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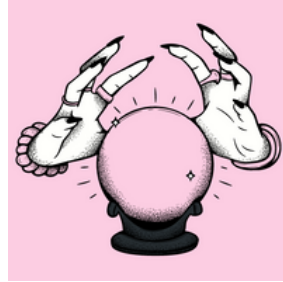
FOR HORROR AUTHORS OF THE FUTURE



SIREN

ALLINGTON, FAITH • BAKER, DW • BETULA, J.S. • BRUCE, RACHEL •
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DIVINATIONS MAGAZINE

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April 2024

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Editor-in-Chief

Amy Douglas

Content Warning

This issue contains work of a potentially triggering nature. Individual works contain content warnings as necessary.

To find out more about Divinations Magazine, visit
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SIREN

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Editor's Letter

Dear Reader,

Picture this: it's 2003, and your Nana has turned on the television to ITV2. On the screen is a re-run of Titanic; two hours later she's weeping to cries of 'I'll never let go Jack!'

Little did I know then, that the film would have such an impact. It struck such a chord within me, that I refused to go to my swimming lessons for the next 6 months at the thought of what horrors lay within the chlorinated hell. Since that day, the sea has terrified me above all else. Within the great unknown, there's so many possibilities. And so I knew, when creating *Divinations Magazine*, I eventually would put together an issue on it.

I grew up on the coast of the North sea, and come from a long line of sailors. Surely, the ocean should be comforting to me... almost familiar? And yet, there's something about its vastness, its unpredictability, that fills me with a sense of unease. It's as if the sea itself holds secrets that it's not willing to share, secrets that lurk beneath the surface, waiting to be discovered by those brave enough to venture into its depths.

It's those secrets that I set out to explore in *Issue Three: Siren*. This issue is filled with the works of incredibly talented authors and poets who share this fascination. From the siren song, to Krakens, to more experimental fiction on the terrifying nature of water itself, you're bound to find something that horrifies.

I am, as always, indebted to the wonderful *Authors* who have kindly submitted these works to us. It is our privilege to publish these works and provide them with a home within the pages of our magazine. I'd also like to express our heartfelt gratitude to our *Editorial Assistants*. Their dedication and skill in assessing and copyediting these works have been invaluable to ensuring the quality of our publication.

As always: stay spooky,

Amy M. Douglas



The Anatomy of a Siren

Nashitah Chowdhury

she slithered into my veins,
piercing every illuminous thought that ever conceived in my mind
but she's just a girl — thought
while storms rumbled inside her dilated pupils
tying little knots of misery around my ribs
she's just a girl
danger can only loom if i let it
yet her voice trembles every corridor of my heart
a hushed melody sinking every truth down my spine
she's just a—
"you can use my skin to bury all your grief in my love,"
i say with the lingering defeat stuck in my throat
her lips melted into salt-water
it's a trap; it's a trap
let this trance last forever—



Mixtapes for Mermaids

Faith Allington

Track 01 - The Inevitability of Water.

This is the song that plays when you first see them and your heart is jackhammering a thousand beats per second. That **nightclub-sparkle-haze** in your eyes. The first flush of fever.

Track 02 - Anemones in Your Hair.

You drift on the dancefloor to this drumbeat of an anthem, never-quite-touching, like the tide and the night shore. You've always known the tide longs to defy gravity, to slip the moon's leash and swallow this fractured land.

Track 03 - The Leg Dream.

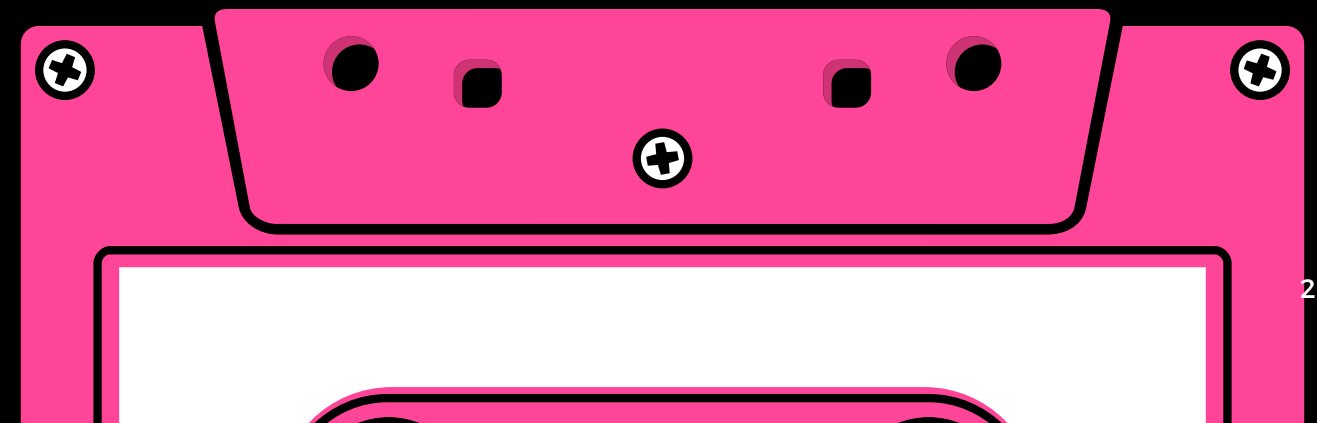
Like every mermaid, they dream of wearing red lipstick and sleeping beside you, without turning to water. They smell like bergamot and kelp, a body of sea-silk. But every morning the bed is gritty with sand.

Track 04 - Your Lungs for A Kiss.

Salt lips and coral heart, that's how this refrain goes. Why did you think it would be any different, trying to grow gills? No matter how long you practice, you can't hold your breath underwater.

Track 05 - Sunken Ships and Drowning Girls.

It's impossible for this to end another way. Summers are always washed away. This road always leads you back to that night. Cells splitting, every filament turning to ocean, every razor-sharp fingertip drawing pearls of blood from your willing body.



Nearer to You

J.S. Betula

The water's surface is bright today—a good day for finding rarities at the small rock-pools near the sandy abyss where the sea ends. I catch a crab, but I am still searching for a more substantial meal when I spot something brand new by the cliffs. I have not seen anything new in a long while, so I swim a little closer.

The creature is slightly smaller than I am, and oddly-proportioned. It has patternless, scaleless tan skin and four limbs with no fins or tail, and there are a colorful assortment of thin tendrils sprouting from its head. It has draped its body in seaweed or algae, but it is not very good at blending into the world around it. The creature is slinking among the pools, often removing a thin, hand-held, four-edged tool of some kind from its side and holding it close to the water—perhaps it is hunting as well? But I do not see it reaching its five stubby fingers toward a meal or bending to lick the rocks.

The crab that I am still holding snips at my finger, so I dash it against the rocks. The crackling makes the creature turn its head. Its deep-sand brown eyes meet mine, and its body tightens into a defensive posture that makes me laugh aloud. The creature would not live to take another clumsy step if I found anything about its blunt form threatening—even its teeth are flat. When I clack my talons on the rocks, the creature falls onto its back, and I laugh again.

A bubble of laughter escapes its pink lips in response, and then it tries to speak to me, I think. The creature cannot click and gurgle the way I do so beautifully, when above water; instead, it makes brief, nonsensical round sounds. Then it reaches into its ugly satchel and holds out a section of a fin-molt from one of my brood, gesturing enthusiastically at the shoreline, before it resigns itself to its incoherence and sits down on the rocks.

I eat the crab, find and slurp an octopus, and the creature observes me in silence until the air grows dark, at which point it leaves the way it came. It raises its hand to me as it goes, and the corners of its mouth turn up.

How interesting.



The creature returns the very next day, bounding over to the edge of the pools and waving its arms.

It has brought me a fish! A big fish that I haven't eaten before, all mine! The others of my brood—most of whom don't explore far outside our caves and don't understand my interest in the above water pools at all—will see the great folly of their ways when I tell them about my special fish.

While I make short work of the red-orange flesh and the thin bones, the creature sits with its flimsy little legs crossed and eats its own meal. It looks at me more often than at its food while using a thin, conical shell to scribble onto a set of sun-bleached leaves all bound together. The shapes remind me of the glyphs we strike into the cave wall, but they're all wrong. Every now and again, the creature holds a tiny bite of fish between two sticks and dips it into dark liquid, and then eats it all at once.

I am curious, so I haul myself up onto the rock where it's eating. I lean on my elbows so that my tail remains in the water, and open my mouth. The creature laughs lightly and plops the bite onto my tongue, but there's some sort of white plant matter beneath the fish. I hate it: I hack and spit, and the creature's chest shakes with laughter. I hiss furiously at it, so it separates the fish from the mush and holds out the edible part. I reach with my mouth instead of my hands, to be polite, and my tongue twines partway up the creature's fragile wrist as the fish tumbles back into my maw.

The creature's face splotches with pink, darkening as I pull my tongue back. The smell of blood mists out from its face and my jaw tenses in anticipation of unhinging and clamping around the creature's head, but I restrain myself—this may be a prey animal, but it is by far the most interesting one I've ever encountered.

It splays its short, un-webbed fingers on the side of my face, and I allow it. It says something softly, and even though I cannot understand the

sounds it makes, I can discern the admiration in its tone. I open my mouth so that it may appreciate my strong and beautiful teeth—my second-best feature after my six shapely eyes.

And then the creature surprises me. With a lone, trembling finger, it strokes the length of one of my fangs from the sharp tip to the wide base.

I suddenly wonder what the creature looks like without the seaweed it winds around itself, and where its body ripples and parts to accommodate another latching inside. I do not know if it can bear young, deposit them, or if it is capable of both, like I am, but it does look like it would be good for rutting against when I am unfurled and rigid.

My creature withdraws from me without warning, busies itself with packing away its meal, and leaves for the day with its face and throat still hazy with blood.

Ravenous need throbs inside my stomachs and along the slit in front of my tail, and the extraneous frills on my back flare out in a display of my beauty and prowess. I imagine the fine, colorful un-seaweed sprouting from the top of my creature's head wisping against my face; I can practically feel it twist around my tongue.



Today my creature comes right to the water's edge clad in a dark second skin, and it wades into the water. I trill delightedly and close the distance between us in a single burst, grasping the creature's hips since it does not have a tail to join with mine in a traditional greeting. One of my talons catches on its seal-skin and tears slightly—ah, there is the creature's true skin beneath. It reminds me of the texture of the octopus, and I am curious if that's how my creature's warm flesh would feel in the back of my throat.

I am interested in showing my creature a few of my most favorite discoveries—the coral maze that glows in the blackwater and blisters away the flesh of anything that touches it, the ever-dwindling remains of that gigantic fish where all sorts of things gather, the pockets of surface in the



crystal-cave...

But my creature seems fearful: it will not submerge its head and it won't venture beyond a certain point. Perhaps it thinks that one of the enormous gray-white fish will try to eat it, but I could show it a stash of teeth from the ones I have slain, so why is it afraid? Doesn't it see the death-soaked spines on my tail and the breadth of my shoulders?

Insulted by its reluctance, I place my palm atop its head and press down, trying to prove that there is nothing to fear underwater when I am near. But my creature panics, lashing out and trying to surface again. I seize its arm but it tugs away from me, only able to slip out of my mighty grasp because its second skin has ripped beneath my hand.

As it scrambles up the shore like a crab missing a leg, it hunches, shudders and water sprays out from its mouth. A defensive display? A sickness? Eventually, my creature stands and looks back at me, water streaming down its face from its eyes, and it parts its lips to try and speak before shaking its head and rushing away.

One of its head tendrils—a blue one—is caught on my finger, and I suck it into my mouth but find myself bitterly disappointed. It doesn't taste like anything at all.



The creature has not visited for eight moonrises. But I check each day, sometimes twice, even though the others mock me as they go about their dull, repetitive routines in our caves. They tread, they sharpen tools, they mock me, they eat stagnant clams and starfish, they tread...

Why won't my soft wonder return?



Just once more, I float in the darkness and watch the white of the moon

scatter along the surface of the water above me like a school of evading fish—too fast and too slow at once, half-real.

The water begins to brighten, and just as I am about to dive down, my creature comes back to me. Today, it is wearing its seal-skin and a thin, translucent scale over its face, and it also bears another of its rudimentary tools on its back—this one long, shiny, and circular at the base. It waddles into the water and picks up a small, round stone connected to the thing on its back, and it puts the rock into its mouth. Then, it ducks its head underwater.

At long last.

What a sight it is, its brilliantly-hued tendrils all splayed out. I wonder if it can hear me better, now that we are beneath the waves and my voice rings out the way it is meant to. But as I speak—telling my creature of the seascapes I would like to explore with it and what I would like to do to its body—it goes still.

It floats before me, no longer kicking its feet, its eyes wide and dark behind the clear scale. I can taste its desire in the water between us, and I tell it as much while it continues to bob in the current. I hook the stone out of its warm, slack mouth so it can answer, and it only replies with a stream of bubbles.

But that is no matter, because it finally begins to paddle closer to me while I continue to elucidate the great beauties and terrors of my home. My creature is quite slow, so I pause my poetics and reach to unhook the heavy thing on its back.

My creature startles, as if suddenly waking, and it begins to flail and heave. But as I speak again it calms, its body loosening like before. I explain that I am only trying to help, and it shrugs away its heavy thing and reaches out for me weakly, its mouth gaping but its eyes silverfish-bright. Ah, perhaps it is asking me to help it swim. That is smart of it: I am very fast, plenty fast enough for us both. I grab onto its hand with my own,

darting us down through the water, and it takes no time at all when I am leading.

But as I heft its body up into my special part of the cave, I realize that my creature is chilly and limp in my arms. It does not respond when I prod its belly and face.

Oh.

I must have been swimming too fast, or perhaps my creature simply went too long without hearing my voice and was seized by a fatal panic. I shall miss my creature's waves of warm admiration, but perhaps one day, soon, another interesting thing just like it shall come to the shallows. That one, I will bring beneath the water sooner so that I can soothe it with my beautiful words, and I will make sure to speak to it the entire time. And for now, at least, I will finally know what my creature tastes like. It is different than I expected, but I do get to keep it all to myself.

wet words

Olivia Lawrence

Losing my voice had been gradual. Gravel embedding in my tonsils as I woke up. A brush of fingertips along my throat as I scrubbed my teeth. I tried gargling bitter mouthwash to chase the tickle away. Whenever I stopped moving, whether it would be after bleaching the toilet or deboning salmon, my breath would catch as if there was a layer of yellow phlegm caught on my tongue. Furry and popping like algae. Then nothing. No hitch, no groan, no speaking.

Weeks before I noticed that my voice was gone, Jamie had asked me why I didn't wear red stuff on my lips anymore, in fact my lips were looking thin recently. That night I dug out my makeup bag, unzipped the metal teeth and dug through the half-filled glosses.

When I tried to speak and only pain waited behind my teeth, I thought maybe my crusty lip glosses were to blame. All the documentaries that I had binged told me to gut my makeup collection every six months; still I had been drenching my face with the same colour. I threw the stained pink bag and everything that rattled inside into the green bin. I drank two litres of water and carried on.

It took Jamie two weeks to realise. Where were his jeans? His jeans? Had I washed them yet? I didn't know but tried to answer. He asked me again, so close that bitter mouthwash licked my eyes. It smelt rotten on his breath like plaque was still hiding in his gums. His jeans had been on the bedroom floor, phone bulging like a caught fish in the pocket.

At first, he joked that he liked me better this way, that maybe his dad was right, but then he shook me. His lips were thin and strained, making me think of my own, overlined in fresh red.

At the doctors, we waited for an hour, surrounded by ugly vinyl seats. The thread holding the navy vinyl together was loose, curling towards my thigh. I wrapped it around my finger until it bulged blue but felt nothing, no pain, no pricking numbness.

The seats had no arms, only metal legs that melted together. Jamie spread his shaking knees wide, smashing against my leg. Needles tore at my flesh, and I pressed my thighs together. Away.

Nailed to the walls were paintings of pears, boats, and tall glasses of water. Were they promises of how I would feel after three a day for two weeks? Calm and back to washing jeans. I closed my eyes and focused on how I felt now. Hollow.

Opposite us was a window with rain trickling down the other side. Blood pumped hard in my throat. I wanted to reach up and wrap my fingers around the pain, but Jamie was sitting beside me. I clenched my hands on my knees. The black nylon snagged on my nails, and I imagined the little crescents scarring beneath.

Jamie reached over and squeezed his large hand over my own. My fingers twitched but I didn't pull away. He was nervous. He was cheating on me.



He hadn't been acting weird. He had avoided my how was works, guess what happened today's, but no more than usual. Maybe it's because they hadn't slept together yet. Or maybe I was as stupid as he thought.

Before my voice disappeared, I had a UTI from the last time we slept together; when I had been trapped under his arm and dozing to the idea of weeing. I told Jamie it was a water infection. There was a half-squeezed tube of cream waiting beneath the sink and I kept it hidden behind the toilet roll stacks for days.

My hand had been wedged between two fat rolls when I noticed a flat cardboard tube. It was inches from the small bin. I closed my eyes and swallowed a sigh.

Tissue caught on my nail as I pulled myself free. The toilet rolls tumbled, vomiting out a black, bulky phone. Hidden, because it was the ring?

Another woman. As I cradled the phone, she sang to me. Hummed into my skin that he needed to tell me. Or she would.

She stayed with me, pushed out my voice to make room for her small white words. I reread the messages every night. Mouthed them until I fell asleep. All of Jamie's dripping words.



The doctor isn't sure if he should remove my tonsils. Their fate relies on the flip of a coin. Some infection has been gnawing at me from the inside and I didn't realise. My body didn't even fight it.

My stomach is collecting pills. Under the bathroom light they are pale and sectioned by the creases in my palms. I swallow them dry. They wedge into the inflamed flesh of my throat. I am glad there is some feeling left.

Jamie has told me to leave the bathroom door open. I push it closed with my foot but don't let it click. Downstairs is the crackle of some football game. He's messaging her right now, I know it. Is he telling her about my silence?

Steam fogs the mirror. It sneaks over me like seafoam snatching sand. Pale hair peeks through in patches. Pearl skin. Dull eyes. I expect my throat to glow red, to be tender under my fingers but the skin is cool and clear.

I stretch my jaw open until it pops. Darkness spirals from my lips and down my throat. I tilt my head back, grip my tongue and pull it flat. The muscle is sliced down the sides, chunks pulsing like coral. I scrape the lumps along my teeth. There is no pain, just a thudding that echoes deep within me. Salt clings to my teeth.

White fluff. I squint and lean into the mirror. My temperature spreads over the glass, melting the fog.

The fluff bubbles, swelling into saliva. Clumps of white froth trail from the wrinkling roof and down my throat. I hold my jaw open and swallow. My neck shifts like I am about to throw up, still the froth clings to teeth and tissue.

I swallow again. Deep inside my throat, pink folds flap and flap like fins. I brush my fingers up and down my neck. Has this always been happening inside me? Steam swallows my lips, elongating my teeth into points before I disappear.

Something creeps into the corner of my eye. Jamie. He has come to see if I am lying again, like when I curled up on the mattress, crying as the muscles in my thighs spasmed. When I was being dramatic.

But it is the bath. It is overflowing, the water surfing the plastic edge.

My knuckles bulge white as I force the stiff tap to turn. As I slip into the bath

the overflow gargles my water, polishing each metal tooth. I take a deep breath, hold it close to my chest, then let the water engulf me. After a few minutes of waiting for my lungs to burn, bubbles sneak to the surface.

White spots pucker on my stomach. I shift in the water, feeling it glide over my skin. The bubbles flatten and reveal red ingrown hairs that I've never noticed before. They trail along my ribs and over my breasts.

I sink deeper until my tailbone smacks against plastic. I cup my breasts, the space between my fingers like the lines on seashells. I don't want to see myself. I squeeze my eyes closed but she is waiting for me. The smoothness of her stomach, his hand trailing up from her belly button. Would she get the ring? Lose her voice? Maybe we would end up more alike than I thought.

Rocks thump onto my collarbones, dragging me down. My eyes shoot open and the ceiling swirls, then Jamie's face floats into focus. He is tinged blue and his eyes are wide, mouth gaping, lips puckering like a fish. Did you speak, did you speak? Fucking talk to me, did you speak? I stare at him until he blurs at the edges. I don't speak.



I start having a bath three times a day, each after I have scraped my food in the bin and swallowed my pills. One evening, Jamie returns from texting her and drags in the pillows from my side of the bed. He squashes them on the fake tiles beside the bathtub before dropping down. Black gunk from his uniform rubs off on the silk case. They each cost forty quid. Will he rest them beneath her hips, between her thighs? Every night I have whispered to them; they already know about her.

He missed his packed lunch today, the usual ham and cucumber sandwiches, their crusts cut neat. But they worked in a pub so it was fine in the end, he had a beer, a pie and a good laugh. Earlier he told me he had been working at a hospital. Am I confusing the days? Remembering what he has told her instead of me? Recently his words have been raindrops I reach out for; sliding through the gaps in my fingers until all I see is the movement of his lips, the little white letters.

I close my eyes and then his voice is gone too. The water is cooling down, pricking my skin with goosebumps. I push the tap with my toe, releasing a stream of warmth that caresses the inside of my thighs, moving up and up.

The wave scratches against my hip. Jamie smirks down at me. His face is warped like it's being sucked down a drain, swirling and swirling. I shiver in his grip.

His palm trails over to my stomach and rubs harder as if searching for bone beneath my flesh. I press my thighs together, away; they spread over the plastic, but his hand is a leeching jellyfish.

He wants to hear me. In the only way he likes. Soft and thankful. Words as wet as his.

I smile and hum bubbles that ring around his forearm. I open my mouth wide and sing the way he wants. His eyelids droop, his smirk falling away. He begins to drool.

I bow under his touch, bending so that my stomach almost breaches the water, the promise of an untamed shore. He leans closer, hand slipping deeper into the water.

Lines ripple the water as I sing to him. He blurs, skin mottling. I clutch at his arm and pull and pull. The water swallows his elbow, blackens his sleeve, sucks at his shoulder. Droplets splash into the sparse hair he calls a beard, like spots ready to burst. Pop, I say and so they do.

His lips pop too but my singing drowns his words. I watch as his mouth moves, so close to me that I can see his lips, stringy with saliva, pink flesh constricting inside. There are no slices on his tongue, no waving flaps. Then he stops. To him I am enchanting again, a small brunette across the bar, his girlfriend, the only one to hear those little white words.

Jamie stumbles into the bath. Rain drenches the stacks of toilet rolls, the fogged mirror, the pillows before he could ruin them. His clothes stick to my bare skin. He doesn't cry or scream but his body fights for him, splashing as he tries to sit up. I dig my nails in. He flails to my hums.

I hold him tight as his limbs stiffen and slow. His groans echo in my chest until they stop. Jamie slips from my body, arms thudding against the bathtub as he is fully submerged. His skin is tinged blue, blurring and mottled.

I burst from the water into cold air. Water trickles down my arms. My breathing is heavy and loud, but real. I laugh. Real as it fills the house. Real, real, real.



Ghost Hunting 101 (Or, The Time Zeb Found Himself Lost in the Cemetery)

A.L. Davidson

What an unusual Thursday it was shaping up to be! With the School of Magic and Divinations emptied for spring break and Miss Eloise's Acid and Apothecary closed for a long-overdue night off while the owner and her friend—the pompous Professor Pyle—went on a date (the horror!), it felt as empty as a ghost town!

That didn't stop Zeb—the school's most famous ghost hunter—from getting the urge to pester the paranormal with his antics. Despite the fact his dorm-mates and fellow hunters were out of town, and the springtime skies were filled with gray-toned clouds, Zeb knew that it was the perfect night to head to the cemetery.

Thursday, as **everyone** knows, is when the supernatural barriers are at their weakest (this is, admittedly, not true but Zeb's enthusiasm makes it hard for anyone to tell him otherwise) and the rain would rouse them from their slumbers like a cursed call back to the mortal plane.

So, dressed in all black with his signature baseball cap on his head and his heavy backpack on his spine, Zeb raced out into the rainy evening to find himself a ghost! It had to be a special ghost, a real ghost, not like those friendly spirits that lingered in the Acid and Apothecary or attended Professor Pyle's lectures on ancient magics.

No, it needed to be a **scary** ghost, that would be the only way he'd ace his filmmaking finals that were drawing much closer than he'd like to admit. How else would he get clearance to travel with the group that was heading to the supernatural sanctuary known as Wylder Wood in the summer for their annual Spirit Festival? It was the highlight of his yet-to-be-started documentary! He had to prove that he could handle it, so tonight he was going to catch himself a really **big**, really **scary** ghost... even if it killed him.

Breaching the front gate of the local cemetery, a place he had been so many times the security guard had stopped trying to get him to sign in, Zeb marched toward Mausoleum Row to begin his quest. His overpowered flashlight swept over the tombstones with such fury that the residents of the Cat Corner in the pet cemetery scattered to the skies with angry hisses.

He began knocking on the doors of the mausoleums, asking the residents within if they had any hunches or hot gossip about big time haunts in the area. Stirring the sailors caused the raging seas contained in their cement resting places to crash down upon the already soaked ground. Pestering the patriots sent gunfire out into the night, and messing with the magicians caused him to accidentally get pulled out of an abnormally large top hat!

Soaking wet and agitated that he had yet to find a good subject for his project after wandering for a whole fifteen minutes, Zeb stood under the umbrella that Molly—the sweets-loving ghost who frequented Miss Eloise's—offered up while they waited for their friends to get ready for a trip to the library.

“Why is it **so** hard to find a good ghost around here?!” Zeb cried in anguish.

Molly cut their eyes to him. “Really?” they chided.

“No offense, obviously, I mean a good **bad** ghost.”

“Maybe you should change fields, I hear cryptid hunting is a hot commodity nowadays.”

“Oh, you're a genius! I should go find myself a monster!”

Molly watched as Zeb disappeared into the night under the cover of the heavy clouds and thick trees that lined the cemetery.

“What a weirdo,” they mumbled as they wandered off toward the road.

Zeb launched himself up and over the fence that kept the cemetery grounds for humans and human-adjacent souls from the more magical resting places that required special wards and soil to contain the energy. He bypassed a stone marker for a Sasquatch, a statue with a beautiful visage of a vampire, and wandered deep into the Supernatural Sanctuary with his flashlight sweeping over the shadows.

“Let's see... werewolf... werewolf... werewolf... we have a lot of werewolves here. Reaper... gorgon... ooooooh,” Zeb grinned with giddy excitement, “it's so hard to choose!”

As Zeb went to take a step forward, he felt himself go rigid and his body spun



like a ballerina in a music box. A sound cut through the storm, one that crescendoed like waves on the rocky shore, and the melodic hum dug into his brain like a pesky earworm. He stepped forward, one foot after the other, until he was marching through the marshy muck toward the far end of the cemetery where he had never dared to venture before.

He understood immediately what had happened when he saw the happily bouncing ball of fire in front of him. He'd gotten caught in the path of a will-o-the-wisp, one who seemingly didn't realize it had scooped up a mortal in its path. Until it released him, he would be forced to follow it like a sailor to a watery grave by a siren song. So, he decided to let it take him wherever it wanted. He liked the humming, it was one of his favorite songs, and the purple-blue hue of its flickering body was a nice light in the chilly springtime evening.

The will-o-the-wisp twisted this way and that, bobbed in and out of trees and massive tombstones that looked monstrous against the flashes of lightning. Zeb found himself soaked in mud and rainwater up to his ankles from the harsh stomping of his footsteps. He was glad he decided to turn his little camera on, tucked up safely against his forehead under the cover of his baseball cap's bill. It would be great B-roll, he assured himself. A fun visual to narrate something dramatic over.

The will-o-the-wisp dipped down a hill without warning while Zeb was lost in his musings and the reverberating tune of the spirit's happy chorus, and he quickly found himself tumbling down the steep, muddy slope. He yelped a bit and started spiraling down the grassy knoll with such force he plowed into the spirit and caused such a shuddering that it lost its incorporeal form and turned back into something more human.

The two tumbled and spiraled until they landed in a patch of poppies near the sacred grounds where the city's saints had been laid to rest. Water splashed up around them like a tidal wave, and Zeb finally regained control of his body. He shot up and wiped the water from the camera lens and his eyes.

"Well that was exciting!" Zeb said happily.

The will-o-the-wisp, appearing much like a watery-eyed young woman around Zeb's own age, looked at him with a sense of distraught sadness. The spirit's body warbled like water without boundaries to hold it, and she sat with her mouth agape

and shock in her expression.

“Are you okay?” Zeb asked.

The spirit tapped her ear and held up her hands to make an X.

Zeb gasped; he lifted his hands and began signing out the words he wanted to say, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you! I’m Z-E-B!”

The spirit’s expression changed to a happy one, “You know sign language? I’m M-E-L-O-D-Y, you can call me M-E-L!”

“I guess you probably didn’t hear me stomping behind you, then! I was caught by your voice and started following you!”

“I love to sing and I always end up trapping somebody when I do, the last guy who got caught in my trance walked straight into a lamp post. I thought it would be safe in the cemetery because this weather is horrible! You’re weird.”

Zeb smiled, “I get told that a lot! I’m making a documentary, and I’m trying to find a scary spirit! Want to help me?”

Melody nodded excitedly. Zeb scrambled to his feet and quickly began searching through his backpack for another flashlight. He did a trick with it, flipping it up in the air before he caught it behind his back, and handed it over to his new friend.

“What’s this for?” Melody inquired.

“Ghost hunting 101, never go anywhere without a flashlight!” Zeb replied.

Melody extended her hand to take the flashlight. It dropped straight through her corporeal form into the mud. Zeb and Melody looked at each other for a moment before they both began laughing. It was a good night to get lost in a cemetery.

Lumps

Maggie Koons

Now what?

Teddy had hard lumps on his thighs and groin, places where his swimsuit clung to him. I told him not to swim in that cesspool, the reservoir we swam in when we were kids, which was now just poison, like the rest of it. It never seemed to put him in a better mood anyway. Never listened to me. Accepted his own demise. He hated that I still ate canned vegetables, still tried to sleep at night; still marked the days. Called me names for being too snotty to smoke. Just like before, in the lockdowns, I did all the things the government told me to. Was too frightened to even have sex with him, scared of his cancer seeping inside me. Towards the end he was in too much pain to do it anyway. When I snuggled up to him, I left a bedsheet between us.

We went on walks and every time we passed the reservoir (we shouldn't have been anywhere close to the water, but even I longed for it sometimes) Teddy would pull off his clothes and jump in. He kicked quickly when he swam, the aquamarine sprinkling the air above him like handfuls of green gems. Sometimes I'd be so mad at him that I'd leave him there, and we wouldn't look at each other for days. Sometimes I'd watch him swim all the way to the center of it, where he'd tread water for a while, his head lost in a mirage of fumes.

Teddy's mom used to needle me about having kids. She said I would never know unconditional love and that I was robbing her of something. Maybe it was a Mormon thing. She said "this generation is so selfish" a lot. I wish she was still alive so I could say *See? See?* Bet she'd feel differently about how many kids she was cosmically owed. Sometimes I see sick-looking adults with pink little babies in tow and want to smack them. Sometimes I do.

Teddy is a corpse who would have been a statistic if statistics still existed. A tiny insignificant statistic but a statistic nonetheless. He had

tumors that grew and cracked through his skin, and he turned green from testicles to eyeballs. I try to think of him as a young, healthy man, with a ginger beard and a baseball card collection. But he's green in my dreams. I stole a pack of cards from his brother's house and played solitaire with them sometimes.

I think the reason people didn't riot is that it took a long time. The water didn't turn green and noxious at once. People were just sick but hiding it, high-functioning in their slot of society. People weren't ready to make any serious changes after so many disasters that amounted to so little. But I was more paranoid than most. That's why Teddy lasted as long as he did (At least I like to think so). I liked to panic about things. Every cold I had was HIV, every tremor in my hands, a stroke. I started boiling our water way back in the beginning.

Everyone worried about the air, and it was kind of in the air, but mostly it was the water. We cower from it like Shyamalanian aliens. The only people that survived were the ones who bought water purifiers, and after a few years they started to break down. You could still steal a good one, for a while, until you couldn't. Some kind of poison. Or many poisons, I guess, a cocktail from so many corporations and governments and mob bosses that you couldn't pin it on just one entity, or even an entire field.

The water situation in Cleveland seemed scary when we moved away, but it was even scarier in Jackson, where it had always been dry, at least that's what I remember from my nonpoisonous childhood. All our childhood friends were dead. I wasn't surprised. Bad lungs in a hostile environment. And water everywhere. There are marshes here now, bubbling up where prairies used to be. Beautiful colors, even the shallow ones. Shades of green, varied brilliance.

When I run into people now, we barely look at each other, let alone fight. Most people are sick, and have very little in the way of possession and resources. I have new neighbors. They die, I move out, they move in. We're all drinking the water now.

Sometimes I feel like I'm the only person with any real weight in the world, like the future of the globe depends completely on me.

Back when they still broadcast the news, I watched it obsessively. After a few years there was nothing else on, not even any advertisements. The entertainment machine gave up. Soon the government stopped giving advice on how to prevent it and started giving advice on how to live with it. Stop showering. Don't spend too much time in the sunlight. Move inland. Stop contributing to the poison, even in the small ways you've been doing all your life.

I took diligent notes on the news in my diary. I took dictation of the news. I had piles of notebooks filled with information for no one. I left them all behind in a closet when I finally left the apartment we'd moved into together, Teddy and I, when we thought death was close at hand, and it was, for one of us. I left a treasure trove of information for no one. Maybe for another looter like me. Maybe for the aliens that will arrive long after we're gone. Sometimes I think I'm living my life for the aliens. I picture them, bug-eyed gray-skinned moonmen, finding books and books of handwritten information, textbooks meant to teach a civilization not to fall. I used to write like I was the sole keeper of the culture. When I wasn't writing down the news, I wrote down the past. I want to preserve it so badly. They need to know about: baseball, pet fish, prom dresses, Ramadan, vibrators, donut holes. Tattoos. Rosaries. Vodka and milk. The hard lumps that have appeared in my breasts.

Teddy was lucky. His lumps were hidden. Not that it matters. But my vanity stings a little that they're so visible, that they've spread from my tits to my breastbone, to my shoulders, up my neck. I'm not sad about my impending death. Death from what?

The news gave up. Everyone gave up. Nothing is on air. Not even reruns. The TV doesn't even turn on. I have no idea what's happening out there. Once I found a laptop with some juice in it still and a copy of the third Lord of the Rings movie in its disk drive. Of course I watched it. I haven't watched a movie in years. It got me. I cried and cried. Then the laptop died

and I smashed it, then threw the pieces in a poisonous marsh.

My lumps look like little mountains. I can't wait for them to crack through my skin so I can see what they really look like. I wonder if there are sea monsters now. Or three-eyed fish. Sometimes I wonder if Teddy became a merman, swimming down there in the sick veins of the Earth.

I scrawl like an animal, eating rotten food, interrupting myself while I think of something else, something else, something else. One thing does keep popping up in my brain, which is probably green. The last time I drove a purloined car, days or weeks or years ago, and saw another woman driving another car that wasn't hers. It's best to leave people alone these days but we both stopped in the center of the highway. We got out of our cars and hugged, our lumps bumping against each other. She seemed surprised that someone my age was still alive. I asked her where she was going and she said "My mother's house. I want to die where she did. Where are you going?"

I told her I was going swimming.

Seiren

Hayden Robinson

On the night of Christmas Eve, inside a rustic log cabin, an old watchman poured boiling water from the saucepan into his coffee mug. The ground beans turned the water into bitter blackness. He was thankful that the gas stove was working. The electricity had been out for the last half an hour, and he had used his last water bottle for his coffee. The radio announced that the little Welsh town of Anghenfil Mor had been experiencing constant power cuts, and the problems would likely persist until dawn.

As he stirred milk into his coffee, the watchman peered over to his phone which lay flat on the table. The last time he checked his phone, it was on 10% battery life. Still, he knew he had to make a call to his son, even for just a few seconds, just to check on him. His son was twenty-five, but he was still a vulnerable child in his father's eyes. Vulnerable just like he was way back when.

And the watchman would have done just that if he hadn't heard a strange noise. He stopped in the middle of the cabin. The low light of the fireplace flickered the room in sinister orange. The watchman listened again. The noise was weird. One moment, it sounded like humming, a harmonious melody; the next moment, there was low thumping, like someone banging on a door from far away.

Placing the coffee on the table next to his phone, the watchman ran to the window.

The moonlight blasted through the falling snow. It illuminated down the frosted hills, bursting across the frozen lake. Splinters curved and cracked through the ice. Snowflakes sprinkled over the blackened lake, looking like icing sugar covering over a puddle of tar.

The watchman placed his hands on the windowpane, feeling the cold wood envelop his palms. He placed his ear just a few inches away from the glass. The strange noise grew louder still. Thumps and hums swirled together like a twisted jazz band.

As he listened to this haunting melody, the watchman could also hear another noise, something less instrumental and more human. He couldn't make out what it was at first, but he placed one hand over his ear and put forward his uncovered



one. Then he could hear it.

“...trapped...under...ice...”

The voice was like a scream muffled by water, pleading for help.

“...trapped...under...ice...”

How could he hear the voice from here if it was out there? He considered that he was going mad, although he quickly dismissed it. If he thought he was going mad, surely that meant he wasn't.

Looking out at the frozen river, the watchman remembered playing by the river as a young boy. He was sitting on the ice, playing cards or something. His sisters were playing nearby. The watchman remembered that he, at six years old, had fallen into the ice. He would have frozen to death that day if his oldest sister had not dived in after him. She brought him back to the surface, but cold, careless death took her life in exchange for her brother's.

Perhaps this was why he took on this position in the first place, to be near a lake just like the one back then. Guilt overwhelmed him so often that it felt like a tribute to his dead sister. Every time he looked in a mirror, at a puddle of water, at anything that showed him his reflection, his sister's face would peer up at him, as if she was still trapped under ice. He longed for a chance to save her, or to save someone like her from the ice. He could still hear her voice pleading with him, saying over and over again that she was trapped under the ice.

Whether it was this memory or something else entirely, the old watchman finally came to a decision.

He put on his coat, pulled on his gloves and placed his hat on top of his head. He took his flashlight from on top of the shoe rack, along with a shovel that he strapped to his back. Then he opened the front door and went out into the windy snowfall.

He took out the flashlight in his spare hand, switched it on, and held it in front of him. The beam showcased the flurry of snowflakes rushing to the ground. Sharp, cold wind blew into his face, and he had to move his scarf over his mouth and chin to not feel it so much. Despite the trouble, he felt rather useful at this moment. His

allocated cabin rarely, if ever, had anyone nearby. No one came to this lake during the winter. However, during the summer, when the lake wasn't frozen, rebellious teenagers and oversexed adults came by for a warm, cosy midnight swim. The worst the watchman ever did was threaten to call the police.

He expected the noise to become louder as he walked to the lake. But to his confusion, the melody actually softened, as if it was drifting away. Yet the thick, echoing **thump** remained as loud as it ever was.

The watchman came to the edge over the lake. He was fully clothed but it did nothing to help against the frosty air. He did what he could, and sometimes that wasn't enough. He listened for the thumping again. The melody, the music, the humming, it all had gone away now. He stayed patient, listening for anything else. Then the muffled screams came again, more insistent and afraid.

“...trapped...under...ice...”

This time, the words were followed by a loud, explosive **thwomp!**

The watchman's heart beat in his chest. He drew in a long breath, trying to keep his cool. Instead, he coughed from the harsh cold air. The hard blasts that came after the words made him quiver each time. It took him a moment to realise that he was making a rapid, raspy breathing noise and clamped his jaw tight to stop it.

Raising his flashlight to his eyeline, the watchman peered down the beam down at the frozen lake. The ice burst with reflective shards flashing back at the man. He searched for something, anything.

And he did find something. Or, actually, he found someone.

A shadow moved from a spot further up the lake. It swam a few feet down before coming back to the surface. Something long and thin stretches back from the shadow's body and brings itself up to the thick surface. The thwomp echoes to the watchman once again.

Fear spiked through him. He leapt onto the ice and began to run to the shadowed spot. But he slipped and flew up into the air before landing with a thud on the thick ice. Pain shot up his back. Something snapped in his ear.

He cursed himself for being so stupid. The ice could break at any second. He got back to his feet, then he reminded himself of advice he had given his son once when they went ice fishing. The advice: one wrong move would take a fool to the cold, careless depths below.

The watchman stepped with careful grace. He stretched his leg out, brought his foot down slowly and flattened it. Then he took another step like this, and another, and he continued to do this as he approached the shadow bashing against the ice.

The flashlight shone brighter than ever in front of him.

Finally, the watchman reached the shadow in the lake. He shone the light down to see **who or what** it was. At first, nothing was there except the black-blue shine. A webbed hand slapped on the ice. The watchman jumped and gasped.

The flashlight revealed a pair of eyes that flared like yellow matchstick flames; then came a gaping mouth showing a few short fangs; then the full face of whom it belonged stared up through the glass-like surface, followed by the full view of its body.

It was a strange figure, like a creature dressed in a woman's proportions. Scales twinkled in rainbow hue; patches of marble-like skin shone against the light. The scales ran down the centre of the woman's torso. The feet, like her hands, were webbed. Both mesmerising and monstrous.

The creature's mouth moved. The pleading words came once more:

"...trapped...under...ice..."

What the watchman wondered, however, was three things: how did this **woman**, or whatever the creature was, get under the ice to begin with? And why didn't she appear to be as panicked and desperate as anyone would be? And most importantly, **why hadn't she frozen to death?**

He thought of his deceased sister; he thought of his son, whom he warned about falling into the ice; he thought, too, about his wife who was comatose after a boating accident three months before. If they were in this woman's position, no doubt he would save them now. Looking at it now, the creature resembled the face he always saw in the mirror. It looked so much like his sister trapped under ice.

The watchman put his flashlight down on the ice. The creature banged their fists against the ice again. He reached around his back and took hold of his shovel. The wooden handle was heavy as a pole, and the metal spade shone dully in the moonlight. He raised it up into the air, let out a long, hard shout of adrenaline and brought the shovel down to the ice.

It cracked upon impact. Water spewed like blood from a wound. He gave two, three, **four** more digs like this until there was a large enough hole to pull any human through. Putting his shovel to the side, the watchman went to one knee and held out his hand. All was silent for a moment.

Then something shot up and grabbed the watchman's hand. It jerked back, intending to bring him down into the dark pit. He tried to kick and pull it off but its firm grip was strong. He fell down into the pit; his screams muffled by freezing water.

A pool of black surrounded him; ice water spiked his skin like needles. The flashlight above the surface shone down like a summer sun. He panicked and tried to swim away, but a rope made of flesh bound his ankles. It made its way around his body; shimmering tentacles gripped his hands tight. Bone snapped through the wrist. The watchman shrieked in a fit of red bubbles. The tentacles tied around his arms, curled around his neck, pulling itself like a noose, barely strangling him.

The struggling watchman was turned on the spot. The snarling creature flew forward, and the watchman caught a glimpse of its fangs; they were sharp as steak knives. A gaping mouth threw itself around the watchman's head. The monster sucked his head into its throat with tremendous force. His screams echoed against tongue and jaw. He wiggled and pushed and pulled, but he was too weak.

Teeth bit down hard on the watchman's neck.

His wide eyes stared at his bloodied neck as it floated away. The jaws snapped together, shutting the decapitated head from the world. A tongue slid over the watchman's head, then it gulped. He was swallowed down a pulsing throat into the monster's stomach, listening to satisfied moans as he fell deeper into a volcanic pit. His head landed into bubbling, boiling stomach acids.

As his flesh burned away, the old watchman learned one final lesson: death could be hot as the belly of a beast or cold as a frozen lake on Christmas Eve, but death is always, and forever, careless.

River Mumma Shayzan Brown

I saw her by the river first.

She sat there, combing long, inky black hair over dark skin. The moon stood behind her, resolute as a soldier. She sat picturesque on the grass, her tail moving lazily in the deep green water. She was beautiful. We called her kind River Mumma. I sat and watched her for hours. I only became myself again when she splashed back into the river, leaving behind a wet spot and a pretty pearl and seashell comb. I knew better than to pick it up. I did anyway.

I went home that night and slept with dreams of a gorgeous woman running through my mind. I never saw her face clearly in my dreams — only glimpses — the flash of a cheeky smile or the peek of brown and green irises looking at me from half-lidded eyes. I woke up with the sun and found the bed wet and pieces of foliage lodged in my hair. The taste of algae swam in the back of my throat. The comb sat beside me, haunting me, taunting me just like its owner was now. I resolved to never return to that river bed.

I returned that same night. I had tried to resist, I had tried to take the path that led home, but my legs were bewitched. They took sure steps and led me to my destruction. I sat on the grassy river bank. I stared at the water for hours. My body resisted the thoughts of fleeing that raced through my mind. I knew I should have been tired, yet my body refused to break. I forgot hunger and thirst; I could not feel the muscle pains that should have plagued me. I only stared at the serene river surface as the moonlight and tall trees that surrounded were reflected in the water.

I stayed there so long that days melded together. The steady rise and fall of the sun and the flora around me kept me company. There was no wind. No rustling of the leaves, no insects buzzing or sounds of mongooses and lizards. I began to think I would turn into one of the trees that guarded me. I imagined it. I would put down roots, my arms would lengthen and turn into branches, and my hair would metamorphose into leaves. I stopped trying to fight the pull of River Mumma. I simply waited.

Then she came. I saw her come out of the water with my own glazed-over eyes. Her face and shoulders broke the surface. Her eyes seemed to watch me and my

shallow breaths. The night was still, as always. Her dark hair hung low, obscuring her face. The moonlight gave her dark skin a deadly glow. She looked at me and beckoned me forward. I no longer resisted. I plunged down, down, down into her murky abyss. The moon dappled water soon gave way to darkness. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything. All I felt was the pressure of thousands of gallons of water pressing on my chest and her hand in mine as she unwaveringly guided me deeper and deeper. Sensations of a horrible something swam around me and kissed my feet. I don't know if I fought. If I tried to wrestle the current and her as they pulled me to my death. If I wrestled my destiny. Or maybe I simply let her take me. Maybe I let the river and its mother trap me as I was doomed to. Maybe I knew it was for the better if I let her take me as she pleased. Maybe I was too stubborn, even in death.



Kanaloa's Gift
Jessica Gleason

The incoming tide brought her in a tangle of pickleweed,
naked and drenched, laying still, on the Wawaloli
beach shoreline.

As Keoni rushed to her side, noble, intent on reviving
the waterlogged beauty, she awoke, blazing amber
eyes, wide and almond-shaped, looked to him,
pleading for help.

Pulling the wahini free from the foliage, Keoni stifled
a gasp when he noticed her fish-like tail slapping
freely against the jagged rocks and fine sands.

She smiled, revealing thistle-teeth, ready to
soul-kiss his life away. Unconsciously, he crept
closer to her waiting mouth. Latching on, she sucked,
drinking his vitality, leaving only his puckered
corpse in her wake.

Shoving him aside, his brittle bones crunching,
she left him discarded and empty, slipping
back into the warm waters until her hunger returned.



Midnight Bite
SOUM

Here staggers a salty one
Topped to the brim with landlubber
Oats and malts and barley hops
Kalopsia colours his vision blurry
Stumbling along on two left feet
Singing a shanty off-key
Emptying his bladder into her home
His addled brain dead only sleep can restore

A predator's sigh slips past the mermaid's lips
The drivel in his blood ruins the taste of him
Mating unlikely, for he can't get it up-
There'll be no fun playing with this prey.

In no mood for an unfulfilling snack
The mermaid sinks deep
... As does he
Taken by her sister, less picky than she



The Sea Witch

Lori D'Angelo

Tristan was known to be a teller of tall tales, so, in the beginning, no one believed him when he said he'd seen the sea witch. He said she was beautiful at first, then monstrous. But, as other strange events began to unfold, we started to change our minds.

The first strange event was the drowning just before the water race, which had always been a fun children's contest held yearly to mark the first rites of spring. In its 150-year history, there had never been a major accident other than some poorly constructed boats falling apart, usually leading to good-humored sea rescues and raucous laughter. But this year, during pre-race practice, the Morgan boy was found face down and not breathing in the water.

How had this happened? We wondered.

Terry Morgan was a swim instructor, and all of her kids, including the littlest one, who had died, were trained to be comfortable in the water.

"I thought he was with you!" John Morgan said accusingly to his wife.

"He said he was going to watch his sister," Terry said tearfully.

"I never saw him," said the sad sister, Joanna. She was thirteen and had been favored to win the race.

The Baptist minister thought that this was a good time to quote the Bible, but no one else approved of his pious comments.

"Could someone have done this to sabotage the race?" asked Jed Barker, the local conspiracy theorist. No one answered him, but he was used to being ignored and unappreciated.

"In spite of this, I'm still going to win," said Joanna haughtily.

The organizers had been tempted to cancel the race in light of the tragic circumstances, but no one wanted to deprive Joanna of her potential victory. She had lost enough.

Joanna's boat was made of the finest oak by Jim, the father of her junior high boyfriend, Bo. Even his own son's boat was no better. Joanna and Bo were expected to battle each other to the finish.

"We should have the race," Tim Teak echoed. He and his son were race day vendors, and he didn't want to lose the money he had invested in supplies for kettle corn and freshly squeezed lemonade.

Once the race began, the boats began sinking quickly, as if they were made of stone. Joanna, undeterred by her ship's failure and the unusually choppy waters, decided to swim the race to its end.

Joanna's boyfriend, dark-haired, long-limbed Bo, came in a distant second. The rest of the kids returned to shore without completing the race and watched as the waters heaved and hoed.

"This is a bad omen," said a troubled looking Matilda, keeper of the town's history.

The next strange occurrence was the appearance of the wreckage. It looked to be at least 200 years old.

"I think it's Viking!" said Bill Bailey excitedly. He was both the high school civics teacher and director of the Seaside Center Museum, which honestly didn't have a lot to offer other than its interactive seahorse exhibit. "Imagine the visitors we would attract if we had a Viking ship!"

Less exciting to Bill Bailey were the Viking ghosts that appeared the next day. Sandra Lam, who ran the lighthouse, was the first one to spot them. She called Tripp O'Reilly, the town's only police detective, who referred her to the town psychic, Bess Arnold.

Bess had just groomed Clint, an Australian cattle dog, and was covered in merle-colored dog hair when she arrived at the lighthouse. She eyed the ghosts with alarm.

"Do you know what this means?" Sandra asked her.

"I do, but you're not going to like it," Bess told Sandra.

"Tell me anyway," Sandra said. She was used to strange stories of the sea. She just preferred the ones that weren't terrible or tragic.

"These ghosts — that drowning is a reminder that the sea demands sacrifice, and, when we don't give, it takes."

"So then, what do we do?" Sandra asked.

"We pray for mercy," replied Bess, "and hope that that's enough."

Sandra looked out at the dark, tumultuous sea and thought about how strange it was that a thing so filled with beauty and wonder could also be the source of so much danger. And then she, like the rest of us, began to understand that Tristan's tall tales weren't so tall after all.



The Lighthouse

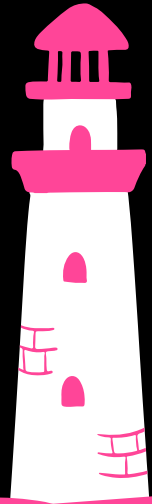
D.W. Baker

I saw the pale spire of the lighthouse, vanishing softly into the distant fog.
Surviving on blood oranges staining shaking hands red -
It had to be the first building after two weeks hiding in the waves.
Circling around, raising my eyes to rove the heights -

Surviving on blood oranges staining shaking hands red -
I quickly closed the distance and went headfirst through the dark space in the floor.
Circling around, raising my eyes to rove the heights -
Hands behind me pushed away - stairway slanting - air - into the gasping air -

I quickly closed the distance and went headfirst through the dark space in the floor.
They smiled first with greening eyes, then quietly pulled me under the surface.
Hands behind me pushed away - stairway slanting - air - into the gasping air -
I slowly sank deeper. Another bubble of breath escaped.

They smiled first with greening eyes, then quietly pulled me under the surface.
It had to be the first building after two weeks hiding in the waves.
I slowly sank deeper. Another bubble of breath escaped.
I saw the pale spire of the lighthouse, vanishing softly out of the distant fog.



Among the Waves

Toshiya Kamei

I cried in the days after the mermaid devoured Coral. I wish she would have hauled me under then and there, but it was not my time.

She will come for me after she digests my wife.

The gulls howl with hunger.

The sun nails me alive on what remains of the upturned hull.

Growing up in a port town, I admired pirates; so much so that I married Coral and joined her seafaring life. Who says the sea is a male domain?

We had a great run together.

The scaly tail slices through the waves. All I see is Coral's last smile.



A Price the Sea Demands

Nina Kriszto

The sun is warm on my skin, so warm I have to roll up my sleeves. The wind in the sails is keeping The [Ocean Curse](#) in a good and steady pace. We are lucky today, the weather goddess seems to be in a good mood for once. I hope that we will be able to make up some distance that we didn't the last few days because of the doldrums that hit us. My crew around me are working hard, as they are supposed to. They are as eager as I am to finally reach the port after weeks on the sea. We all love sailing, but also have needs that can't be met on board my beautiful [Ocean Curse](#). A good meal for example. My cook does a fine job with the resources he has, but a good meal with fresh ingredients isn't something he can do after weeks on board. And I'm slowly becoming sick of potato stew. There are other needs my men have that they need to take care of on land, ones that I don't care about. But most importantly of all, our rum stock is slowly coming to an end and that's simply not acceptable. You can't keep a crew of pirates around without rum if you want them in a good mood. So we are all looking forward to drinking more rum than we should in a dirty, filthy pub with people who are always looking for trouble.

The creaking of wood behind me announced the presence of my Quartermaster. I don't have to turn around to know it is him; he has been my second in command for several years now and I know his footsteps. He puts his arms on the railing next to mine looking out onto the wide sea. The wind tousles his bright blonde hair, bleached by seasalt and weeks in the sun.

"We're making good distance today," he says.

A spray of water hits my face when a wave crashes against the hull. I don't care to wipe it away. It's not the first and it won't be the last. Life on the sea means getting wet every day, among other things. The wind starts to tear more on my shirt and pants when it flares up and I reach up to hold onto my hat. I'm not going to lose this one. My Quartermaster turns around and shouts commands at the crew handling the stronger winds. I keep my eyes on the sea and the waves, rising and falling, taking us with them in their own flow as we work our way through them. In the distance, I notice some light mist and soon enough the hull of the [Ocean Curse](#) is parting it. More icy water splashes my arms leading to goosebumps. I have to roll down my sleeves. I walk to the helm and take it from the sailing master, my Quartermaster following me in suit. The waves are growing, the wind becoming stronger and with every mile we travel the light mist is turning into thicker and

thicker fog.

A small, tight knot starts to build in my stomach.

"What is this?" I mutter under my breath as another wave crashes against the ship, trying to rip the helm out of my hands. My crew adjusts the sails as the winds keep growing. Yes, I had asked the goddess for more wind to get us out of the doldrums, but I hadn't asked for a storm. There is just no relying on deities, not on land nor sea. Maybe one of my men did something to displease her and now we all have to pay the price.

The fog is thick now. I'm just able to make out the helm even though it's only an arm's length away. I can't see any of my crew and the only reason I know I'm not alone is because I can still hear their shouts — the thumps of their footsteps, the sounds of their work.

The harsh gust of wind stops suddenly. Without it the sails are useless and the ship is losing speed. Soon enough, we're standing still. Again. I'm shaking my head. What is this? In all my years at sea, I have never seen this kind of weather. I let go of the helm and turn around, almost bumping into my Quartermaster who came up to the quarterdeck again, but he was invisible to me thanks to the fog. He runs his hands up and down his arms to get rid of the chill. I can feel it too, creeping through my clothes and settling deep somewhere in my bones. [Something is wrong.](#)

"Captain, we're stuck. What now?" The Quartermaster asks.

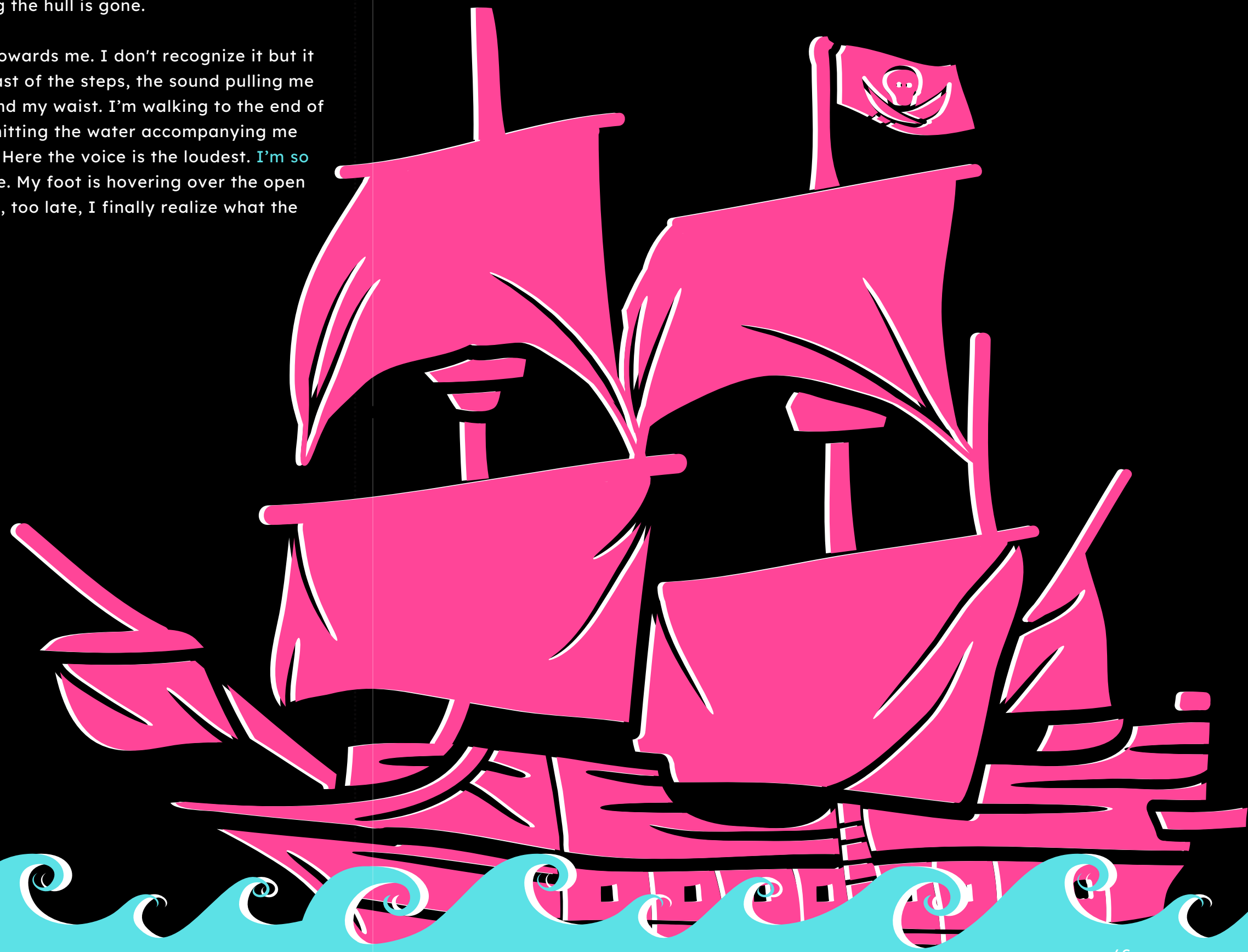
"Get them ready to row, we're not waiting this out here."

He nods and leaves. I go to the railing and look out into the sea, but all there is to see is fog. I frown. There is a shape... a figure in the mist hovering several feet over where the sea has to be. I'm squinting at the shape, but then I blink and it's gone. Must have been a trick of the eye. A shiver runs down my spine and I turn around to call out to my crew to ask them if they've seen something too.

That's when I hear a bloodcurdling scream. Never has my crew sounded like this before, not during battles when fighting for their lives, or afterwards when we had to take care of the inflicted wounds. [This](#) scream makes the hair on my neck rise and the blood in my arteries freeze. It's filled with mortal agony.

I go to the stairs leading to the main deck, holding tight onto the handrail. I still can't see my crew and, even more concerning, I can't hear them anymore. No commands are yelled, no one is working at the oars. There aren't even any whispers. Even the sound of the waves hitting the hull is gone.

A soft, melodic song waves over the sea towards me. I don't recognize it but it sounds like a lullaby. Slowly, I go down the last of the steps, the sound pulling me closer like an invisible string that's tied around my waist. I'm walking to the end of my ship, the splashing sounds of something hitting the water accompanying me with every step closer. I get up on the plank. Here the voice is the loudest. **I'm so close to finding her.** Just two more steps. One. My foot is hovering over the open air with nothing but the sea beneath me, and, too late, I finally realize what the sound is: the Siren's Song.



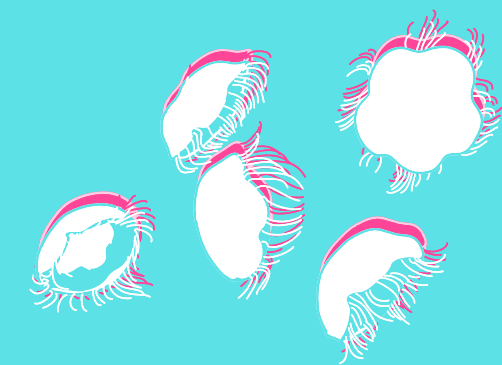
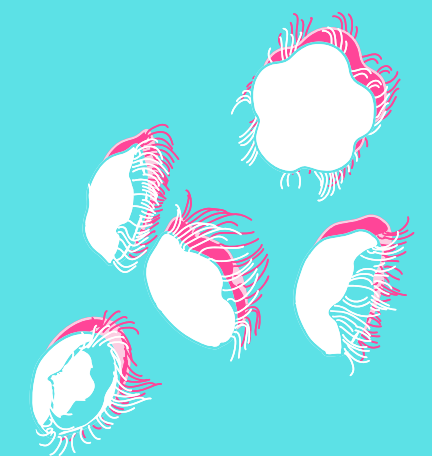
Under
Devon Webb

I think about your secret rage & go crazy
I think about the sea beneath the foundations
& drown endlessly // gathering strength
for just the right amount of resistance
before submission
when I'll let it all wash over me
like a crashing wave that has been
building // stretching // anticipating
'til it explodes all froth & anger
oh, I must teach myself to swim
how to breathe underwater in between asphyxiation
how to leave just the right amount of space
in my lungs for air
as you crush it out, all power & sincerity
the most honest integrity
the most inescapable grip
the most man & monster // the most light & depth
like a drowned sailor & I
a lonely siren to your call
did I say I could swim
'cos you're pulling me under
we plummet, we sink, we sing.



Bodies
Devon Neal

How foolish we are to trust bodies
of water. How many times did my bare
childhood feet part the murky lake water
where the sharp edges of stones
slit at my soft soles, or glass teeth
chewed near my ankles? How often
did my fingertips skip like soft stones
on the surface as I sat at the boat's edge,
life jacket like a strand of muscles at my feet,
the water spiked with spines? On vacation,
I walked among the thunderclouds of jellyfish,
edging along the precipice of drop-offs,
riptide sinews tugging at my limbs,
swallowing and swallowing and swallowing.



Sea Monsters
Rachel Bruce

When salt next mats my hair,
I will chop it off and fly to my beloved horrors.
I will have to become monstrous —
I'm already halfway there.
A pretty picture: three sisters in misery.
Each of us foretellers,
lusting for the blood of the damned.
I feel as though my hair is always matted.
The world has its hooks in my locks
for good men to pull at.
Evenings hang like fishing lines.
I might doze with Charybdis,
diving through the riches of the sea.
The secret of her face brings warmth to my cheeks,
her whirlpool breath obscuring something scaly.
I want to count the drowned souls in her eyelashes.
Or I could lie with my Scylla,
many-headed and vicious, her voice full of howling.
She has long forgotten the ways of the nymphs,
but she could teach me how to smell a thunderstorm.
There is something charming in how she picks her teeth.
Waves echo back the cries of fledgling birds —
my sisters' fangs are sharp enough to cut wire.
Sometimes I dream that I'm the devil.
I think I should like to eat you.

The Kraken
H.V. Patterson

So much hungry grasping
sharks, sailboats, seaweed,
blubbery whales,
the raw delicacy of an unwary male—
You've no patience for eggs or mating.

Running limbs over the universe,
unraveling it with your tender touch
ready at a moment to turn
violent, to haul the world
into your hidden beak-mouth.

Humans quail at the shore
shoving squirming sacrifices
into your depths,
hoping in vain to fill the unfillable
black hole at the heart of creation

Nothing appeases your relentless tentacles.



Drift

Ash Morelock

There's a mass floating out in the water when she goes to cast her first line. It's almost evening already, the day having completely gotten away from her. She needs to hurry up and get a catch if she wants anything more substantial than popcorn for dinner.

She can just barely make out tendrils of something from her spot on the dock, floating like listless pieces of seaweed. She thinks of the pretty cashier at the gas station in town, hair always scooped into an unruly bun at the nape of her neck. Then there's a bite on the line and her attention flickers, focused on whether she can gut the fish before it gets dark out and how much she's dreading driving to the grocery store tomorrow.

The thing is closer in the morning. The mosquitos are out in full force despite the early hour, and she slaps at them distractedly as she locks the door and heads to the truck. She can make out the outline better now. It's larger than she thought, with a mass of that dark something on one end. A log with some slimy plants caught on it, probably. She climbs into the truck.

It's a girl. Or —

She shouldn't assume. She was raised better than that. But it's got arms, spindly limbs bobbing up to the top of the water when the tide jostles it.

She almost wants to take the boat out to it and check, but she knows better than that too. She's alone out here. Some things are simply none of her business.

She tries to put it out of her mind, but she isn't heartless. Whoever it is out there, they had people who cared about them. A favorite color. A comfort movie. They bob a little closer to her dock every day, and every day she makes out another detail. The hair is long and darkened almost black by water. The arms are long and thin, oddly proportioned against what seems like a comparatively large torso. One day she catches a look at the fingers and must go inside early, shaken

that death seems to have sharpened them.

She tries to make dinner, read a book, clean the house, anything, but she can't get it out of her mind. She thinks of those fingers against her face, tracing her cheekbones with a ticklish point. She's been trying not to think of what they might look like. Her dreams that night supply the cute clerk, hair loose around her shoulders and dripping water onto the floor. She's definitely alive, or at least was earlier this week, but in the dream her eyes are milky and unseeing. She wakes up in a puddle of sweat.

If the body doesn't drive her insane, the mosquitos will. Even when she doesn't see them, she hears them buzzing right next to her head no matter how much bug spray she uses or how many citron candles she lights. She's taken to staying inside more often than not, uneasy with the lessening distance between her and *it*. Gators or something must have got to it because there's fresh blood in the water one morning, clouding the water right next to the body. She can't stomach fish after that, thinking about what they might be feeding on. She drives into town to stock up on cans and scan the notice boards as nonchalantly as she can. Lots of missing people, as always, but no one that looks like hers. She can feel the clerk's eyes on her when she fills up before heading home.

It's been a stalemate of sorts for a while. She doesn't go out and doesn't look, trying to convince herself that the tide will pull it away eventually. It's not like she can get the police out here, and even if she could they'd just be trouble. Moving it herself feels wrong, somehow, and then what would she do? Bury it? A week and a half since she first saw it, it floats directly in front of her dock.

She stands at the kitchen sink, scrubbing dishes, and is seized with the sudden image of going out and walking right off the edge, into the water. She can feel the way her toes would scrabble for purchase in the sandy mud as she waded deeper and deeper in, her head disappearing under the surface in seconds. She'd walk along the bottom of the ocean floor until she couldn't anymore, and then she'd be free. Floating, the sun warm on her back, the entire ocean under her, no worries about gas money or the fridge dying or anyone finding her out here. By the time she snaps out of it, she's halfway out the door.



It could be a lot of things. Lack of sleep, irritability, hypervigilance. Hell, climate change might have thrown everything out of whack and moved their breeding season, for all she knows. But the mosquitos are insane. She's lived here for three years now, and they've never been this bad. She can hear their buzzing inside like she's in the middle of a swarm. She hunts them like it's a household task, setting aside time specifically to arm herself with a shoe and make sweeps of the house. She finds some, but nowhere near the amount she hears. It's maddening. She's so preoccupied with them that she almost doesn't notice when the body disappears.

Once she does, the sense of relief almost knocks her off her feet. She goes out and sits on the edge of the dock, feet dangling above the water. She can just barely see it on the horizon, drifting away. She almost waves to it.

Things are good, for a little while. She starts fishing again and gets back into a routine. The mosquitos seem to relax, and she does too.



There are two of them.

They bob slowly toward the dock, heads slipping under the water every so often. When she loses sight of them her stomach clenches with terror, sure they'll drag themselves up on the shore somehow and come knocking. The edge of the kitchen table creaks in her grip. Maybe they'll be gone in the morning. One washed away. Why can't two?

She heads to her room, though she knows she won't be able to sleep. She doesn't want to, anyway, too afraid of dreaming; but maybe if she could, she wouldn't be hearing the damn **buzzing** returning in full force. Are mosquitos drawn to corpses, like flies? Are corpses drawn to her?



She knows as soon as her bare foot makes contact with the water that it's the latter. The buzz travels up her leg and into her core, every cell in her body alight

with a humming melody. She's just like they are. A girl alone, drifting, aimless. Why hadn't she come to check on them? Why had she left them to rot in the sun? The hum makes its way into her ears as she wades deeper, tickling somewhere she can't reach. She had ignored them. She's doggy paddling now, stricken with a guilt she can't begin to put words to. They had been trying to help her, and she'd **ignored** them.

She reaches one, struggling now to stay above the water. It's the first one that came to her, she knows instantly, dark hair flowing down its back. Its head is tilted up, eyes just barely peeking out of the depths. They're the filmy green of algae blooms and bloated fish bellies, unseeing and yet somehow fixed on her. Something swishes in the water behind her, fast as a shark. Cold flesh brushes against her back. They're together now. She's not alone. The song comes to a screeching crescendo, so strong it makes ripples in the water around them.

She floats.

Forgotten Bones

Sirius

Hungry black waves lapped at the sides of the jetty, regurgitating froth that spilled over the craggy rocks like cheap beer roiling in a sailor's belly. It made the rocks more treacherous and slicker than they already were. Even on his hands and knees, Kennedy navigated them carefully – knowing well that one misplaced hand and too much weight could send him tumbling into the water.

They would never find him, then. The jumbled bones in his pocket were testimony to that. Fingers, toes, and whatever else of his fallen comrades' that had washed up to shore like oyster shells. Picked clean as if the flesh had been neatly shaved off with a razor. The teeth marks on some of them were viciously deep. He told himself, for days, that it was the work of sharks that had scavenged the shipwreck.

Now, staring at the luminous green orb that had appeared underneath the water's surface, he was less certain.

The waves made it difficult to judge, but the light looked close enough to touch. He felt as though he could easily reach down and scoop it up, and he knew that if he did it would be cool in his hands. What a relief that would be on his burning palms, which the jetty had mercilessly sliced up once he had decided to crawl. The saltwater would sting, without a doubt, but only for a moment. If he could just hold the light, the beautiful light. It made the surface of the water bubble and ripple, creating wide pale rings of such an eerie and alluring color. It seemed like the light was getting bigger, bent on consuming the entirety of his vision.

If he could only get close enough...

Something broke the surface of the water and raked against the side of his face. Kennedy cried out and reeled back, the stinging pain enough to break him out of his trance. He touched the side of his cheek tenderly, expecting to find blood. There was none, but the top layer of skin was broken, and a little bit of clear oil oozed out.

The bright green light was now blood red. Kennedy saw what looked like a pale, gnarled hand vanish underneath a churning wave.

All around him, he could hear wailing, a cacophony of tortured cries that were so in harmony with one another they almost sounded like a song.

Kennedy closed his eyes and rubbed at them with his dirty fingers. He had to block out the light. Somehow, he had to turn around and get back to shore.

But the water was rising high over the jetty as the moon pulled in the tide. His chances were looking slimmer with every passing second, and he was not sure that the beach would be any safer.

On his hands and knees, still, Kennedy turned around. He put himself lower until he was practically dragging his belly against the rocks. His ragged shirt offered little protection against their needle-sharp points, and he winced whenever they bumped against his bruised ribs. Even so, he kept his chin up as high as it would go and he fixed his eyes on the shore.

He had to make it, or else their families would never know.

The Red Maiden would be just another ship lost at sea. The names of his comrades would all be forgotten. He had seen mass graves before, where each one was marked with a salt-worn stone but half, if not all, were missing names.

Their bodies would never be found, but he had the bones. The bones were something.

The screams were getting louder. They melded together into one haunting melody. They drifted over the water with the coastal fog, creeping up toward the shoreline. Kennedy's arms started to shake from fatigue. He felt it through his entire body to the point where all he wanted to do was crumple and let the ocean take him away. He kept dragging himself forward until the water hit his chest. It lapped at his throat and tickled his earlobes, and it was colder than a banker's heart.

The cold made it difficult to breathe.

From the edges of his vision, Kennedy thought that he could see the light following him. He blinked to be sure, shaking his head instead of rubbing his eyes to try and keep the salt water out of his tear ducts. It was still blood red, and the water around it churned as if boiling. A sudden, paralyzing fear seized his chest and

made his breath stick in his throat. Kennedy coughed hard enough to rack his whole body. The light continued to drift closer, narrowing the distance between them with unnatural speed.

Kennedy closed his eyes, muttering a prayer under his breath as he continued to crawl. His palm glanced off a sharp rock and his prayer was cut off by a curse before he slipped, falling face-first into the water. His world became entirely eclipsed by brine, and for one blessed moment, it was silent. The only sound he could perceive was that of his racing heartbeat.

He scrambled to regain his hold on the jetty. Blood was streaming from the gash in his palm, although he could not feel it. It seemed like an eternity before he found the jetty again. He gripped its side, using his hold as leverage to pull himself up and break the surface of the water, gasping for breath.

The screams were even louder than before. He heaved a jagged breath, vomiting salt water as he gasped for air. His eyes burned and no amount of blinking could clear them. It was almost impossible to see.

The only thing he could still make out, decently, was the light. It was blue now, and it had stopped right beside the jetty. It waited, perfectly still, the water around it undisturbed by its presence, where that had not been the case only moments prior.

Kennedy swallowed hard again. His whole mouth tasted like brine and there were grains of sand caught in his cheeks.

The shore was close, only a few more steps. If the tide was lower, and if he were any stronger, he would not have to move far. He could have covered it standing upright – but he did not want to slip and fall off the jetty again.

Despite the fear making his heart race, Kennedy took a moment to compose himself before dragging his hands and knees along the jetty again.

Along the dark line of rock, he caught a glimpse of something else. It was as long as an oarfish and flashed tarnished silver, with rust-red fins like fallen sails dragging the surface of the water. The fish, or the tail of it, broke the surface of the water – making an arch before sinking back down. He felt something slide over his bare feet – as slippery and smooth as a moray eel.

Terror put his heart in his throat. He froze again, unable to move forward, despite having his eyes locked onto the moon-drenched shore. It was so close, and yet he felt like he was being pulled away by a rip current. He had no footing anymore, and he was losing his grip.

If it was a rip current, Kennedy knew better than to fight it. He could do nothing about the creature that appeared to be circling him – only visible now in the barest flashes of metallic skin underneath the water.

Kennedy stuck his hands in his pockets and felt for the bones that were still there. He gripped them tightly in his fists and held them, finishing the prayer he had started.

Dead, but not forgotten. He would remember, he would remember.

Another splash. This one sounded like the flat side of a tail smacking against the water. Kennedy turned his face upward towards heaven, and his hopeless gaze met with a blanket of stars.

Wet, clammy hands dove into his pockets. He let out a horrified sound as nails, sharp like nettles, dug and scabbled at his fingers until he pulled them free. The creature – whatever it was – did the rest of the work by snatching the bones from his hands. He saw the spotted silver tail again as it curled around his body. Impossibly long from the way it seemed to form a perfect circle and still had no sign of ending.

Kennedy had run out of prayers. Still, there was the distant wailing – getting fainter, but still present enough that it rang through his ears like a shot.

He caught sight of long, red hair. It spread across the surface of the water like weeds, tangling in his fingers and clinging to his clothes. Revulsion nearly made him retch as he tried to get it off, untangling himself as hopelessly as if he were thrashing inside a net.

Inside the mass of tangled crimson hair was a face. It was like no face he had ever seen on any animal. It looked as though it could have been human, or at least like it wanted to be. It had eyes that were as large and round as saucers and as dark as plum jelly. Wide and unblinking, they observed him, set above a too-wide jaw and a gaping mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. Each one gleamed like steel, and

they jutted from the top and the bottom alike, sticking out in all directions.

The creature watched him, and he found himself staring back. The tail that wrapped around his body coiled up a little tighter, and he could feel it closing in on him.

The creature opened its mouth and let out a heartbreaking wail. Kennedy felt it as a physical blow to his chest – a beautiful song of such agonizing sorrow that it made him want to sink into the water and never resurface. It continued to sing, never tearing those preternatural dark eyes away from him.

And he could have sworn, in the very heart of the mournful wail, that he heard it say his name.

‘Kennedy!’

His heart felt like it was going to break out of his chest.

‘Kennedy!’

He was so overcome that he wanted to cry. He wanted to weep for his lost shipmates. He wanted to weep for their families who would never see them again. He wanted to weep for himself.

‘Kennedy, come here, come to me, come here!’

He smashed his hands against his face. Kennedy ground his knuckles into the corners of his eyes, weeping around them, heartbroken sobs bubbling out of his throat.

“I cannot,” he cried, “I cannot!”

He brought his head back up. His eyes still burned, and his vision was getting hazier. If the shore was still nearby, he could not see it any longer.

A cool hand touched his face and slid over the warm, swollen cut. Kennedy blinked again, swearing under his breath, and tried to wipe more salt from his eyes.

“Kennedy,” the voice that spoke to him sounded far more human. “It is all right.

Shh, there. Quiet, we found you. It is going to be alright.”

He could see eyes – what looked like normal ones. They were soft, gray, and narrow – and they sparkled in the center of a pale, glistening face.

“You found me?” he echoed, unable to stop froth from gurgling up his throat and spilling from his lips. “You found me. Thank God. Thank God.” More tears ran down his cheeks, although he could not tell if they were from him, or if the water was getting warmer. “I did not forget them.”

“No, you did not,” the voice said. “Come join them. They are all here, waiting for you.”

“Thank God,” were the last words he spoke before water swallowed up his throat.

The silver tail wrapped around his middle and tightened its hold, twisting around to drag him deeper into the water.

He looked for the light. It was nowhere to be found.

The Abyss

Chiara Picchi

Frigid. Dark. Suffocating. The water like concrete as it closes in, dragging him deeper and deeper into the abyss. Lungs burn, starved for air, eroded by salt as water floods his nostrils, drips down his throat one drop at a time, arms flail, and strain, fighting against the current.

Up, swim up; up where the sky blends with the sea and clouds mask the sun; up where seagulls are circling, crying his name as they wait for the body to come afloat; its dull eyes waiting to be pecked, ribbons of its flesh feeding the fish. Swim up where the wind whistles and the air is poison but one can breathe.

Eyes sting, vision blurs, shadows dance at its periphery — sea creatures observing his execution, their instincts aroused by the thrashing and struggling as he battles to tread water.

Swim. Swim. Swim.

Fingers grasp the darkness and clench around water that slips effortlessly through them. It doesn't care for muffled pleas and cries for help, it delights in the panic expanding his pupils, the oxygen escaping his lips, the last rush of adrenaline feeding his frenzy.

Swim. Swim. Swim.

With what strength? There is none left. Fabric clings to his skin and weighs him down — his cross to bear on his way to Calvary. Pressure builds, and old injuries awake, his ears shrieking in pain as it crushes him. How stupid it is, to end it all for a mistake, for a tipsy stumble off the dock. People will find his cadaver rotting away on the water's surface, brought to daylight by the gasses expanding its intestines. They'll ponder the reason behind his death — suicide perhaps, or maybe foul play. Oh, if they only knew the absurdity of it all, if they only knew that it was neither despair nor human cruelty that killed him but sheer misfortune. The shadows grow before his pupils, expanding in his vision until there is but a strip of light left for him to distinguish.

Swim. Swim. Swim.

He can't. His limbs are refusing to obey commands, turning into marble blocks aiding his descent towards the unknown. A stream of bubbles escapes his lips and float upwards as light fades, cannibalized by blackness as his screams become distorted, muffled by the layers of waves piling upon him. Tentacles wrap around his limbs, tighten around his torso and squeeze. His ribs crack, bone fissures and splinters under its strength. Consciousness hesitates to depart, lingering undecided on the doorstep.

So, this is how it all ends: in solitude. His partner will be curled up on the sofa with a cup of tea, a red pen skimming over piles of exams, waiting for him to come back and recount how his evening went. No mystic last words, no tear-stained goodbyes; their last interaction will have been a 'see you later,' rushed as the door closed.

Perhaps all is not as dire as he thought. After all, things cannot worsen once you cease to exist. The world can burn, drown, tremble, explode, it won't reach him. He will be untouchable, unscathed. He will not see the people he loves age and waste away. He won't see the effects of time ravage his own body...

A silver lining, right? Yes. A silver lining. His chest tightens, a knot closes his trachea caused not by water, but by an unexpected stab of despair. A silver lining. He'll lose his friends. He'll lose his family. He'll lose his future. People will grow, have children, have families and find their path in life. He won't. Where will he be? In some fish's gut.

He doesn't want to die. There are things to do, places to go and people to meet and he doesn't want to lose it all. He struggles against his restraints, mustering the last remainders of strength to kick at the ropes of flesh wrapped around him. The creature seems to recoil in surprise, but in a mere instant, suckers cling to him with renewed vehemence. Spikes dig deeper into muscle, eyelids part and death stares back. Shards of bone guard the entrance to the creature's mouth, the oblivion ready to engulf him. Eyes sting, stabbed by salt, blinded by the crimson staining the water. The beak parts, approaches, inching closer and closer and closer. Alertness wavers, determination fades, flesh is sliced as the abyss abducts him.

About Our Authors

In Alphabetical Order

A.L. Davidson

A.L. Davidson (she/they) is a disabled, queer author who specializes in cozy genre-blending web novels and tales of haunting horror romance. She writes stories about ghosts, grief, isolation, space exploration, eco-horror, queerness, and the human condition.

They have penned several short stories that have been featured in various lit mags and anthologies. They are best known for their eco-horror romance novella *When The Rain Begins To Burn*, the *R-PNZL: A Futuristic Fairytale* series, and their collection of web novels – *The Wayward Souls of Avalon*, *Lonely Planet Hotel*, and *The Night Farm*. She is a crazy plant parent and lives with her cat, Jukebox, in Kansas City.

Ash Morelock

Ash Morelock (they/he/she) is an aspiring writer, crocheter, hiker, and just about everything else. They can be found in a cemetery near you, probably.

Chiara Picchi

Chiara Picchi is a Brussels-based translator originally from Italy. She graduated from the University of East Anglia with an MA in Literary Translation and enjoys writing short stories and flash fiction in her free time. Her work has been published by Eggbox Publishing, Sonder Magazine, and Queerlings.

Sirus

My name is Sirius (He/Him They/Them). I am a disabled, non-binary author and a member of the Horror Writer's Association. My gothic novel, *Swallow You Whole* was recently released by Curious Corvid Publishing with more works forthcoming and my short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies such as *The Doors Of Darkness*, *The Monsters Next Door*, *Books of Horror*, *Siren's Call*, *The Magpie Messenger*, and more.

Devon Webb

Devon Webb is a Gen Z writer & editor based in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her award-winning work has been published in over seventy journals worldwide & revolves around themes of femininity, vulnerability, anti-capitalism & neurodivergence. She is an in-house writer for *Erato Magazine*, an editor for *Prismatica Press*, & is currently working on the launch of a collective called *The Circus*, which will prioritise radical inclusivity within the indie lit scene. She can be found on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok & Bluesky at @devonwebbnz.

Devon Neal

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Kentucky-based poet whose work has appeared in many publications, including *HAD*, *Livina Press*, *The Storms*, and *The Bombay Lit Mag*, and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He currently lives in Bardstown, KY with his wife and three children.

D.W. Baker

D.W. Baker is a submerging poet from St. Petersburg, FL, USA, where he writes about place, bodies, belonging, and the end of the world. His work appears in *Green Ink Poetry*, *Queerlings*, horror senryu journal, and *Soft Star Magazine*, among others, and has been nominated for Best of the Net. He reads poetry for *Cosmic Daffodil* and *Hearth & Coffin*. See more of his work at linktr.ee/dwbaker

Faith Allington

Faith Allington (she/her) is a writer, gardener and lover of mystery parties. Her work is forthcoming or has previously appeared in various literary journals, including *Hexagon MYRIAD*, *Flash Frontier*, *Pyre Magazine*, *Hearth & Coffin*, and *Litmora Magazine*.

Hayden Robinson

I am an English writer and poet. I write mainly in horror, fantasy and poetry, which tackles themes such as neurodivergence, trauma and finding humanity in a dark world. My work has appeared in several publications such as *Re-Route Magazine*, *HNDL Magazine*, *Colour Theory*, *Diverse Verse 3*, *Diverge Magazine* and *HorrorScope Volume 3*. My poem 'Leona' is set to be featured in the anthology *HorrorScope Volume 4* in February 2024. I currently reside in Decatur, GA with my wife, our dog and our two cats.

H.V. Patterson

H.V. Patterson (she/her) lives in Oklahoma and writes speculative poetry and fiction. She's a cofounder of *Horns and Rattles Press*. Recent stories and poems published with *Sliced Up Press*, *Diet Milk Magazine*, *Creature Publishing*, *Flame Tree Press*, *Eerie River*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *Black Spot Books*. Find her on X @ScaryShelley and on Instagram @hvpattersonwriter

J.S. Betula

J. S. Betula is a 27-year-old genderqueer speculative fiction writer from the swamps of rural New York. Xe loves goopy practical effects and unpleasant final girls, and you can find hir on twitter @jsbetula.

Jessica Gleason

Hawaiian-Italian author, Jessica Gleason, is a lover of horror and fantasy in their various shapes and forms and can usually be found penning gory tales deep into the night. She enjoys painting monsters with acrylics and singing a mean hair metal karaoke. Her daytime persona teaches college English and Communications in the American Midwest. Her recent releases include *The Dangerous Miss Ventriloquist*, and *The Fabulous Miss Fortune* (Evil Cookie Publishing, 2023) and *Madison Murphy, Wisconsin Weirdo* (Champagne Books Group, 2023). For information on her projects, follow her on Instagram (@j.g.writes) where she hosts a monthly horror writer challenge, #WeWriteHorror. <https://jgwrites.carrd.co>

Lori D'Angelo

Lori D'Angelo is a grant recipient from the Elizabeth George Foundation and an alumna of the Community of Writers at Squaw Valley. Recent work has appeared in *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Beaver Magazine*, *Bullshit Lit*, *Chaotic Merge*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Idle Ink*, *JAKE*, *Litmora*, *Rejection Letters*, *Thin Veil Press*, and *Voidspace*. Find her on Twitter and Bluesky @sclly21 or Instagram and Threads at lori.dangelo1. She lives in Virginia with her family.

Maggie Koons

Maggie Koons grew up in Colorado and is currently an MFA student at Temple. She writes horror and fears the sea.

Nashitah Chowdhury

Nashitah Noorayn Chowdhury is a Bangladeshi-Canadian writer. Exploring themes of identity and belonging, her prose and poetry spring from introspective musings at dawn and the echoes of distant memories. She can be reached at @nashitahnoorayn on Instagram.

Nina Kriszio

Nina is living in Germany with her partner and their two cats. During the day she works in the medical field as an orthoptist and at night she gives all the characters that live in her head a voice. Aside from writing she has lots of other hobbies like reading (obviously), handball and ice hockey.

Olivia Lawrence

Olivia Lawrence is a horror and speculative writer from the North East of England. In 2023 she completed an MA in Creative Writing with distinction. Lawrence is inspired by horror video games and the uncanny. Her writing explores the female experience, body horror, and obsession. You can find her @oliviawlawrence on Twitter.

Rachel Bruce

Rachel Bruce (she/her) is a poet based in South London. She studied English Literature at the University of Warwick and has been writing since a young age. Her work has appeared in The Telegraph, Mslexia, Ink Sweat and Tears, The Daily Drunk, Atrium, and Fragmented Voices, among others.

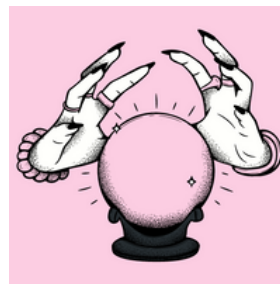
Shayzan Brown

SOUM

SOUM (Screams of Unfettered Minds) is a collaboration of three women, who value anonymity, using their art and poetry to be their voice. Their style is raw, unpolished, tongue-in-cheek, unapologetic, unfiltered; a mishmash of life experiences and ongoing shadow work. SOUM champions mental awareness and social issues drawing inspiration from the struggles of everyday people highlighting the darker aspects of their physical, mental and spiritual battles.

Toshiya Kamei

Toshiya Kamei (they/them) takes inspiration from fairy tales, folklore, and mythology.



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