

Corner Bar Magazine

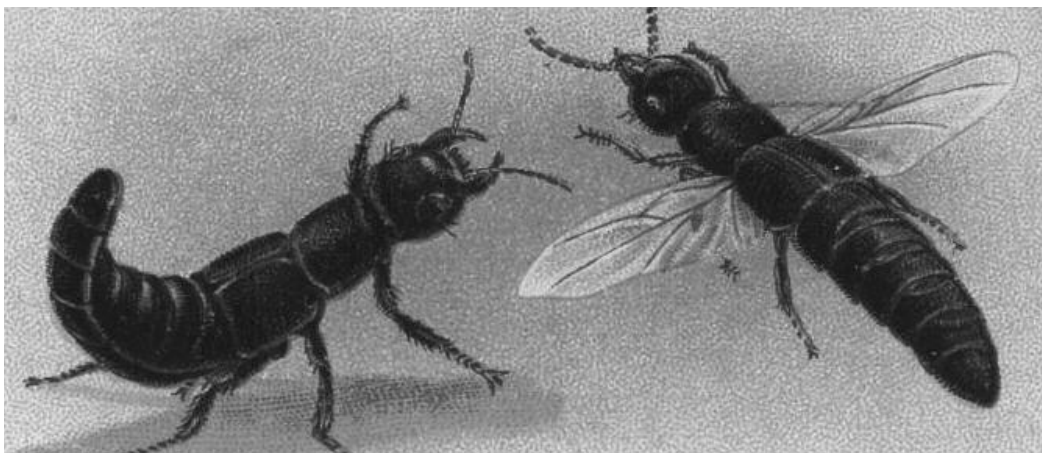
Volume 7 Number 3

Page 1 – THE VENUS PROJECT by K. A. Williams. K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes mystery/crime, speculative, general fiction, and poetry. Almost 90 of her poems have been published in various magazines including *The Blotter*, *Altered Reality*, *Literary Yard*, *Calliope*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Tigershark*, and *View From Atlantis*. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), and CYOA games.

Page 5 – NEW GOD by Min Mai. Min Mai lives in New York City and was longlisted for the 2021 Fractured Lit Flash Fiction Prize.

Page 7 – THE BEAST OF LADENCROFT by Kamon Cruz. Kamon Cruz is a mixed Indo-Caribbean and Latino writer living in the Greater Philadelphia area. He loves reading about superheroes, monsters, aliens, and all the magic and technology that comes along with them; consequently that also happens to be what he loves writing about. When he's not writing, he spends playing games (video games and tabletop); reading and listening to podcasts; and thinking about writing.

Page 13 – LICORICE by Doug Hawley. Mr. Hawley is a hobby writer of around ninety publications - memoirs, speculative, horror, crime, drama and humor <https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/>. He is a former math professor and actuary, now retired, who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Lake Oswego, Oregon. Besides the writing, he hikes, snowshoes and volunteers.



“THE VENUS PROJECT”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

The meeting was by invitation only. Guests had to show their invitations to me at the door to gain admittance. After all of them were inside, I closed the door and nodded.

The woman in a stylish white outfit and white low-heeled shoes mounted the dais. “Hello everyone. For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Martha Caelum. I am the CEO of Byner Technology, the corporation behind the ‘Future Of Venus’ project. Behind me is an image of the planet as it is now and how it will look after terraforming.”

Two large holograms of Venus, one yellow and one blue, appeared and spun in the air behind her. They were an impressive sight.

After some oohs and aahs, she explained the colonists selection process. “The names of those with the highest intelligence scores among the worldwide population aged twenty-five to thirty-five who have applied for the opportunity, and also passed a psychological and flight simulator test, were entered into our computer. It will randomly choose the new

world colonists keeping the mixture of races and sexes proportional.”

I was bored now and yawned. I knew I never had a chance of being selected as a colonist. My IQ wasn’t high enough, and my grades had been less than stellar in school. And there was the other reason too.

“When will the names of the colonists be made public?” asked someone on the second row of seats.

“The computer is currently analyzing that data now.”

“How long will their journey to Venus last?” asked another.

“It used to take three months in the old days, but we’ve improved on that considerably. I’m not exactly sure of the number of actual days though. The scientists can answer questions like that at our second meeting.”

Earlier I had watched the androids set up four rows of folding chairs. Now they were setting a table with food and recyclable plates, cups, silverware, and napkins.

My stomach growled as a reminder that

I



had skipped breakfast because I overslept. Never had I dressed so fast before in my life. Not even the time there was a fire in my college dormitory. Rumor was that I had started it but they could never prove that.

No one seemed to be paying any attention to me, so I eased over to the table a few steps at a time until I stood beside it. I popped something that looked delicious into my mouth. It was.

I got a plate and helped myself until someone asked a question that caught my attention.

“Since you can cultivate extinct animals, how about putting a couple of Tyrannosaurus Rex dinosaurs and some Velociraptors on Venus.”

Martha frowned at the man. “So they can eat all our new world colonists? Are you crazy?”

She looked toward the door before she spotted me at the table. She looked angry, I didn’t blame her.

She said to me, “Could you please escort our uninvited guest out now?”

I set the plate down and approached the intruder who walked meekly toward the door with me behind him.

I opened the door, let the man out, and shut it. This time I locked the door too, something I had obviously forgotten to do before. I saw Martha at the table with the other guests

and hurried over to apologize.

She turned around quickly and I ran into her. The plate fell to the floor leaving a red glob of cherries stuck to the front of her white linen jacket.

“I’m sorry,” I said, grabbing up some napkins and dabbing them at her jacket.

Martha snatched them from me and wiped the jacket herself, dismayed at the sight. “Cyrus!

When Fran asked me if I could find her son a good job, I agreed. I’m sure you’ll understand why I’m deducting my laundry bill from your pay.”

“Yes, Aunt Martha,” I said gloomily.

“And I’ll give you one more chance. Let any uninvited guests into my second meeting tomorrow, and you’re fired.”

“Yes, Aunt Martha.”

“And quit calling me Aunt Martha in public.”

“Yes, Aunt, uh, Ms. Caelum.”

Martha took off her jacket and handed it to me. “Take this to the cleaners.”

I turned to go and she added, “And lock the door on your way out.”

I could hear laughter, but I didn’t look back. The dry cleaners wasn’t far, so I started walking in that direction on the sidewalk. I got angry when I thought about the laughter. When I saw a trash receptacle up ahead, I started wadding up the jacket intending to toss it

inside.

I reached the trash can and held the jacket over it. The lid popped up but before I let it fall inside, a driver passed by me in a flying cab and yelled, “Why are you walking when you can fly?”

I ignored him.

Flying made me sick. Martha too. Motion sickness pills didn’t help us either, and we had both failed the flight simulator test. All the rest of the family had passed it and now lived on one of the Moon colonies where you didn’t need to have a high IQ or be a certain age, if you had the money. My parents would have paid my way if I’d passed, and Aunt Martha was rich.

We were all the family each other had. I changed my mind and walked away from the trash container with the jacket.

“Hey, come back here! Give me that jacket! You wanted to throw it away, I saw you!” the robot container yelled. It started rolling toward me, clicking its lid.

I ran down the sidewalk away from it. The dry cleaners was just ahead. I flung open the door and rushed inside. Beyond the woman at the counter, I could see several androids working at machines.

“Can you get this stain out?” I asked,

laying the jacket on the counter.

The woman took it from me and examined the stain. “Certainly.”

When I left, I saw that the robot container had gone back to its usual place. I don’t know why scientists thought it was a good idea to give trash receptacles any artificial intelligence.

I noticed the sign of an appliance store a few doors down. What I really needed to throw away was my defective alarm clock. I’d buy a good one so I could get up early and have breakfast before I left for the second meeting tomorrow.

With her jacket, which I had been assured would be ready early in the morning.

And this time, so would I. ❖

“NEW GOD”

by MIN MAI

When the world was erased, it was just a flick into darkness. I didn't need theatrics like the world splintering into a million pieces or folding into itself until it was a tiny ball that I then ate. The beauty of my world was discovered, and it was my time.

“Where am I?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

“You died. Everyone in the world died,” I said. I remembered how scared I was—how many eons ago was it?—and softened my tone. “It’s okay, there will be a new world: your world.”

“I was working at my desk...”

“Yes, you were working at your desk over three hundred Earth years ago and had a stroke.”

I felt her energy pulse through the rainbow. She was experiencing a multitude of emotions. Even though I had limited time, I didn't want to rush her. It took me ages to control my thoughts well enough that the world was stable enough to support life.

Poppy seed sized spots started disintegrating in my energy. The transitioning was beginning. I wondered what would happen if I said nothing, letting her exist on her own without any guidance, but it wasn't the way of the Universe.

“Am I in Heaven? Are you God? Are my children waiting for me on the other side?”

she asked.

“There is no Heaven or Hell. And I am *technically* your God since I created the world you lived in, but I was initially a mortal, like you,” I said. “There is no other side, just here, and you, and me.”

“Why me?” Her energy trembled.

“You’re here because you made the most mathematical discoveries explaining the world I created. The discoveries, in your short lifetime, were supposed to occur over a thousand years, at minimum. After you died, people were able to utilize your theories to understand the last remaining mysteries of the world in just a few centuries. Once it was all discovered, the world ended.” The holes in me were the size of rice kernels and growing larger. I was starting to split apart. It felt similar to stretching after a long rest.

“You ended the world because humans discovered how it worked?”

“No, I didn't end the world, or at least not purposefully. The Universe ended the world. There is only one rule here: Create beauty. Once you discovered the mathematics that was the foundation of the world I created, then it all became replicable. I became predictable. And beauty that's predictable doesn't excite, and what doesn't excite you isn't beautiful,” I

said.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

My energy was like Swiss cheese. I could feel that I was going to end soon, but I wasn’t scared. “You’re going to create your own beauty, one that the Universe has never seen before.”

“How do I do that?” she asked. There was some excitement behind her voice, but mostly fear. Her energy trembled less now.

“It’s easy, just imagine what you want. The hard part is making sure that your decisions have no unintended consequences.” My energy began expanding and splitting apart. Tethers of silver thread snapped as I inflated. “I initially did not want to give humans such a high level of consciousness, but I had to. I needed someone to truly perceive the majesty of my creations. Rabbits loved to eat my flowers, but they couldn’t comprehend how beautiful the colors were or the complexity of the symmetry.” I laughed, lighting up like a star. “But it ended up being my downfall.”

“Will you be here to help?” she asked.

“No, but you will know each choice every God before you has ever made. Hopefully, you can learn from our mistakes to make something even more beautiful than our creations to please the Universe.”

“What’s going to happen to you?” she asked. She sounded genuinely concerned. That’s good; Compassion is beautiful.

“I will cease to exist,” I said simply, pulling towards her like a magnet,” like the God before me when I discovered how his world worked, and like you will in the future when someone discovers how your

world works.”

“How do I make sure that doesn’t happen to me?” she asked. “I don’t want to die again.”

“I’m not dying. I am turning back into matter that will be used for the new world that you create,” I explained.

My energy melted into hers; The two of us became one. There were thousands of potential worlds running through her mind, most that existed at one point, but some that were brand new. Our memories melded together, and she could now see all the choices and experiences of the millions of Gods before her. There were also some vague memories of my corporeal life, like the imprint of a dream after waking up. I noticed an arrogance in her and the belief that her creation would never be deciphered, a thread of thought that existed in all new Gods. It was her turn now to create the new world, and my turn to make the last journey in the Universe.

Everything flicked into darkness ❖

“THE BEAST OF LADENCROFT”

by KAMON CRUZ

The filthy streets of the Ladencroft’s outer ring rush to quiet themselves as mothers worriedly usher children inside. Anyone with the unfortunate luck to be out in the small town tonight hastily ducks into buildings and alleys, doing their best to make themselves scarce. Tonight Brant the wild woman walks the streets. Her passing is heralded by the sound of her massive blade dragging along the ground, held tightly in her left hand. They have heard stories of her, out in the wilds. Some of the beasts she hunted could require a platoon of trained soldiers to put down. Either that, or a village that had enough bodies to lose in the attempt. Usually, such stories could be dismissed with a wave of the hand, superstition and exaggeration. Nothing more.

But usually the proof didn’t stalk the streets, and any who doubted turned chalk white when they saw the tooth affixed to the head of her blade. They may not have recognized that it once belonged to a cavern wurm, but anyone who witnessed its size could tell it came from a great and terrible beast. Brant does not acknowledge the townsfolk as she walks. Her eyes are fixed beyond the vast swath of farmland that lies between the town and her prize. The Duke’s castle. From where she stands,

it is visible as a dark shape.

She deviates only once, placing her sword on her back to clamber up the side of the belltower. She cuts the rope that would have alerted the castle of her presence had someone gathered the courage to ring it. Now only the castle lay before her, and nothing but death would keep Brant the Beast Slayer from completing a hunt.

#

In his Castle, Duke Raen is seated in the throne room. He has held court for the day, ensuring that Ladencroft continues to run as it has for decades. The citizens of the outer ring make their living by working his farmlands and tending his livestock. Craftsmen and others may sell their wares through the trading guild. The guild’s council lives in the inner ring of Ladencroft, along with members of the Duke’s court, and others near enough to nobility to have earned their place in this part of town. With his evening meal concluded, the members of his staff that do not live in the castle will be returning to their homes in the outer ring.

He sits with a chalice of fine liqueur in his hand, mulling over how to best increase his holdings and make certain of Ladencroft’s future. The large glass

windows around him let in what light the sun has left as it touches the horizon. The pinkish-orange hues reflect off his black mail and complement the deep blue of his cape. Only one attendant and the court musician are with him now, one prepared to refill his cup, the other providing a steady tune on the lute. Both are vital elements of the man's routine before he bathes and retires for the evening. Perhaps tomorrow he would walk the castle town, or check in on how his crop and livestock are handled before holding court again in the afternoon.

All thoughts of tomorrow are dispelled by the sudden opening of the throne room's heavy wooden doors. Holding them open is a broad-shouldered woman of lean musculature. She has long, unkempt hair and a dark brown, carapace-like armor covers her chest and arms to above the elbow. Her midriff is bare, and a large-webbed scar marks her abdomen. Taking a step forward she grasps the handle of her enormous sword and draws it, pointing the blade directly at the Duke. The court musician stops playing at once.

"Leave us," the Duke says to what remains of his retinue. "Do not bother raising the alarm. I would wager our guest has taken care of whatever guards could reach us."

The attendant and musician hurriedly flee out of a side door, stumbling over the bodies of the two guards that had been posted there.

Duke Raen rises from his throne, sweeping his cape behind him. Downing

the last of the chalice's contents, he takes his sword from its resting place at the side of his throne. The waning sunlight from the windows is overtaken by the flickering candlelight of a chandelier overhead.

"I am Duke Raen, lord of Ladencroft. I do not know why you have come to my castle and spilled the blood of my men, but I tell you now that you will pay for what you've done."

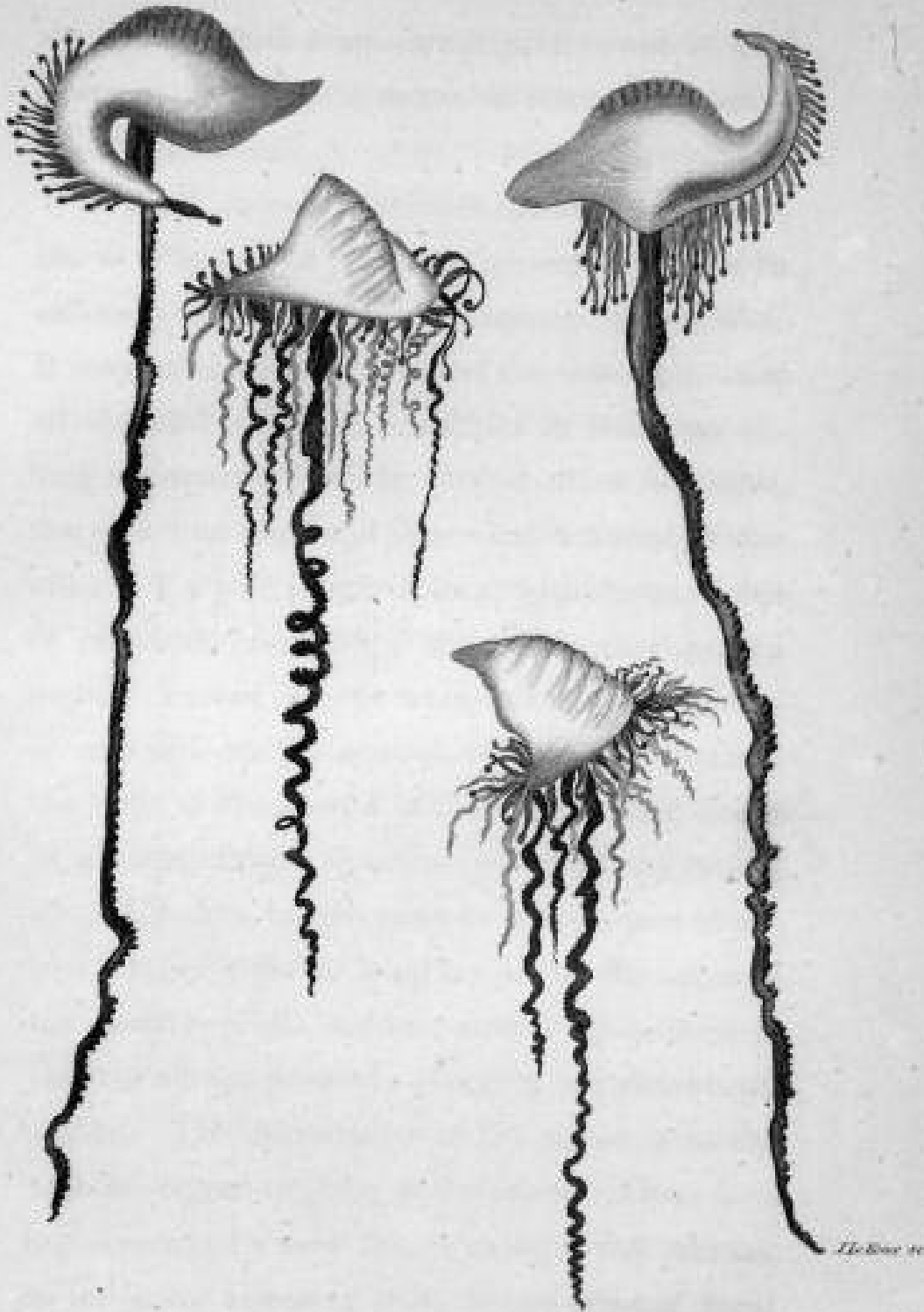
The woman hefts her sword over her shoulder and says, "I am Brant the Beast Slayer, and I am here for you."

Raen throws his head back and laughs, blond hair cascading around his shoulders, "You think me a beast, Beast Slayer?" He draws his long, thin blade from its scabbard, "I don't know how you've developed this notion of me, but it will be your final mistake."

Brant spits on the ground. "I have killed many things in the wild. Most had magic they were born with; your manufactured magic will not save you, just as their natural magic did not save them." She returns to her odd ready position, allowing the sword to touch the ground behind her.

"Come now beast, let us fight."

The Duke takes his ready position, his cape glows and he distorts into a pinprick of light and shadow before blinking into the space of Brant's guard. The glow from his cape begins to fade as he stabs the blade into her uncovered abdomen; her eyes widen as it makes contact. He had analyzed her for weaknesses and assumed the gap in her armor made her vulnerable, then



HOLOTHURIA UTRICULUS

without a second's hesitation had gone for the killing blow. There was no way for him to know she had injected the wound with the ichor of the same monster she'd made her armor from. The scar tissue that formed there was almost as tough and resilient as the armor itself.

He presses the blade harder, trying to pierce through, the hardened tissue begins to crack, and Brant uses the heel of her open palm to shove him back. She brings her blade up, hoping to strike at Raen's side, but he twists and blocks the blow with his sword. Its steel had been folded over and over, and reinforced with magic, making the sliver of metal far more robust than it appeared. She pulls back, allowing the tooth to hook against the blade and pull it down and moves forward to kick him in the chest, but he uses the magic of his cape to blink backwards and avoid the attack.

He pivots behind the billowing cape, obscuring his exact position, before crouching down and launching another thrust towards a gap in her armor between her shoulder plate; she quickly holds her sword up and blocks the advance, then aims a wide arc at Raen's head. The Duke blinks to one side, then blinks again laterally, slashing at the Beast Slayer's throat. She sidesteps, and slams her greatsword downward onto his shoulder.

The familiar sound of bone cracking reaches Brant's ears and her brow furrows in concentration. She brings her sword around again, pressing the advantage.

The Duke takes his sword with his

other hand, grits his teeth, then blinks away. Brant scans the room, but sees nothing. Hearing a sound above her, she swiftly lifts her blade to block as Duke Raen drops from the chandelier. The strike would've buried the blade in her head. Raen flips forward, landing behind her, and scores a cut along her calf. Brant reaches back and grabs a handful of the Duke's hair, yanking him off balance. His cape glows blue, but as long as she holds onto him, he is unable to blink away. She secures her sword on her back, and grabs the arm the Duke holds the sword with.

Through gritted teeth, Raen speaks, "What brought you out of the wilds? Did you grow tired of hunting animals? Will killing me give you the thrill you desire? These people depend on me!"

Brant grunts, and grips Raen's wounded shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain.

"I don't just hunt any animal," she says "I seek out beasts who have become greedy. They go outside of nature's laws to terrorize towns and hurt people. When a beast decides it wants more than what is natural, I kill it."

He barks out a pained laugh. "If that is what makes me a beast then you'll have to hunt and kill every noble across the land. That is our nature."

She tosses the Duke to the ground, placing her foot on his back and grabbing onto his cape. "The other thing a beast needs for me to hunt it is some power that I want. My sword is made of tooth and bone, my armor shaped from the shell of a

monstrous insect I destroyed.” She pulls on the cape till it rips along the clasps, pressing her foot harder on his back. “I heard tell of your cape, how it allows you to change positions in an instant. This is what I will take from you.”

“You’re nothing but a filthy scavenger! A barbarian!” Raen cries out then twists and slashes at the foot on his back.

She jumps back and takes her sword, “Yes, that’s what I am.”

“Without me these people have nothing! They work in my fields, they serve my house and with our efforts Ladencroft is a prosperous town. My people have the satisfaction of earning their keep by the sweat of their brow and the work of their hands!”

He stands to his feet, and uses the last of the magic in the scraps of cape clasped to his shoulders. Blinking forward, he swings his sword and with one slash cuts Brant’s right arm off above the elbow.

“Here is what I take from you. Your arm, and your life!” He grits his teeth and brings his sword up for a final blow.

Before he can react, the tooth on Brant’s blade is driven through his neck. He slumps forward, legs collapsing as the life leaves his body.

#

The next morning, the townsfolk watch as those from the inner ring pack their possessions into carts and wagons and leave. They make their way to the castle, and find the Duke’s body pinned to the castle’s outer door with his own sword. The bodies of his guards lay in a pile in front of

him. Smoke billows from the castle’s shattered windows. The message to them is clear.

“Your land is yours once more. Any who try to take it from you will meet this end.”

Their fathers had been stripped of their farmlands by the Duke’s father. He had forced them to work their own lands, given them only what food they needed to survive, and a pittance in coin. The Mayoral house had been torn down, a castle erected in its place, and a town built around it. Any homes located on the farmland were destroyed, and its people pushed to an outer ring. All craftsmen had to give a portion of their payments to the new trading guild, and the Mayor had changed his title to Duke. So it had been for nearly 50 years. Raen had ruled for 15 years, after his father was poisoned. Now he was gone, with no successor to speak of.

Ladencroft was free.

Brant does not hear the town’s celebration, she does not join them for the feast they hold, food taken from the Duke’s storehouses. She walks, what remains of her arm wrapped tightly with the cape she had torn from Raen’s shoulders, dragging her sword along the ground behind her, marking a trail.

Should the people of Ladencroft need her, she would remain in the wilds around the town, nursing her wounds and weaving the cape into her armor and boots. The power it provided would make up for the arm, at least for now. In two weeks time she’d leave and find a creature that could

provide a replacement for her arm.

She recalls the Duke's words for a moment. That the nature of every noble was to seek more than was natural. She ponders the idea of this new prey she had neglected, native to cities and towns, instead of the wilds she was so familiar with. Should she expand her hunting grounds? With a breath she clears her mind of wandering thoughts.

For now Brant would rest easy knowing she had slain another beast. ❖

“LICORICE”

by DOUG HAWLEY

I had been working in the University of the Filipinas anthropology department for several years, when I got the break of my career. I was awarded a decent sized grant to study of the elusive Chupa people in the mountains of Luzon. People surrounding the tribe generally avoided them because of their reputation for aggressive and odd behavior. According the various legends, the Chupas attempted to suck any exposed flesh on those that they encountered.

My first challenge was to learn how to communicate. Their lingua franca was based on Spanish with a lot of words and phrases from other languages. The Chupas were not exactly unknown, but much about them was a mystery. As an ex-pat American, I hoped to get by with Spanglish and a little cramming.

My second challenge was to visit them. Again, I had good luck. Other than their reputed sucking behavior, they had the reputation as being quite peaceful.

For a few thousand Filipinas Pesos, not much in American dollars, I was able to get a guide as far as a path into their territory. That left just a few miles into their territory for me to go alone. When I arrived, many of the Chupas were waiting to greet me. Their appearance was quite surprising. Superficially, they resembled the people of

South East Asia with olive skin, mostly dark straight hair and sparse body hair. They differed in that they had a sprinkling of blond or auburn hair, some of which was wavy. Perhaps their most striking feature was what appeared to be erythermas and hematomas (or hickeys as they are known) in various places about their bodies.

I was surprised to see a group of them waiting expectantly for me. It seems that I had been spotted along the trail, or someone had told them that I would be coming. They smiled and shouted “Hola” to me, and all I could think of was to respond in kind.

After some attempts at communication given my weak Spanish knowledge, the assembled natives decided to appoint a woman named Ann to guide me. I was amazed that Ann was so proficient in American English. She told me that she had spent quite a bit of time with an earlier traveler from the US, Duke Hanley. They had not only learned each other’s language, but he had left her tapes and books in English. Clearly, I would not be the first American to learn Chupa culture, but I could still be the first to document it. Ann told me that her friend traveled the world and kept a diary, but only for his own entertainment.

With our introduction out of the way, Ann took me on a tour of the settlement. The populations appeared to be in the hundreds living in thatched huts much like those in the South Pacific. Men and women wore skirts made of palm fronds. I didn't observe anything that Westerners would call work, but there was some repair work being done on the huts. Some were casually eating the banana, papaya, coconut and jackfruit that grew abundantly. As with most of the Filipinas, there was little evidence of vegetables grown or eaten. Here and there pigs and chickens were barbecued. So far, nothing was out of the ordinary, except that the people mostly jogged and danced rather than merely walking.

After our short tour, Ann took me to the guest house and told me that she would see me the next day when the cocks crowed.

When we met in the morning, she explained the local mythology handed down for hundreds of years. People from the Western mainland left their homeland because of great floods. Much later when the Spanish missionaries tried to convert them to the Great Spirit in the sky, the Chupas largely pretended to accept Christianity, by mostly laughed it off. Since the missionaries left, the Chupas had largely been isolated and left alone, except for the occasional explorer. In her detailed telling the story took most of an hour. When she finished, I asked "How much of this gag am I supposed to believe?"

Ann looked startled for a moment and then began to laugh. After awhile, I was laughing with her. When she could talk

again, she said "Not much. Most of us did come from the West, but not that long ago, and we are not the primitives we sometimes pretend to be. What gave me away?"

"So many things. After you left me last night, I wandered around as inconspicuously as possible. I saw one guy reading a book. Not exactly a stone age thing to do. Later, I saw Mack, the black guy. I think that I can say 'the black guy' because that is what he calls himself. He told me about finding this place after leaving the US Navy and never wanting to leave. I found out only a little from him, because he wanted to keep some of your secrets, but we did have a good time talking about our lives in America. If none of that had given you away, your 'mythology' is a mash-up of origin stories going back to Gilgamesh."

"OK Dirk, you passed the test. We don't like being treated like oddities, so sometimes we play games with outsiders. We do live simple lives. There is no hidden mall or arcade here and we like it like that, but we are not unsophisticated. Our ancestors mostly came from South China and what was Indo China in the time that Spain ruled the Filipinas. During times of misery in the mainland, the Spanish government in league with shipping companies would recruit people with promises of riches and even gold, playing on the California Gold Rush. When the people arrived, all they got was low paying menial labor. Escaping to areas like our highland was the answer for many. They found that it was easy to build dwellings from the local trees and palms, and food was there for taking

from the trees. Chickens and pigs were added and let roam free for barbecues when desired.”

“That answers a lot, but why isn’t it widely known?”

“When the Spanish were overthrown, what little records there were, were lost, and the Spanish were not anxious to admit their shameful behavior. Our ancestors became fluent in Spanish and did keep records, which is why we Chupas know our history. The Filipinas government and the Chupas find it advantageous to maintain the mystery. They don’t bother us and we ask nothing of them.”

“Is there any truth to your reputation as suckers?”

“There has been a lot of confusion and exaggeration involved, but the story is even bigger than you are likely to believe at first. Some of the original immigrants from the Hong Kong area were orally fixated. Their ways spread to all of those that came to be called Chupas. Their rituals did involve licking as a way of welcoming people or as a romantic gesture. The legend is wrong in that we lick more than suck. You may not have noticed it because we were attempting discretion while we were unsure of you. You will have to convince yourself of the rest of the story. Our licking is a way of forming bonds of different sorts, including love. Licking tells us about the licked – whether that person is friend or foe, what he eats, or even whether that person is a likely lover. Before you dismiss this, think about what many animals learn from licking or sniffing other animals. Maybe there is a

latent part of homo sapiens that we have uncovered. Chupas – sucking people is inaccurate. It should be Lamas – licking people. ”

“You are right, that is a little tough to buy, but I’ll attempt to keep an open mind. Another area – I’d like to collect saliva from your people to get a genetic fix on you – do you think that I can do that?”

“You can start with me and I’m sure that others won’t mind.”

I got out my collection kit. Ann opened her mouth for the swab. As I leaned in, she licked my cheek. I jerked away while she smiled and said “You may change your beliefs.”

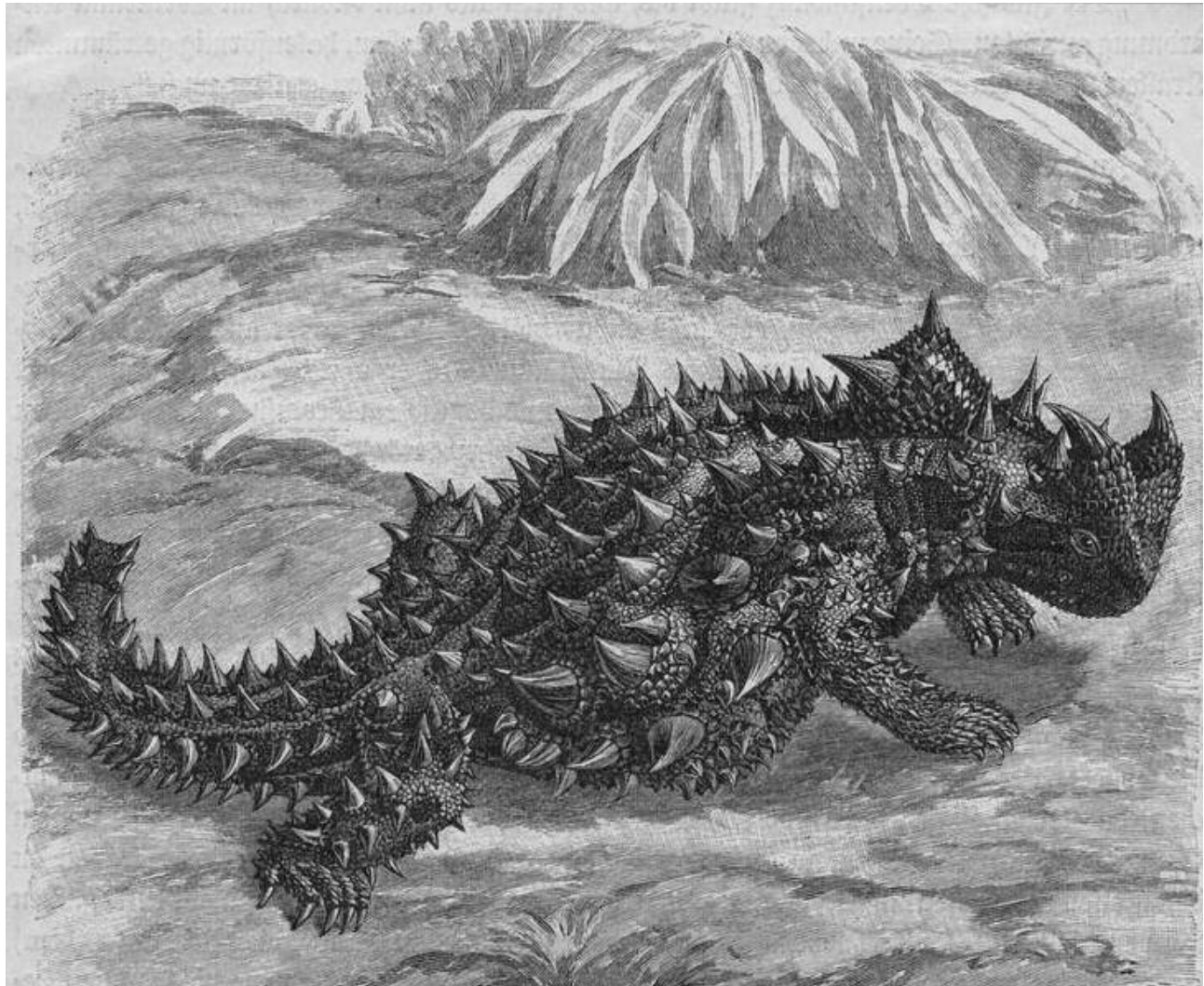
I told her “I should break off our conversation for now and go write my notes from the day”, and left for my guest room with my head spinning. I ended up sitting down the rest of the day, unable to concentrate. Later that night Ann came to my bed. When I tried to keep her at arm’s length, she said “You can’t fool me, I’ve seen inside you. You want this.” My resistance wilted.

Maybe that night happened because my wife had broken up with me before I came to the Filipinas and I was lonely and vulnerable. Maybe I already liked Ann or it was the power of suggestion. It might have nothing to do with licking, but my skepticism was weakening.

Wandering around and talking to Ann and others I found out more about the people. Despite living a simple life, they became allies with an odd group of friends that had discovered their story. Billionaires

that feared for their lives in a natural or economic apocalypse gave the Chupas financing in return for sanctuary if necessary. You have heard of some of the investors if you read Bloomberg. I have not

Their apparent health was easy to explain. As noted, they ate natural foods. The climate at their elevation was good year around. With little work to be done, they spent their time with sports and arts. Both



yet learned what the Chupas did with the money. Environmental groups bought surrounding lands with the promise that the Chupas and their friends would provide enlightened stewardship.

men and women played games with rocks of various sizes - throwing for distance and accuracy - and other kinds of track and field. They lacked exposure to electronic devices and the problems and stresses of the

outside world, but instead had a taste for creativity. There was an amphitheatre where they danced, sang and put on plays. Writing in all forms was a popular pastime.

No place is perfect. The Chupas had some of the problems that plague mankind, but on a much smaller scale than I had previously observed. I will be staying here longer than I expected. It probably has a lot to do with Ann. Marriage or even exclusive relationships are not valued here, but I treasure my time spent with her.

Lickademic

After one of my reports on the Chupas was released, I accepted an invitation to give a talk on them at my alma mater, Portland State University (it was college when I was there).

I was able to spend some time looking up old buddies from my time at Portland State. I noted with some satisfaction that they had gained weight and lost hair. Jerry had done both and was stuck in a bad marriage with three kids. I shouldn't feel too superior, I remained short. Jerry told me that my ex-wife Jelly had gotten a divorce from husband number two after he left her for a younger woman. As the guy that she left for an upgrade years ago, I looked at it as karma. For reasons that I can't remember I was Jam and she was Jelly when we thought that we were young and in love. Jerry must have told her that I was in town because my caller ID indicated that Jelly tried to call me several times, but after running many scenarios through my head, I

could think of no way that talking to her would be a good thing.

A couple of days of looking people up made it clear that Portland was no longer home. Seeing people from my past consisted of long awkward pauses followed by "stay in touch" or something like that.

When it came time to check in with Portland State I was introduced to my minder/guide, graduate teaching assistant Gretchen Simpson. She seemed quite subdued, the reasons for which became clear later. As she was showing me around Portland, much of which was changed since I lived there, she asked out of the blue.

"Do you really believe everything that you have said about the Chupas?"

"I have firsthand experience of everything that I reported.

"You think that you can really find out about a person by licking him or her?"

"You can after you have studied with the Chupas as I have."

"Would you care to prove it?"

My "OK" was followed by licking her right cheek using Chupas' technique. While in the Filipinas for several years, I'd missed the "Me Too" movement, so I didn't know any better than to do that without her consent. After about two minutes of concentration, I responded "You appear Caucasian, but have a significant amount of African ancestry. You are questioning your sexual orientation. That happens particularly now during your period. I didn't need the lick to know that you don't like me."

Gretchen appeared paralyzed momentarily.

Finally she said “Oh my god, you got at least three out of four.” I was wise enough not to ask which three. After that Gretchen became respectful if not worshipful. I learned that I’d made a mistake when she started touching me and whispering in my ear. My licking technique was not sharp enough to avoid giving her a romantic bond with me. I was fortunate that I only had to avoid her for another day until my talk was done.

During the talk to students and faculty I deemphasized the controversial elements of the Chupas’ society and treated the licking, and to a lesser extent the sucking, as simply a minor ritual. After the Gretchen experience, I wanted to avoid controversy. I succeeded so well most of the audience snoozed through my talk. I’ve always felt that that the audience should be the one to fear public speaking, not the speaker.

At the Manila airport an English language newspaper headline read “Licking breaks out in America.” Damn. In the body of the article “The outbreak has been traced to Ohio, but still has not been pinpointed more closely.”

I remembered that Gretchen told me that she was going back to Akron, Ohio to be a bridesmaid for an old friend. In my mind, I could see lots of her old friends doing kissy face when they met before the wedding. Up until that moment, I had no idea that Chupas kissing could work like Chupas licking. I saw the Chupas’ ritual in a new light. Could their behavior and ability be neither cultural nor genetic, but caused by a virus which had infiltrated their

bodies? It was a stretch, but stranger things have occurred in animals. Biologists have learned that much of evolution has been through viruses which have settled in our cells. If my new theory is true, I must have the licking bug which was passed through saliva.

The authorities were ahead of me in some ways. They tried quarantine in Akron, but as I found out, the infectious wedding party had already dispersed though the U.S. The licking virus did no damage to the infected, but it did allow them unwanted invasion of privacy among the licked.

The rest is history, but I’ll do a short recap in chronological order for anyone who is too young to have lived through it, or anyone who missed part of the story.

Americans were not allowed to travel outside the country until they were deemed “disease” free.

There was a spate of sexual assaults by predators who falsely claimed they were infected by the lickademic, as it was called.

The Center For Disease Control urged Americans to spray disinfectant over all exposed body parts and to avoid exchange of bodily fluids including blood, saliva and ejaculate. The first part worked fairly well, but the second part failed.

The spread slowed significantly after the nature of the “disease” was discovered and the carriers were identified.

The CDC quickly came up with a vaccine and the lickademic slowed to a trickle. The anti-vaxxers urged their followers to avoid that vaccine as well as the better

established vaccines.

Licking cults and communes for the infected sprang up around the country.

Senator Springfield sponsored a bill which would require the infected to wear a lavender armband. He may have been hoping for support for his presidential run. The bill was narrowly defeated.

An eccentric space and auto billionaire quietly maneuvered Delaware into a majority infected state as a social experiment. He wanted to see if the healthy living of the Chupas could take hold in the U.S. Delaware was one of the most infected states to start with and the billionaire bribed many of the uninfected to leave the state, and sold their homes to the out of state infected. As he put it “I want to see if the Chupa culture can thrive here.” The experiment failed, when to improve their lives, the billionaire cut off Delaware’s cell phone coverage, but a new political party, Lickadelican, became the major political

party in Delaware and Vermont.

A former U.S. president tweeted from an assisted care facility that he owned “We need to contain these lickens. Build a wall around them. I think that they are cousins to vampires. My successor, what’s her name, hasn’t done anything to control the threat. Sad.”

That brings us to the present. I’m still with the Chupas. The reality of Portland obliterated the nostalgic glow that I had. I had no connection with my old friends, the traffic was intolerable, the local newspaper would fail an eighth grade English class and the government was as bad as ever. As for America in general, just play the old Guess Who song, “American Woman”. ❖

END TRANSMISSION