn't say what you're doin' in these parts."

"No, I didn't." Hank let silence grow while Carl just stared at him. After a few beats, Hank relented. "I'm doing research for a story about ghost towns in Oklahoma. I'm a stringer for the *Tulsa World*."

A bell rang and the cook dumped his fries and hamburger into a plastic basket lined with waxed paper. Ruby snatched it up and put the basket and a glass with his soda on the counter. "Anything else?"

Hank shook his head.

She dropped his check on top of his fries and flounced back to her refuge at the opposite end where she lit a cigarette. Hank considered complaining. He could swear smoking in a restaurant violated Oklahoma law. Still, he'd never be here

again, and the place already stank.

Carl chewed on his lower lip while Hank dug into his meal.

Despite being greasy and a little crispy at the edges, he had to admit it was pretty good. At least the onions, lettuce and tomato were fresh.

Carl watched him eat. "So ya work for the newspaper, eh? That takes brains, and book-learnin'." His eyes narrowed.

"Ya *look* like a smart guy. You a smart guy?"

Hank frowned. The question and Carl's tone were vaguely threatening, sending a quick chill through his belly. "I'm just a guy. No different from anyone."

"Too bad. I could use a smart guy." He fingered the straps on his briefcase. "When ya goin' back to Tulsa?"

"Tonight. It's only an hour's drive."

Carl's eyes lit up and he beamed at Hank. "I knew you was different. Daring. Why, it's eighty miles if it's an inch to Tulsa. Ya'd have to drive like greased lightning to get there in an hour."

Hank reflected that the speed limit on the Turnpike was 75—hardly greased lightning. He wished again Carl would go away. Maybe he'd get the hint if Hank didn't respond.

The juke box whirred, and the song changed to an up-tempo version of "Summertime." Carl drummed his fingers on the counter. Hank ate French fries and worked on his hamburger.

When the song careened to a stop, Carl put his briefcase in his lap, opened it, and pawed through the interior. "I got somethin' for ya. Some official docu-

ments."

This guy just couldn't take a hint. Hank continued to munch on his fries and burger. He gulped down some Pepsi, but it tasted a little off. Maybe too sweet and not enough *fizz*.

"Here it is." Carl held up a manila envelope. It bulged, as if it held a sheaf of papers. "I been tryin' to get these delivered forever. Can you do it for me?"

Irritation dragged Hank's lips down. "Have you considered the postal service?"

"Yeah. It keeps comin' back. Addressee unknown, it says." He pointed to a red stamp on the envelope. "They just need hand delivered. I know Mr. Getty lives there."

"Why not deliver it yourself?"

Carl looked away and closed his briefcase. "I can't leave here. Not right now. But these papers, they's real important. They'll fix everything up for me, and for the town folk."

Hank used the last of his hamburger to soak up some of the catsup that had oozed onto the waxed paper. "I don't really see—"

Carl's voice turned whiny and wheedling. "Come on. It'll be easy-peasy. It just needs to go to the desk at the Mayo hotel. Ya know where that's at, donchya?"

"Of course. It's a landmark."

"Look, there's a five-spot in it for ya." Carl pulled a wallet from his suit coat and laid a bill on the counter.

Hank eyed it. "A five spot? Wow." This guy was too much.

"I could go to ten if that's what it takes. I told ya, this is *important*." He added

another bill on top of the first.

Anything to make him go away. “Keep your money.” Hank slid the envelope to his side of the table. “I’ll do it.” It wouldn’t be much of a chore. He planned to be downtown tomorrow anyway, for a real meal. Maybe he’d try the new sushi place in the Blue Dome District.

Relief washed across Carl’s features. “Thank you, buddy. I can’t tell you how much it means to me. You’re the tops.”

Hank shrugged. “Think nothing of it.”

Carl’s expression shifted from sunshine to storm clouds as quick as an Oklahoma sky in tornado season. He glared at Hank, and his voice turned harsh and accusatory. “Mr. Getty, he’s *rich*. Real rich. If he don’t get these papers, he’ll find out and make you pay. He’s the one who can do it, too.”

Hank did roll his eyes time. “OMG, mister. I *said* I’d do it for you. Give me a break.” He glanced around the diner. “Where’s the restroom? I’d like to wash my hands.” And get away from you, you smarmy little creep.

Carl pointed to a corner behind the counter. “There.” He lifted his briefcase and stood, a broad smile on his features in another lightning-quick change of mood. “Thanks again, buddy. Keep the money. Seriously.” He slapped Hank on the back. “You deliver them papers, now.” His countenance hardened and his voice took a knife-like edge. “Or else. Mr. Getty, he’ll know and he’ll ruin ya. Don’t forget, now. Or else.”

Hank pushed away from the counter and escaped to the diner’s washroom.

Amazingly, it was spotless. Old, with out-dated fixtures, but scrubbed and filled with the crisp scent of Pine-Sol.

Hands cleansed, he reentered the diner proper. Carl had disappeared, thank God. Hank stood, wiping his hands, and examined some of the photos on the wall. One whole set showed houses, barns, and businesses shredded by a tornado, with the date March 2, 1934 penciled at the bottom.

Ruby paused beside him. “Ya interested in history?”

Hank gave a little start. “What? Yes, in fact I am. Why?”

“I seen ya lookin’ at them pictures. They’s of the storm what hit back in ‘34. What them rich furriners did after, well that was even worse. They plum destroyed this place.” Her mouth turned down and she softened her tone. “The Dutchman what founded Carl’s Corner, he had a plan to save us, but he done got sucked up in that there tornado and no one never seen him again. He just flew up in the sky and disappeared.”

The hairs on the back of Hank’s neck prickled. “The founder? That wouldn’t be *Carl Vanderdecken*, would it?”

“How’d ya know? Yeah. After him, some out-of-town yankee *investors*”—she spat the word out like it was poison on her tongue—“took over the local oil fields. Swindled all the locals outta their rights. It was the death of this place.” She pointed to another photo of a man standing in an Art Deco hotel lobby. “That there’s Mr. Vanderdecken, ‘bout a week afore God’s plan took him to his greater reward in heav-

en.”

Hank peered at the black-and-white photo. He recognized the lobby of the refurbished Mayo Hotel, the rumpled white suit, and the Indiana Jones style hat. The man in the photo carried an old-fashioned leather briefcase. The man was Carl, the very man who had spoken to him minutes before.

“I know him. He was just here. He left me an envelope to deliver.”

She tipped her head and narrowed her eyes. “Ya gone daft? He’s done been dead for years now. That’s a tale to scare kids and idiots. My Granny Great, she used to tell it when I was a wee one. She’d say how that poor Mr. Vanderdecken’s ghost still haunts what’s left of our town. He’s supposed to have papers what need delivered to our savior in Tulsa. Papers what’ll bring justice to us town folk.” She sniffed.

“Pastor says tales like that’s the voice of Lucifer, and we shouldn’t be spreadin’ ‘em.”

Hank glanced back at his place at the counter, at where Carl’s envelope rested. “There was a man who was talking to me. He sat next to me while I ate my sandwich. He gave me that envelope to deliver in Tulsa.”

“Ain’t no one done been talkin’ to you ‘cept me, Mister.” Ruby scowled at him. “I think ya need to take that there *en-vel-ope* and go, afore you rile up folks with them old tales.” She pointed at where he’d sat. “I left change on the counter for the ten dollars ya put on top of the check. Take it and then best ya jest get along.”

Fear jittered down Hank’s spine and sent needles prickling out his fingertips. *Hank* hadn’t left any money on the counter. *Carl* had.

He scanned the interior of the diner. Ordinary people huddled at the tables. Food sizzled on the cooktop. Dust motes floated in the dim light.

Then, in one corner, an image flickered, deep in the shadows. A forlorn figure in a rumpled suit and carrying a briefcase beckoned. Carl. He threw a ghoulish grin at Hank before he faded to nothingness, leaving behind naught but dust and memory. But first, before vanishing to the nether world, he opened his mouth and uttered two words. Hank couldn’t hear them, but he knew what the man said.

“Or else.” ❖

“NEITHER FISH NOR FLESH”

by HAYDEN MOORE

‘Already have I once been a boy and a girl, and a bush and a bird, and a silent fish in the sea.’
(Empedocles)

It was impossible to tell where the sky met the sea. While the wind-swept waters belonged to a different realm of Time, the same physics shaped the clouds, the lofted and impalpable water droplets above a still-life identical in form to the manic waves below. Both realms of Time were defined by a graceful roughness, a pair of acerbic nymphs harsh to the eyes but smooth to the soul, a paradox that left the solitary witness confused and in the stupors of ecstasy. Had she taken a photograph of the ocean before her and held it just above the indefinable limits of the water on the horizon, those captured waves would superimpose themselves upon the concealed clouds. The sky was the portrait the sea saw of itself in its mind’s eye.

The cold north wind blew her gritty black hair onto her cheeks and over her shoulders, down her bare chest and onto her lap. Aeolus was providing her with a bit of corporal comfort as the sun failed to penetrate the clouds, the sun that had not shined for a week as Winter had turned to Spring only in the calendar. Time and its fickle children, The Seasons, followed their

own course. She smiled at the sky to think of the affinity she shared with them. While she was only a mote of dust upon a sub-atomic piece of space and Time, she still existed just as surely as the clouds and the sea. The unblinking eyes beneath the surface of the earth and the water did too. Perhaps that was the price of consciousness, to sacrifice perpetuity for a moment in the sun and in the water. Nothing could be gained or lost if Time were not the great ravisher. To have and to love was to sacrifice Time for that thing and that thing she loved. Nothing meant anything unless all could be lost. She scratched the budding scales just below her waist. They looked like emeralds and responded to her fingernails like pliant jewels. Growth could only spring from destruction. Growth always entailed pain.

To call her form amphibian would betray the two worlds that battled for her primacy. She still answered to the name of Akaste whenever somebody called for her attention or tried to objectify what could never be a fixed form. Her oceanic name moored her to the shallow waters where terra firma still beckoned for her bare feet to imprint its surface, a quality water could never offer. But the earth was harsh, even the sand that was battering her face, her

young face, that spent more time submerged than in the faceless wind. Water was the absolute embrace, the boundless womb beyond the womb that fostered the faltering forms that lived and died in its element. But her parents were as earth-bound as roots, a pair of dividing and sub-dividing contradictions in relation to her. She was the moon to their earth, a star to their lamppost, a restless fish to their fishermen's hands. Here she sat upon the shore, the sizzling bubbles of the lapping water failing to pull her back into the sea as it flowed around her seated body and ebbed back into its greater self, relentless and failing. She looked down at her lower half. If she kept this up, she would be ready for the mystic depths of the sea by next week. If she kept this up, she would never walk again.

It has been said that temperature determines the sex of a person while in the womb of the mother. But nothing has been said as to what determines the element a person is suitable for once the sex or sexes has been realized. Perhaps the air blows upon a baby's brow and excites some secret thing within. Maybe the earth sings a silent song and fixes the infant to the hardness of the world. Fire, being the great ravisher, consumes that which it calls for, an ashen existence of carbon nothingness. The sea must emit a sparkling spray that stains the face of the neophyte, a dripping stigmata that points to a secret law: This way the Truth lies. But Truth is not a tyrant. Truth is truth, that eternal thing that is only revealed in glimpses. If the sea was the

Truth for Akaste, her parents and everyone around her were the enemies to Truth. The earthbound people she knew were like the ear-worms in her head that ravaged her flowing thoughts: 'You have to wear clothes', 'If you stay in the water any longer your skin will fall off', 'We need to talk to a professional about this', 'There's no such thing as mermaids', 'Do you have any idea what lies beneath', 'This is just a phase', 'There are far more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your watery philosophy', 'No more swimming for a month'. If she had made a list of the phrases that were pernicious to her Truth, the phrases would win as the list was endless. Akaste sighed as she realized that the ear-worms were actually squirming rationality. Nothing she knew for herself was rational in the wind-weary eyes of the land dwellers. Just as her lower-half was changing, her upper faculties were changing too. The cold North Wind was deafening in her ears. She felt a slight vertigo as the waters within her ear canals swirled in accordance with the sea, a dual microcosm within herself. She needed to step into the embrace of the sea and hear her brethren who were silenced by the oppressive sky. She looked up at the petrified air of grays and blues, a dead sky pretending to be a living seascape. Akaste closed her eyes as she felt the weight of the air upon her. She was at the bottom of the troposphere, a fish who had delved too deep in the place with no shelter. Pools and bathtubs, deep puddles and ponds were nothing but the festering simulacrum of the sea. Food above the water tasted like

ashes now. The lips of the boy she kissed months before had felt like animated stone, a living corpse dripping with conceit. Another series of concentric scales blossomed along her thighs. The beginning was the end. The way down was the way back. She slid along the wet sand. The trail her body left behind was an oblique line pointing to her fate. This was the pathway of the sea-turtle, that ephemeral path etched into the sands of the shores of the whole world in Time without measure. A surge of water washed away the sandy trail before her whole form found the full embrace of the sea. The north wind was consumed by the water. She listened and she heard.

Akaste was born as most babies were, in the full embrace of the mother as she cried to feel that she had come to this barren stage of fools. Had she the reckoning of the young lady she had now become at birth, she would have crawled back into her mother's womb. But change had ruined that warm and wet place that nurtured a body meant for the ocean. That belly-sized Oceana burst and banished Akaste to the dry place where eyes had to blink and breaths were always empty, no matter how hard she fetched breath. For many, childhood and adolescence are imbued with a hyperborean light. Pain and anguish were superficial as imagination and absence of responsibility presented a vast playground. Perhaps that was merely the chimera of childhood that memory cast in the mind of the weary adult. But Akaste struggled for every step, every breath as she bore the burden of a creature out of her element.

Throughout her conscious years, she was often bound to her room where the light that entered without the filter of water tortured her. Sea salt was poured into the bathtub in heaps, day after day, as her skin struggled to remain on her flesh. She breathed in the water more often than she drank it. Children made a mockery of her whenever she left class to run out onto the beach and jump into the sea. A pile of children's clothes lying sporadically on the shore meant Akaste was somewhere in the depths just beyond the horizon trying to establish some kind of compromise with Poseidon before she had to answer to the Earth and the Sky when she surfaced. But when she often surfaced, after weeks of wandering the desert of the earth, her parents would be waiting for her on the shore. Her first experience of accompanied flight was when her father first caught her swimming away the latter half of the school day. He jerked her up and carried her by her left-wrist the half-mile back to her house, her little feet dangling just above the ground, her discarded clothes tucked under the other arm of her ruthless father. The town watched. They always watched. Akaste wondered how eyes cursed with eyelids, the curse of living above the water, could stare collectively for so long, for so many years with hardly a blink when they watched her being ripped from the world she should have been delivered into. There was no need for blinking beneath the water. For creatures such as her, blinking was a gesture just as much as a smile or a flap of the tail-fin. Aquatic beings, those with eyelids,

blinked carefully. Blinking above the water was a sign of the barbarism of the Earth. Thoughtless blinking meant nothing just as the countless repetition of words devolved them into blabber, a ticking sound and nothing more. But nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse. Her duality required compromise. She was forced to blink through her formative years. Unless she was in the water, the Automatica of her earth-bound family and neighbors did not come naturally to her. Every breath, every step and every blink was a conscious action reminding her of what she was not meant to be. Out of the water, the world was revealed in quick glimpses, there could be no completion.

As Akaste glided within the current that flowed out to sea, her arms drifted to her sides. Her webbed fingers danced upon the vicissitudes of the water as her velocity increased with every scale that surmounted the obstacle of flesh. Here she could hear the world. This was the realm of universal fluency where a laugh could span oceans and a scream the circumference of the globe. The desolation above the waters was nothing but an echo chamber. It forced the living to come together in order to hear one another, a false gathering with dark outcomes. Even the human ear—a lingering shell from its origins—was a mockery of the faculty of hearing. Air was a trim reckoning, a child of oblivion a step away from what was to come for everyone. By the time Akaste had reached the open ocean, her feet were singular. She was swimming through the hands of creation. What took

eons on land, took moments here. Every flapping of her budding tail was a million years above. The dear, hidden things on her body that breathed the water were becoming more efficient and seamless with every fathom she dove. This world of twilight where the moon and the sun were subject to the water was a sparkling realm of discovery for Akaste. It was not the light penetrating the depths, it was her eyes seeing the depths and the secret lights they held. The bottom of the ocean was not a cold dark place, not in its entirety.

Whether it was a molten vent or an iridescent octopus, an electric eel or a shimmering and eyeless fish without a name, the bottom of the ocean was just another illuminated attribute of the vast sea. Here, here she would remain with fish that would be her chambermaids, here should would find her everlasting life. And shake the yoke of inauspicious flesh from her world-weary scales.

Two years before, when Akaste turned thirteen, her parents let her spend the day as she chose. Without a word, she stumbled out of the house and towards the beach. It was still cold outside in spite of it being the thirteenth day of April. An etiolated light fell on the beach. By the time Akaste first put her feet in the sand, she was already liberated from her 'costume' (so she called her clothes, or any clothes following the incident with her father some years before). She never thought of herself as being naked. How could aquatic lifeforms ever be naked when the water clothed them? But even in the open air, her clothes



made her feel like she was bound upon a Wheel of Fire. Garments of any kind were binding and false. Clothes were suffocating, almost as much as rooms, especially for Akaste. She closed her eyes as she approached the lapping waters: ‘Another year on shore had passed, another year— Calloused hands fell upon her bony shoulders. Akaste opened her eyes and saw the sea but felt his heavy breaths on the nape of her neck rather than the saline air, breaths that smelled like death, the many deaths of her brethren.

“What’s a pretty little thing like you doing out here not wearing nothing?” The grizzled voice demanded of the back of Akaste. “I don’t know if I should keep you or throw you back. This is a strange fish. A fine one but a strange fish.”

Akaste closed her eyes again to seek some safe place in the darkness of herself. The man’s hands jerked her around to face him. She pursed her lips as the full force of his miasmatic breaths fell upon her smelling sense organ.

“Nothing to say for yourself? You deaf? Or can’t you speak?” He shouted shaking Akaste by her shoulders. “Guess you can’t ever tell anyone about me. I’ll never forget you, my pretty mermaid.”

Akaste opened her green eyes and blinked at the ruined face of the man. His nose was infected with the squirming purple worms of the pub while his eyes were the color of the urine of a sick cat. His irises were colorless, a dull hue tending towards the circular oblivions at their core. Half of his drooping lips smiled while the

other was subject to gravity. Akaste felt heavy, heavier than she did when she awoke from an oceanic dream and found herself in the darkness of her bed where the ceiling seemed to be on top of her. His hands were pressing down on her trembling shoulders, the sand was consuming her inchoate feet.

“Now how about just a little kiss for your daddy, eh? Just a little kiss and you can go back from where you came?”

Akaste swallowed as she felt his hands slide down her shoulders and along her back. She imagined her skin tearing from her flesh as he did so. The man leaned in with half his lips puckered. Just as she felt his hands reaching the place nobody touched, she leaned into him. She opened her silent mouth and parted her lips. There was no other choice. Her teeth clamped down on the man’s split lower lip, the upper teeth meeting the bottom through a penetration of flesh. When her upper and lower jaw were tightly clenched, she shook her head violently as the blood of the man poured into her mouth and onto the sand. She was a predator of the sea as her eyes rolled into the back of her head avoiding damage both physical and psychological. After a series of shaking, the greater portion of his lower lip had parted from his form. Akaste spit it onto the bloody sand and walked towards the water. All that she could hear was the beckoning song of the sea. The man’s screams and cries and moans were suitable for the chorus of seagulls. The salt water washed the salt blood away and Akaste vowed never to return to

terra firma. But love, even the love of parents bound to the earth brought her back that night. It was the love that a child could forgive even when it banished her to her room for a month. Forgiveness never entails duty. Akaste's only duty was to return. She never spoke of what happened on her thirteenth birthday on the beach. That lump of flesh on the sand was penance enough for her, food for crabs. The oceanic world always found a way to circle the square, even on shore, to tend towards dominance. Just as the lapping waves pulled away rocks as surely as they pulled away the sand, Akaste felt the water pulling apart her spirit while her parents held her body fast through guilt and rules.

The pressure at the bottom of the sea prohibited many life-forms from penetrating these dark waters. But for Akaste this was not so, this was a reversed night sky seen from an inverted mountain peak, the tremendous weight of the sea above her like the full embrace of a benevolent giant. Stars were metaphorically replaced by blinking and crawling things on the bottom, neon-signs of bars and restaurants were now the neon blood of invertebrate creatures drifting by with multifarious means of propulsion. Volcanic vents mocked the instability of nuclear power plants with their bright orange finesse, radiating potential life with the heat from the earth's organs, a poetic confession from the planet's subconscious. A monumental skeleton of a sperm whale provided twilight shelter for wriggling things while eyeless snakes without taste pecked away at ancient flesh

preserved on its towering rib cage, a lingering simulacrum of life tending towards a ghost. Down there, even the dead were safe within the place outside of Time and beyond the reckoning of most spaces. It was a place unto itself, a singularity without remorse, the graveyard of the sub-aqueous world where the living always visited. Nothing was wasted. But to call it the bottom was deceiving. From the perspective of the even deeper places of the earth, this was a majestic roof. Earth upon earth, sky upon sky, deep space expanding at an ever-increasing pace; Akaste realized there was no motion in space. To exist in the infinitude where the center was everywhere and the circumference nowhere, was always to be where she was. The only question was which element a lifeform chose to occupy. She remembered a teacher saying the phrase: 'As false as water'. Nothing could be further from the Truth, she realized. Water always followed its nature. Even when it was frozen, it waited with all of its potential energy, perhaps for millennia, until it thawed and carried on. To hell with witnesses to confirm its Truth. The only falsity were the channels that water flowed through, the hidden chasms, the pipelines and artificial propulsions that deluded air-breathers into believing water was an element subject to their power. Waterparks might be the greatest abomination on the wind-swept world, she thought, as she drifted along the bottom of the ocean. A singular question haunted Akaste, something that comforted and frightened her, often at the same time. Was she the only one of her

kind? Certainly, there must be others. Or was she an anomaly, some kind of shy and silent prophet signifying the superiority of the sea? With every flap of her budding tail-fin, Akaste was at once searching for another while fleeing from the same. She felt herself heading towards the very thing that was behind her. Her head wanted to know while her instincts flapped through the water in harmonious protest. She felt like an aquatic snake eating its own tail representing infinity and zero at once. The eternal question mark of existence penetrated throughout the infinitude of water, earth, air and fire. The questions that swam through Akaste at the bottom of the ocean perplexed her only in their lack of answers, not in their omnipotence. Uncertainty was the state of the universe. Any equation calculating otherwise was nothing but primal groping in the dark, a cave painting of a lion seen by a lion after consuming the grunting painter. In the flowing distance, Akaste could make out a trinity of pale lights. What was living was never bound to fixed routes, especially in the ocean. Curiosity and necessity forced sentient things to wander. But these three lights followed a set course, looking neither above or below. Something about their quality as they grew larger through proximity reminded her of the planes approaching the small airport behind her town at night. The planes reminded her of automated insects as the humming of their approach provided something for her eyes to follow during those sleepless nights. While it was a poor metaphor for a fish descending to the bot-

tom of the sea, the same physics were in order. But this was absurd. She was far too deep for anyone up there to fathom. As Akaste lingered just beyond the skeleton of the whale, the water that was compounded by the waters above—those seamless layers of water through which the various ecosystems determined by light and pressure pressed downwards—was displaced in a way the waters of the surface would be by a passing boat on a cloudy night. Sound bored its way through the liquified pressure chamber betraying its source as the abominable rumble of the engine banished the soft chorus of the deep. Akaste felt her now fully-formed scales from a region just below her belly-button to the precipice of her magnificent tail-fin bend upwards. The perfunctory retreat of these pliant jewels warned of something foreign approaching, a known unknown baffling not in its construction but in its location. She blinked. Nobody saw her fear.

The week before Akaste chose the sea provided an intensive study in what it was to live within four walls and a ceiling with no exit. Without warning, she had been carried away from the seashore on a cloudless Wednesday. The arms that pried her bellicose body from the sand were not her father's. These arms were stained with the green-ink of superficial profundity, a collection of forms and phrases from the two men's wrists up beyond the limits of their white sleeves. She vomited when she smelled the air that puffed from their armpits as they carried her. The two men only referred to her in the third-person

before a prick from an unseen needle made the crystalline sky spin before all turned to black. When she woke up, Akaste was bound by her wrists to a bed with starched sheets in a white room with fluorescent lighting. She realized that this was the hell of the wind-swept world. Vertical steel bars marred the light that fell through the soiled windows. Oblique shadows marked the timeless Time that passed as disembodied hands fed her pills, took her blood pressure, and provided her with food. A fish pulled by the mouth from the deep and finding itself flapping in the sun on the poop of the boat must have felt like this. She never spoke to the woman who sat by her bed. No matter what questions were asked of Akaste, she merely continued to blink at the cracked ceiling, her hands squeaking as she clenched her parched fingers. She dreamed the dreams of the prisoner. Open spaces without articulation were the scapes that formed in her drugged brain. There was no sea. Not even in her imagination. There was only the Purgatory of where she was. It was neither here nor there. On the seventh day, her bindings were released and Akaste was able to roam around the cell. She was a wingless bee, a tailless fish, a silent girl without a sea. In the light of the barred windows, the disembodied hands of the Others were revealed in all of their horror. The ravages of the dry world revealed themselves in the age spots and wrinkles, the warped fingers and the yellow nails. Each and every person on the earth was bound to become a monster. The beast's many hands were an abominable

exhibition of perverted existence. On the eve of the seventh day, when the light glowed through the muck of the window, a moment of blinding beauty within the Inferno, Akaste leaned against the steel bars and heard a rumble. Her cracked hands gripped the bars and pulled. The singular piece of successive bars pried off of the window just as a collection of sea-grass would in a turtle's mouth. A gentle gesture could move mountains and lay barren the sea floor. How she was able to pry herself through the narrow slit of the window where the dry air was allowed through was impossible for Akaste to understand. She closed her eyes and thanked the magic of the octopus, that alien being, the pinnacle of the actuality of the escape artist. When she was free from the purgatorial cell, Akaste smelled for the sea. Everything was flat here, nothing tended towards the shore. In a stroke of irony, a seaplane with its tell-tale form flew over her head. She watched as it traced an invisible line in the sky as it descended to the very place she was seeking to avoid such things. By the time she reached the shore, her feet were bloody and her scales dying. Once her starched blue gown was discarded between some sand dunes, she limped to the water and fell onto the sand. The moment the waters of the eternal sea bathed her, what had been a ritual became a confirmation as her scales were replenished and the drugs in her system were washed away. A faint song trickled along the waters that licked her feet, a song in the same scale as her heart, the harmonious song of herself.

What was lost was found and found in abundance.

When the three-eyed beast was upon her, Akaste stared at the pair of blinking eyes within the glass face. They had a look of dumb wonder, the wild white hairs of the man's head and beard a sign of his excitement. For the first time in years, Akaste wanted to speak. She felt a primal urge to tell him her name and describe the place they both occupied under far different terms. But the element she breathed was fundamentally different than the element the old man did within the confinement of his mechanized beast. Words would never penetrate the thick glass that allowed him a distorted glimpse of Akaste and her world. The old man might as well have been looking at her through an impossibly long telescope on the surface of the moon. She thought of swimming by him, forgetting that the encounter had ever occurred, but something held her fast. Somehow, the workings of the wind-swept world were new to her again and she wanted to see. It reminded her of looking at photographs with her parents from her childhood when she was at the beach and smiling without worry. The pictures were nothing but two-dimensional ciphers signifying whatever she chose but there was something comforting about them. But this was no picture. Here she was and there he was. But they were not. She could see the objectivity in his wizened eyes as he stared on at her. His gnarled hands were busy before him as his crooked fingers marked with age typed away. Akaste looked behind

her for a moment. The skeleton was still there, the sea creatures of the deep still pecking away at the gray flesh with indifference to the spectacle just ahead. When she looked back, the three-eyed beast was closer. The old man beckoned her with his hand, a benevolent gesture of the grandfather she never had. Akaste smiled and with a flourish of her glorious tail-fin, she swam in a spiraling pathway towards him. The old man stroked his long beard and smiled back when Akaste pressed her hands on the glass of the machine. His eyes looked up and down the girl, his pale blue eyes seeming to penetrate her form as the gaze of the scientist soon replaced the look of ageless wonder. For the first time in her life, especially in her watery element, Akaste felt naked. The eyes of the scientist had objectified her. She pulled her hands away from the glass and covered her breasts. A faint rumble through the glass signified his laughter. Yellow rows of teeth marked by black rot magnified the old man's laughter into a hyena's cry. Akaste kept her hands over her chest as if she possessed two hearts. Tears were streaming from the scientist's face while the tears that Akaste shed had no beginning or end in her element. The paroxysm of laughter within the beast had reached such a magnitude, the glass sounded like it was mechanized as the cruel notes rattled it. Something within Akaste forced her to remain and watch. She wanted to see how long he would mock her being, her form, her *self*. Just as the laughter had reached its crescendo, when the scientist's face had turned from red to purple,

he stopped. The resonation remained as such a performance took time to subside. A supplicating palm pressed to the window begged pardon of Akaste. She hesitated for a moment but nodded to the palm. The old man nodded and smiled without revealing his Time trodden teeth. Akaste shook her head to stop her ears from ringing. Whether it was the laughter, or the sight of it all that assaulted her inner ears, was impossible to know. When she returned her liquid gaze to the three-eyed beast, the scientist was seated again. His head was lowered. It looked like he had forgotten something or was regretting what had just happened. In the end, he was just a tired old man, Akaste thought. When the metal hand closed around the waist of Akaste, it was too late for her to swim away. She watched in horror as the mechanized sound that found form was pulling her towards a cage at the back of the beast. She closed her eyes and tried to pry herself free of the stainless-steel hand. Nothing was to be done. By the time she opened her eyes, she was imprisoned in the the steel cage. For the first time in her element, she felt wet. For the first time in her element, she was trapped. Here she was in the boundless deep barely able to take a breath. Only the temperature of her tears differed from the water around her, that water that was never bound bar steel bars. Water was true to the end. The man within the three-eyed beast tilted the vessel upwards and Akaste's hair fell backwards with the violence of the ascent. As the light grew and the pressure diminished, Akaste could feel her spirits

dwindling. Rather than watching the approaching surface of the water play with the light of the sun, Akaste watched as the deep became darker and tended towards black. She tried to stop breathing but her nervous system betrayed her. When all was black beneath her, when the warmth of the shallow waters warned her of the open air's approach, she closed her eyes and felt a prick from something next to her. ❖

“THE WEEK OF THREE FINGERS”

by SCÁTH BEORH

I rejoiced when Lacy Huffington cut his right forefinger off in his bicycle chain.

I had a few good qualities as a kid. I loved old people. Okay, I had one good quality, and it was appreciated by a handful of the older folks while being underappreciated or outright despised by the others. That said, I had no character to speak of, and because of that I had no personality other than the one who demanded that everything in life go my way or not at all. A life of adversity has a tendency to change things for the better, to develop character and wit and personality, but right now I'm talking about what kind of kid I was and how I was elated when the neighborhood bully Lacy Huff-Puff, as we called him, permanently lost one of his most important fingers. I would have been happy enough if he had chopped off a pinky finger, but the fact that he stupidly stuck his forefinger between the bike chain and the chainwheel while his little brother Gerald was rotating the pedals to a maximum spin made fireworks go off all over my body, and I wasn't even there to see it! Had I been there, I would have been outwardly horrified but inwardly so gleeful that, even at my young nine years, I could have formed a new religion. I was always good at getting people together anyway, like a director. I could,

and still can, inspire others towards exciting ideas and ventures. I don't have too many opportunities to do such things these days, but there have been times when I could really rally the troupes.

Two days after Huff-Puff lost his pointer finger, Augusta Puissant, the neighborhood girl bully, chopped off her left thumb while she was showing off with her father's shockingly sharp chef knife. She was trying to cut celery like she saw him do countless times, or so she whined through millions of tears. Augusta was twelve and pretty and a tomboy, and she was mean to every neighborhood kid smaller than her or quieter than her or different than her. She especially liked to pick on me, of course, which made my enjoyment of her losing that thumb extra-special. And this time I was given the privilege of watching it happen! Oh, sure. I screamed and ran to tell my mother what had happened, but that was all just part of the play-acting. Just under my supposedly terrified skin and bulging eyes was a kid so happy that Augusta Puissant was bleeding all over her lemon-yellow sweater that the only thing that could have made me happier was if she had bled to death in the process. But she didn't. She did turn a ghostly white, whatever shade of white that actually is, and so I cut my losses

and was glad that she had at least come close to death. I believed in an afterlife even then, but was uninformed about its particulars. Truth is, I had been taught that if a person died who had not gone through the ritual of the all-important Sinner's Prayer, this person, upon death, would simply go to live in Hell for eternity. Not very Biblical, I know, but most Baptists aren't.

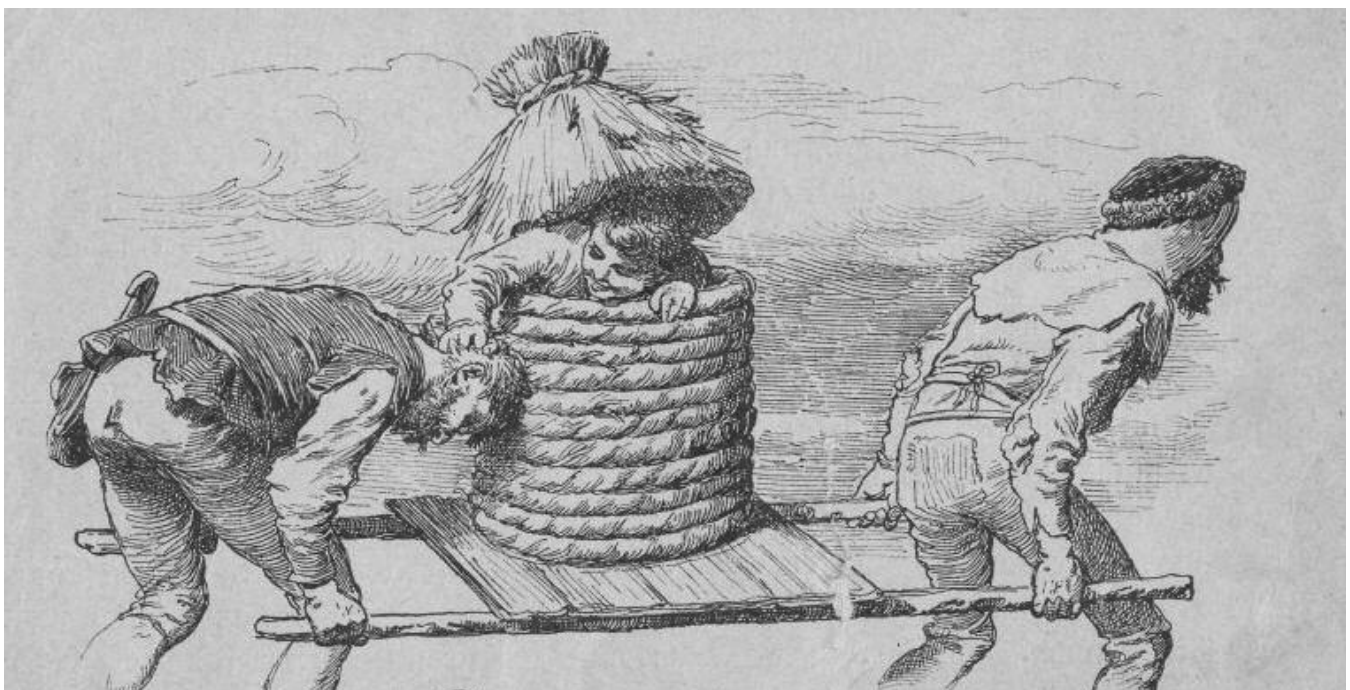
Lacy Huff-Puff got stitches and came back home the same day he lost his finger. Augusta Piss-Ant, poor thing, lay in the hospital a whole week, and what made it even better was that it was during the Christmas holidays!

I've saved the best for last.

Tony Toronto was too old to be part of our neighborhood gang of twenty-some-odd kids ranging between the ages of six and twelve. When I was nine, Tony was already fourteen. When he did come outside, which was rare, he even bullied Lacy—a feat thought nearly impossible to accomplish.

And one time—no, I think it was twice—Tony slapped Augusta across her freckled face so hard that her nose made a cracking sound. Why? Because she had screamed at him to shut his stupid pie-hole and go home. I was there both times. Thrilling days those were! Anyway, I hated 'Tony Tomato' more than I hated anybody on Earth. That kid haunted my days, my nights, and even my dreams! He'd show up at my dream-school and dream-stalk me, dream-sneer at me, dream-threaten me, dream-taunt me. It all began when I was seven and he was twelve. He started picking on me and pushing me around, I told him I was going to tie his ears behind his head and kick his ass out of my yard, and that was the beginning of it all. Well, that and the time I told him I thought his mother was the ugliest woman I had ever seen in my life. No, I should have never said that, but I was somewhat outspoken as a child.

Tony Tomato lost his right middle fin-



ger. You can probably imagine what he was doing with that middle finger when he lost it, but I bet you can't imagine how he lost it, so I'll tell you.

My father had a chicken coup filled with speckled roosters and hens. He had bought them as chicks a few months before, and by the time Christmastime had rolled around they had grown up to a pretty good size. Well, one day the Blowhard's dog Cougar got loose and navigated himself across six backyards straight toward my father's chicken house. While the dog dined on this hen and that rooster, my father thought it might be a great time to try out his newly acquired WWII vintage .30-06 rifle. I found myself at once in awe, terrified, and, yes, electrified to no end that Cougar—or anything having to do with the weirdo Blowhard family—was going to die a bloody and infamous death. And I would get to watch!

Long brass rocket-like bullet in chamber, my father the sharpshooter stood like the soldier he had once been, his feet set apart and planted firmly, his eye cold and calculating, his finger hovering around the trigger of that death machine like a bee around a springtime flower.

Deep breath, hold, hold—
Crack!

And down went Tony Tomato, who had been trying to retrieve Cougar, good-hearted boy that he was, from a sure and instant death.

'Daddy! You killed Tony!'

My father, the strong and silent type, shouldered his rifle and strode out to the remainder of his chickens—I think there may have been one still standing, but barely—took lie of the situation, then stepped over to the Toronto boy and yanked his blubbering self up off his knees. 'Damned mutt,' was all my father said.

'Maybe you'll get him next time, Daddy. Split him right down the middle!'

Tony Tomato was as white as a sheet, and I knew what color that was. Colorless. Except, of course, for his shirt and pants and hi-top tennis shoes all painted a beautiful bright tomatoey red.

My father cleared his throat. 'Maybe next time, Tony, you'll know not to be disrespectful to your elders.'

'Yeah—yessir,' was all the bleeding fingerless buffoon could say, but unexpectedly, this horrific comedy added yet a new dimension to my nightmares concerning that bully of all bullies, and I was well into my twenties before visions of Tony Toronto and his fingerless hand stopped waking me up in freezing sweats. But, if you want to psychoanalyze me, this story is proof positive that I was permanently scarred by a childhood that may have only given me one thing—a backbone I wasn't born with. Or two things, but I'll let you be the judge as to whether I have a sense of humor or not—something else I was born without. ❖

END TRANSMISSION