

THE MAUL

Hedonists welcome



Charlie B. Lorch
Caias Ward
Frank Oreto
Jason P. Burnham

themaulmag.com

Pics

Stay for Dinner

Front Cover

by Michelle St. James

Tiff and Lainey #4

Comic

by Alina Wahab

Cosmic Horror Contest

Winner

Daniel Roop

w/

The Seventh Visit of KlCharthoth

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Lies We'd Like You to Believe

The small fibs we tell often say more about us than the mundane facts regarding our current circumstance

***Note - Some artists choose to give a simple, and truthful, bio instead

Charlie is a space pirate on a lifelong quest to defeat their archnemesis (their sentient printer). They travel around the galaxy with their codependent dog and opinionated cat, and hope one day to see space from Earth.

Caias Ward is an ogre from New Jersey who has fought Nazis, had the statute of limitations run out on several crimes, is fueled by spite, and has no navel. Some of these statements are false, or perhaps none of them are.

Frank Oreto once made his living participating in the underground book fighting matches held in the basements of libraries and used bookstores until he killed a man using the forbidden technique known as The 500 Papercuts of Bartholomew Cubbins. Frank can play any instrument he's spent a romantic weekend in Taos with. If Frank pets an animal with his left hand, that animal will gain the ability to speak in the voice of Michael Caine for the next fifteen minutes.

Every night, Jason sleeps for an appropriate number of hours, and he never has awkward conversations with fellow humans.

Michelle St. James is a Plant Psychologist dabbling in human behavior modification. Each piece of art is embedded with a subliminal code to facilitate inter-species communication on a telepathic level. If you stare at her work long enough, you may start to understand what your cactus is telling you, and why it feels that way.

Bio for Alina - Alina Wahab is a comic artist and illustrator from India. They enjoy making fun, self-indulgent, queer art that showcases their love for all things retro, spooky, and fashionable. Their work has been published in numerous fanzines and anthologies. They're pretty terrible at talking about themselves, and wish that all viewers would perceive them as a some sort of small, porcelain dog figurine that came to life and now spends all their time daydreaming about goofy vampires.





SKINTIGHT by Charlie B. Lorch

In their dreams, their teeth rise from the sink and slot back into place one by one.

They open their mouth, slide an index – skin of its tip grown back – inside. Fingerprint alongside pink gums. The yellowed teeth stand in a disorderly row, huddled together in a messy semi-circle, fighting for a better view out the mouth, peeking through lips wet with pooling saliva, bright and shiny like candy. Their finger reaches the molar, feels the patch of gum where a wisdom tooth once was. They pull on the corner of their mouth, widening the grimace. Their jaw clicks as it is pulled out of shape. In their dreams, it snaps back into place when they let go.

There is no truth to be found in hair. This they knew. Still: meticulous and methodical, they remove every last one, from the top of their head to their big toe. They hold each between tweezers, close enough to their inquisitive stare their eyes cross. It is not enough.

Bare feet on a bathroom floor carpeted with hair, they move on. They take inventory of the uniqueness of their body. The splash of a wide birthmark, rosé spilled on the white tablecloth of their belly. A thin, controlled slice of a scalpel removes it. They deposit the flap of skin on the side of the sink, kneel to look at its shape closely, and pray it says something. Its silence is disappointing, but no matter.

Next: a mole, round and big and once cause of great hypochondriac worries, on the side of their neck. They apply the scalpel around it, the first cut already history, old and fresh blood mixing. It stings but discovery has never been painless. It feels right, actually, that the mental torture of it is now physical, present elsewhere than their reflection. It feels good to be able to hold it. The mole is soft to the touch. They roll it between two fingers. Tell me tell me tell me. They wonder what secret its ridges hold, what they are bound to. Is it being alive that keeps them quiet? Disappointing.

They run their finger along the long scar that splits the newly flat expanse of their chest: above, nipples, below, bellybutton. They consider reopening it to look inside, but the surgery has not revealed any grand truth, so why bother? They had asked to be awake for it. This small grace had been denied.

They could not be there for the autopsy of their past self. They had fallen asleep in a body, woken in another, and whatever knowledge the old one contained had been thrown away with the leftovers. No, better not go down a road frustratingly traveled.

What next? They spare a glance at their tattoos, which they have a fondness for still. No reason to disturb them. A willing addition to the body they inhabit, they would not tell them anything they haven't decided themselves. And isn't that the crux of it? They know what they have chosen. They know what truth they want their body to spell. That is not the knowledge they seek.

One millimeter deep and a sacrifice to get a fingerprint. They choose the index of their left hand. It bleeds bright red onto the floor. They run water on the wound, peering into the pink tissue underneath with nervous hope. What makes me me? They try to ask the open finger, and when it doesn't reply, they turn to the detached fingerprint. Elegant swirls like question marks, certainly singular but human still, and how unique can anybody be, really, in the flesh? They squint at them, studying their twists and turns, hoping to read not their future but their past, happy to settle not for an absolute truth but maybe a hint. This is what we grew, the skin could



say, from scratch. This is who you are. But if there exists a language in the freshly severed lines, they can't read it. No luck. Rotten, in fact.

They pull at the skin. It tears off in uneven chunks like candy floss, alongside each phalanx, revealing more pink flesh that they run underwater. It stays clear for half a second before blood rushes to anger them further, scattering the proof of them, making their inside indiscernible, covering up what was concealed by the envelope of skin. Identity's last resort, the gush of red-hot liquid to confuse eyes growing weary and unfocused. What is inside needs to remain inside is the only message they find, feeling their knees buckle.

Time is running out and so they hurry, frustrated. Let go of the scalpel. It clatters like bones rattled. They pick up pliers. They open their mouth and hold still. It is said a person can be identified by the pulp inside their teeth when the body has disintegrated.

They reach for a canine, pinch, twist, scream, pull. Their labored breath fogs up the mirror, enamel trembling between pliers held with shaking hands. They put the canine down, raise the pliers, and aim them at the tooth. Smash. They miss the tooth and hit the counter. The dent it creates reveals its nature: laminate and tile. It enrages them, the easy truth of it.

A canine alone won't do. Plier, tooth, plier, tooth, plier, tooth. The teeth fall one after the other, forming a pile of 28 against the drain. They smash the lot, breathless and dizzy. The shards look like the rest of their body: splintered, reddish-pink, confusing, stubborn. Speak, they shout. Tell me what's me.

Their vision blurs. They smile at their reflection, toothless, gums leaking blood like raw meat squeezed. Rest, then. Tomorrow they will continue. Palms, soles, eyeballs. The truth of their body must be hiding in it. They must go deeper, to the bone, the marrow, inside it.

Tomorrow. Darkness rushes to meet them.

In their dreams, their teeth rise from the sink to their mouth and slot back into place one by one.

End

Massive Gains

by Caias Ward (originally published in "Shredded")

Fitness Log Week 33

Height: 5'7" Weight: 155 lbs

-Barbell Bench Press: 135 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps No Change

-Dumbbell Bench Press: 40 lbs 3 Sets 10 No Change

-Incline Bench Press: 140 lbs 1 Sets 10 Reps, 135 lbs 2 Sets 10 Reps No Change

-Decline Press: 160 lbs 1 Sets 1 Reps Failure DNF workout

Notes: This bullshit isn't working. Why do I bother?

Week 33 Progress Video Comments:

Chuzwut: damn this boy is weak!

MikeyP: He had to get someone to pull the bar off him on the decline! LOLLOLOLOL

GraveyardLady97: Someone needs to maybe start on a machine rather than free weights?

RoganFanNumber2: dude, we all start somewhere. I mean, it's not like 160 lbs is easy to—nah, this guy is soft and he has shamed his ancestors. Broseiden is not pleased.

@GymRat1997:

Dude, saw the YouTube vid. Pinned by baby weights that someone lifted off you *one-handed*, damn.

@MassiveGains:

Fuck you, Steve. Everyone saw the vid.

@GymRat1997:

My offer stands. I got a hookup.

@MassiveGains:

I'm not becoming some juicehead. I just want to be stronger. Healthier, like you.

@GymRat1997:

It's not roids. It's an Old World recipe. I know someone. I'll hook you up.

@MassiveGains:

Fine. Give me the address.

@MassiveGains:

Dude, that lady was Old World brolic. Like she should be doing World's Strongest Woman throwing cows around. She old as fuck too.

@GymRat1997:

But did she hook you up?

@MassiveGains:

Yeah. Shit was chunky and green and thick. Thought I had to take a dump through the first workout, it was clawing inside me.

@GymRat1997:

Now you'll get some changes quick, but it will level out and you'll make normal gains. Be happy with it.

@MassiveGains:

We'll see.

Fitness Log Week 34

Height: 5'7" Weight: 160 lbs

-Barbell Bench Press: 165 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +20

-Dumbbell Bench Press: 60 lbs 3 Sets 10 +20

-Incline Bench Press: 170 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +35

-Decline Press: 185 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +25

Notes: Hell yeah!

@MassiveGains:

Check the numbers.

@GymRat1997:

Massive gains, brah! Brosiden would be proud. Remember, one and done, you don't need more.

@MassiveGains:

OK. You got any advice for recovery? I'm hurting.

@GymRat1997:

What, like muscle fatigue?

@MassiveGains:

Everything hurts. Not like 'injured', just everything burning.

@GymRat1997:

Hydrate, rest days, I'll send you a list of supplements you need.

Fitness Log Week 37

Height: 5'10" Weight: 185 lbs

-Barbell Bench Press: 225 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +60

-Dumbbell Bench Press: 75 lbs 3 Sets 10 +15

-Incline Bench Press: 220 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +50

-Decline Press: 225 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +40

Notes: I got more of the stuff. I feel great even with everything still hurting. Feels like I am fire.

@GymRat1997:

There's a typo.

@MassiveGains:

Nope. Grew 3 inches.

@GymRat1997:

Bullshit, boss. Are the weights at least legit?

@MassiveGains:

Watch vid, slapnuts

@GymRat1997:

Holy shit.

@MassiveGains:

I'm getting more of that green stuff! That shit is awesome.

@GymRat1997:

Dude! You can't take more! It's not for that.

@MassiveGains:

It's working. I'm going to be huge. HUGE!

@GymRat1997:

It's special. Old World. This wasn't made in a lab. Be happy with what you got. But you can't take more of it.

@MassiveGains:

Gotta get jacked. This is my chance.

Fitness Log Week 41

Height: 6'3" Weight: 273 lbs

-Barbell Bench Press: 235 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +10

-Dumbbell Bench Press: 80 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +5

-Incline Bench Press: 225 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +5

-Decline Press: 230 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +5

Notes: Hit plateau. Need more green drink. Need to adjust diet, skin is breaking out bad. Bones stretching.

@GymRat1997:

Saw your last vid. You're changing. Answer your phone.

@GymRat1997:

Bro?

Order Requisition

CityMD Urgent Care

2317 Center Island Route 22, Union, NJ 07083

(201) 354-1951

Patient: BARNES, VICTOR

Order/Test: **Referral**

Requested Date/Time: 6/14/21 12:45

Referred to Specialty: Dermatology

Referred to Provider: Dr S. Centurion, Dermatology Associates of Central NJ

Reason for Referral: Treatment for suspected rapid-onset Acne Conglobata and Acne Fulminans on face and body. Odd growths under skin causing pain and discomfort. Terrible odor emanating from acne.

Order Status: Ordered

Order ID: 47689091594.00

Diagnoses: L70.9 Acne (Unspecified), L72.0 Epidermal Cyst, R22.9 Localized Swelling (Mass and Lump, unspecified) over majority of body

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

yo, you best collect your boy.

@GymRat1997:

I haven't seen Vic in weeks.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

you didn't hear?

@GymRat1997:



what?

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Motherfucker went to Shop-Rite and bought twelve pounds of chicken breast and then ate that shit raw in the parking lot.

@GymRat1997:

the what?

@GymRat1997:

how you even eat 12 pounds of chicken? Raw?

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

My sister saw him, she works the courtesy counter. People were talking about that shit coming into the store.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

He was sitting on the curb just chowing down and growling at people. He look gross. His skin's all breaking out and he's got these nodules

@GymRat1997:

What the fuck's a nodule?

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

It's a big-ass lump under the skin. Read a damn book sometime why don't you? My sister said some of them are bleeding, some looked like they were ready to pop blood and pus.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Like I said, collect your boy. Get Dr. Drew. He needs an intervention, whatever he on.

@GymRat1997:

I ain't heard from him in a minute.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Something ain't right with him. I talked to his dad, he hasn't been home for a few days. I think he moved that busted car.

@GymRat1997:

Finally got a tow truck to pull that thing?

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Nah. His dad said he picked up the back end and walked it into the garage.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Crushed all the stuff they had stacked in there.

@GymRat1997:

That's a 1976 Buick Century with a seized axle. Vic ain't moving that, no matter how much he talked about fixing it.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

His dad said he moved it. When he talked about making that junker gone, Vic roared at him and punched the wall.

@GymRat1997:

damn

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Sending a pic ...

@GymRat1997:

Shit. That's the cement wall. He had to hit that with a hammer.

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Dad says he punched it, then drove off in his car. Honda Fit gotta be a clown car for him now.

@GymRat1997:

damn

@BiscuitHeadJohnson:

Like I said, you best collect your boy or he's going to hurt someone.

Fitness Log Week 45

Height: 6'11" Weight: 374 lbs

-Barbell Bench Press: 285 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +50

-Dumbbell Bench Press: 95 lbs 6 Sets 20 Reps +10

-Incline Bench Press: 275 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +50

-Decline Press: 290 lbs 3 Sets 10 Reps +60

Notes: skin hurt so much. flesh ripping. need more gains. need more old lady green drink. no one laugh now.

Week 45 Progress Video Comments:

AndyMarks44: This dude grew a foot in three months? Bullshit.

Brosiden92: This shit ain't real. Gotta be a movie promo, a viral thing. Will so see this movie. Guy looks like something from D&D!

PlateLadySupreme: This guy is real, he's at my gym. He's a real creeper now, threatened to eat someone. He looks so gross, his bacne stained the damn incline press and he reeks.

Pavellifter: holy shit, that guy looks like one of my great-grandfathers, he drank something a hag gave him and transformed into an ogre!

Brosiden92: Pavellifter you related to Shrek LOLLOLOLOL

Pavellifter: No you fucknut he turned into a monster and ate someone. Fucking clown. Go tear your ACL.

@MassiveGains:

When we gonna lift, brah?

@GymRat1997:

You gotta stop taking that shit. I saw your last vid, that ain't healthy. Your skin's all fucked up. Your teeth. You're leaking all over the place.

@MassiveGains:

Saw docs. Tell me stop taking green stuff. Can't stop. Gotta lift or it hurts.

@GymRat1997

You have to stop.

@MassiveGains:

Why you want me small?

@GymRat1997:

Don't even.

@MassiveGains:

You just jealous of my massive gains. It hurts so much, though. Except when I lift.

@GymRat1997:

That shit is warping you. Gotta stop taking it.

@MassiveGains:

You want me puny.

@GymRat1997:



I want you healthy, bro. This ain't it.

@MassiveGains:

MASSIVE GAINS!

Sender: Metro Gym

Subject: Notice of Membership Cancellation

Mister Barnes:

Last week, there were several complaints regarding your hygiene and your behavior towards other guests at our Union, NJ location. The sheer volume of complaints in a short period of time as well as the video evidence of the interactions leaves us no choice but to cancel your membership to all Metro Gym locations. Your membership has been prorated based on your effective cancellation date.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact our corporate office at the listed number.

Best,

Sean Ossinger

Manager

Metro Gym, Union NJ Location

Police Report

7/16/19

Responding Officers: James Samuels and Robert Lopez

Location: Cap Barbell Company, 625 Rahway Avenue, Union NJ

On 7/16/2019 at approximately 0300 hours, I responded to a theft report at 625 Rahway Ave with Officer Lopez. We arrived to find the 911 caller, night security guard Desmond Battle, waiting for us down the road from behind a car. He reported that shortly after doing his site tour, he heard a tearing sound from one of the doors. Investigating, he discovered the suspect still holding the steel security door in his hand. The suspect threw the door at Battle, who dove out of the way and took shelter.

The suspect proceeded to carry off a variety of weight lifting equipment, including weight plates and a barbell on his shoulder. Battle reported that the suspect was muttering about a 'home gym' and 'stupid metro', and noted a foul odor which nauseated him. A spot inventory indicated that the suspect purportedly carried off twelve (12) fifty kilogram plates and a heavy-duty barbell. Blood and pus stains were also found on the floor of the warehouse as well as the damaged steel door, which struck and dented a support pillar.

There is nothing further to report.

Comments: This is a joke? I don't have time for this. - Watch Sergeant Miller


Comments: I saw the video. What the hell is going on? - Captain Pignatelli

Police Report

7/18/19

Responding Officers: Sara Woodson, Marcus Dante

Location: Lord Stirling Stables, 256 S Maple Ave, Basking Ridge, NJ 07920



On 7/18/2019 at 0520 hours, Officer Dante and I responded to a call at 256 S Maple Ave. We met with Peter Benton, the manager of the facility. While Officer Dante addressed crowd control, I went with Benton into one of the stables where I discovered the remains of a horse. It had been brutally attacked, its neck twisted at an odd angle, with large portions of its flesh torn away and a portion of the animal missing. I notified Animal Control and called for detectives. No other animals had been harmed although several were incredibly agitated. A foul odor lingered in the area, with blood and pus on the floor and wall surfaces.

Further investigation revealed very large and deep bare human-shaped footprints leading towards and away from the stables, along with a blood trail which disappeared after entering deep woods outside the stables.

There is nothing further to report.

@MassiveGains:

See video I sent?

@GymRat1997:

Victor! Been trying to reach you for weeks! Why are you in the woods?

@MassiveGains:

Been training. Lift with me.

@GymRat1997:

You need help.

@MassiveGains:

Got diet plan and workouts. Horse good. Make own green stuff, made lady show me how. She strong, I stronger.

@MassiveGains:

Lifting alone. No one spot me

@MassiveGains:

Everyone so puny now

@GymRat1997:

You gotta stop taking the stuff

@MassiveGains:

Why you want me small?

@GymRat1997:

I don't want you small. You need help.

@MassiveGains:

Yes, I need help. I need spotter. Lifting alone. Lonely. Painful skin. Lonely

@GymRat1997:

I want to help you.

@MassiveGains:

Thrown out of gym. Said I was mean.

@GymRat1997:

I heard. You are scaring people, bro.

@MassiveGains:

They fear my massive gains. Need real gym, got my own plates.

@GymRat1997:

Wait, what do you mean, 'horse good'?

@MassiveGains:

Horse taste good

@GymRat1997:

What did you

@GymRat1997:

That was you?

@MassiveGains:

Horse good. Green stuff good. Skin still hurt no pain no gain. We work out soon. I spot you. Get you massive. Phone dying, in woods. See you soon.

@GymRat1997:

Vic, you need help.

@GymRat1997:

Vic?

@GymRat1997:

Vic, message back you fucker!

Three Dead, Six Wounded in Gym Rampage

Union, NJ: Three dead and six wounded in what appears to be a revenge killing occurred at a gym in Union Thursday afternoon, initial reports reveal. Preliminary investigation, including video, show a nine-foot form smashing in the gym doors and attacking several people [CLICK LINK TO CONTINUE]

Witness Interview with Steve Alban

8/14/19

Interviewer: Detective Davina Paneras

Detective:

Thanks for meeting with us.

Attorney:

I'd like to point out that my client is here voluntarily with information regarding the case. Detective: I understand. You said you had information on the incident at Metro Gym?

Steve Alban:

Yes. That's ... Victor Barnes.

Detective:

The one you said was called 'Massive Gains' online?

Steve Alban:

Or was. It looks like him, kind of. Before he started taking this green stuff.

Detective:

Green stuff? Drugs?

Steve Alban:

It's a ... preworkout? It's not steroids. But you're only supposed to take it once. Ever. He kept on taking it and he got ... bigger.

Detective:

Like in the video? You are saying—



Steve Alban:

Yes, he's nine feet tall. He's been taking this ... green stuff, it made him huge. He said he figured out how to make it himself from this old lady.

Detective:

And you talked with him? When?

Steve Alban:

I talked to him online. He sent videos of him working out. He posted some of them online. You can see him getting huge from week to week.

Detective:

Huge? This green stuff made him huge?

Steve Alban:

Yeah. You're only supposed to take it once. He kept on taking it. It's doing something to him. His skin is breaking out, pus and blood and shit. Getting all leathery.

Detective:

Do you know where Victor Barnes is?

Steve Alban:

I don't.

Attorney:

We've agreed to turn over the videos Mister Alban was sent, which appear to have metadata regarding location.

Detective:

We'd like to look at the phone.

Attorney:

That won't be happening.

Detective:

It's easier if you do it voluntarily.

Attorney:

I think we're done here, then. My office will send you the video and other information for your investigation.

Steve Alban:

You saw the security video that got leaked online! You saw the gym video! It's turned him into some kind of giant or ogre or something! He ripped a door off the hinges! He was responsible for what happened at that gym ...

Detective:

We're having a hard time believing—

Attorney:

I advise you to—

Steve Alban:

I don't give a fuck what you believe! He's always felt like he was weak, and now he's not, and he's ... he's a monster.

Attorney:

We're done here.

Workout

PUSH DOWN BIG TREES IN WOODS

LIFT BAR WITH 12 PLATES SIX TIMES

LIFT BAR WITH 12 PLATES SIX TIMES
LIFT BAR WITH 12 PLATES SIX TIMES
WALK AROUND WITH BIG ROCK
GET BIGGER ROCK, WALK AROUND UNTIL TIRED
PULL UP 10 TIMES
PULL UP 10 TIMES
PULL UP 10 TIMES
RUN AROUND (HATE RUNNING)

FOOD
GREEN STUFF
HORSE
DOG
DOG
RACCOON
SNAKE
RACCOON

NEED SPOTTER. CAN'T HIT PR WITHOUT SPOTTER. BORING WORKING OUT ALONE. WILL GO SEE STEVE. PHONE BROKE. GO SEE DAD AND CALL STEVE. ME HAPPY, NO LONGER PUNYSMALL. MASSIVE GAINS!!!

Dispatcher: 911, do you need police, fire, or medical?

911 Caller: Police. He's here!

Dispatcher: What's your address?

911 Caller: [address redacted]. It's between [address redacted], by the county park.

Dispatcher: Please repeat the address.

911 Caller: [address redacted]. By the county park.

Dispatcher: OK sir what is the emergency?

911 Caller: My friend called, he's here and he says we're going to have to work out!

Dispatcher: 911 is for emergencies only—

911 Caller: I know that! My friend is the guy who killed those people at the gym! He's huge!

Dispatcher: Sir, you said your friend is what?

911 Caller: He took something and it turned him into ... I don't know, something! And he killed some people, and he wants me to work out with him.

Dispatcher: Sir, can you get out of your house?

[Smashing sound at door]

Voice in background: Steve! Workout! [roaring sound, clanking metal sounds] Brought real weights!

911 Caller: [screaming, retching]

Dispatcher: Sir, I am dispatching police to your location, please stay on the line. Are you on a home line or cell?

911 Caller: [clattering sound from phone]

Dispatcher: Hello?

911 Caller: Help! Help! Vic! No!

Dispatcher: Sir, police are on their way!



Voice in background: No slacking! Take green stuff! Get big!

[spilling and choking sounds in background]

Dispatcher: Sir?

Voice in background: *[roaring sound]* Massive gains!

End



The Punishment of Jurgen Shurke

By Frank Oreto

I am being punished.

Captain Jurgen Shurke closed his eyes and thought of his nightclub in Berlin. He hummed a bit of forbidden jazz and could almost smell the heady mix of tobacco, brandy, and beautiful women that once filled his nights. A hot iron hissed against damp cloth from across the room. The scent of starch-laden steam robbed him of his illusions.

Jurgen stared balefully at the diminutive soldier, who acted as his valet as well as his second in command. "The men say you once studied for the priesthood."

Lieutenant Reuig stood barely five feet tall. Round wire-rimmed spectacles made his eyes seem too small for his large head. He set the iron upright and carefully hung the wool trousers on a wooden clotheshorse before answering. "Yes, Sir, I attended seminary, but my father... he believed patriotism outweighed piety."

"Fathers." Jurgen thought of the Polish farmer he'd hanged a week before. How the skin sagged from his old neck, remnants of a long-gone plump affluence. The man had screamed curses and defiance at Jurgen as if he longed for the rope. The language was foreign, but the tone reminded Jurgen of his own father. He'd not been sad to see the man's face darken as the noose cinched tight.

"Well, my little priest. You perhaps will understand my predicament better than most. Do you know why I am here?"

"Our orders are to ferret out the rebels of Prolz," the lieutenant said.

"Ah yes, the Rebels of Prolz. Rebels so cunning and stealthy, they never attack, never light a fire, never leave a single trace. Almost as if they did not even exist." Jurgen made a sound of contempt like a low growl in the back of his throat. "Yes. Those are the orders. But I did not ask what our orders are, little priest. I asked, why am I here? Why is Jurgen Shurke, famed impresario, here in this bombed-out crater of a village, when I should be currying favor in an office in Berlin?"

The Lieutenant did not answer, and Jurgen had not really expected one. "You must know the story of Bathsheba and King David. Yes?"

"Yes, sir."


"That is why I am here. King David saw a woman and had to have her despite the fact she was married. The inconvenient husband was sent away to die in a war. Not such a grim tale if you're king. But I am no king. So, when I seduced General Wielding's wife, the bastard sent me to the front. But then I did a very rude thing, Lieutenant."

Jurgen waited for the question but heard only the hiss of the iron. "Well, ask what the very rude thing was? I can not hold up both sides of this conversation."

"What rude thing did you do, sir?"

"I lived. And so, the general has sent us all here to seek the invisible rebels of Prolz. He must think if a bullet does not find me, then he will bore me to death. Or perhaps, if winter comes and the rebels have not been found, we will all starve. There are only so many escaped cows roaming the abandoned fields." Jurgen rubbed a hand over his face. "I am being punished."

From the street came a high-pitched wail like the cry of a hungry child, followed by the sound of the sentry's gruff challenge. Jurgen stepped forward, pressing close to the window. One of his



men stood before a bent gray-haired woman holding the handles of a wheelbarrow. A long-handled spade lay across it. The pair spoke, while their shapes cast mad shadows in the light of the sentry fire. The wailing had been the sound of the barrow's ungreased wheel as it turned. Jurgen heard it again now as the sentry lifted a hand in farewell and the old woman guided her barrow down the street.

"Lieutenant Reuig, come here." They both stood in the window, watching the old woman push her barrow around piles of rubble as she made her way.

"So, a villager goes out late at night and our sentry... waves at her?!"

"It is only Frau Rebholz." Reuig leaned closer to the glass. "She goes to the cemetery."

"The cemetery, at night, with a wheelbarrow?"

"Yes, sir, every night. She and her husband were the groundskeepers. A family position, passed on from generation to generation. The husband died before the war."

Reuig stepped back from the window. "Frau Rebholz does not meet with rebels, if that is what you believe. I have followed her, watched what she does. Both the church and the graveyard were heavily shelled. She fills holes. Levels gravestones. Prays for the dead."

"At night?"

"Yes sir. She cleans and cooks for us during the day. I assure you—"

"You assure me of nothing but your own incompetence. The woman knew you followed her. Of course, the rebels did not meet with her then. But now that you ignore her..."

Jurgen took his trousers from the clotheshorse and dressed in the still damp uniform.

"I thought you didn't believe there were any rebels," said Reuig.

Up to that moment, Jurgen had not. But now he felt something warm and unfamiliar inside himself. This must be what hope feels like. Maybe there were people hiding in the fields and woods around Prolz. Perhaps not steely-eyed rebels yearning for German blood. Just hungry peasants, too afraid of the soldiers to come into town. It wouldn't matter. If Jurgen could find them, his orders would be fulfilled. He could report back to central command and call on favors owed him. I'll be in Berlin by Christmas.

"Have the men fall in, Lieutenant. We are going to this cemetery. And I will find my rebels."

"But sir—"

"Now, Lieutenant."

A few roughly made torches lit the soldiers' way as their heavy boots beat out a rhythm on the road's hard-packed soil. Fields of unharvested hay grew to either side, tall as a man's chest, somehow untouched by the shelling.

"How far, Lieutenant?" The men had taken only a few minutes to form ranks, but the old woman was faster than Jurgen thought. He'd not caught sight of her yet.

The lieutenant marched beside his commanding officer, head down, speaking in a low murmur Jurgen could not make out.

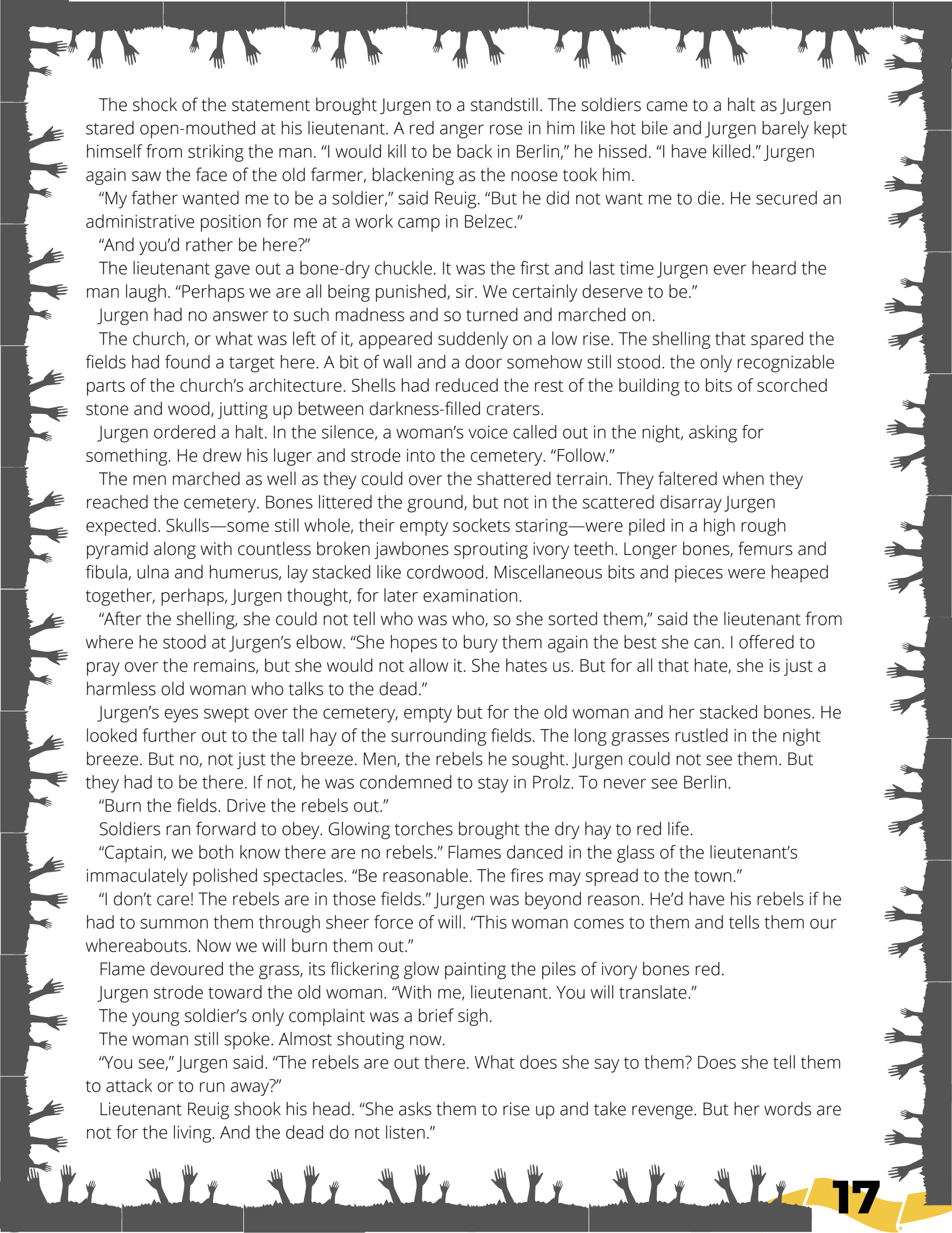
"I asked how far?" Jurgen recognized the name of Jesus in the Lieutenant's low words. "Are you praying? You'll face God one day, little priest, but right now, you have me to obey. How far?"

The Lieutenant raised his head. "Another half mile, sir." The young officer's skin shone parchment-pale in the torchlight. "I asked to be here, sir."

"You pray for odd things, lieutenant."

"Not in my prayers, sir. I mean..." Reuig paused, as if preparing himself for something difficult.

"Earlier, you asked why we were here. As for me, I asked for this. Not to be here on this road, but to be sent to the front."



The shock of the statement brought Jurgen to a standstill. The soldiers came to a halt as Jurgen stared open-mouthed at his lieutenant. A red anger rose in him like hot bile and Jurgen barely kept himself from striking the man. "I would kill to be back in Berlin," he hissed. "I have killed." Jurgen again saw the face of the old farmer, blackening as the noose took him.

"My father wanted me to be a soldier," said Reuig. "But he did not want me to die. He secured an administrative position for me at a work camp in Belzec."

"And you'd rather be here?"

The lieutenant gave out a bone-dry chuckle. It was the first and last time Jurgen ever heard the man laugh. "Perhaps we are all being punished, sir. We certainly deserve to be."

Jurgen had no answer to such madness and so turned and marched on.

The church, or what was left of it, appeared suddenly on a low rise. The shelling that spared the fields had found a target here. A bit of wall and a door somehow still stood, the only recognizable parts of the church's architecture. Shells had reduced the rest of the building to bits of scorched stone and wood, jutting up between darkness-filled craters.

Jurgen ordered a halt. In the silence, a woman's voice called out in the night, asking for something. He drew his luger and strode into the cemetery. "Follow."

The men marched as well as they could over the shattered terrain. They faltered when they reached the cemetery. Bones littered the ground, but not in the scattered disarray Jurgen expected. Skulls—some still whole, their empty sockets staring—were piled in a high rough pyramid along with countless broken jawbones sprouting ivory teeth. Longer bones, femurs and fibula, ulna and humerus, lay stacked like cordwood. Miscellaneous bits and pieces were heaped together, perhaps, Jurgen thought, for later examination.

"After the shelling, she could not tell who was who, so she sorted them," said the lieutenant from where he stood at Jurgen's elbow. "She hopes to bury them again the best she can. I offered to pray over the remains, but she would not allow it. She hates us. But for all that hate, she is just a harmless old woman who talks to the dead."

Jurgen's eyes swept over the cemetery, empty but for the old woman and her stacked bones. He looked further out to the tall hay of the surrounding fields. The long grasses rustled in the night breeze. But no, not just the breeze. Men, the rebels he sought. Jurgen could not see them. But they had to be there. If not, he was condemned to stay in Prolz. To never see Berlin.

"Burn the fields. Drive the rebels out."

Soldiers ran forward to obey. Glowing torches brought the dry hay to red life.

"Captain, we both know there are no rebels." Flames danced in the glass of the lieutenant's immaculately polished spectacles. "Be reasonable. The fires may spread to the town."

"I don't care! The rebels are in those fields." Jurgen was beyond reason. He'd have his rebels if he had to summon them through sheer force of will. "This woman comes to them and tells them our whereabouts. Now we will burn them out."

Flame devoured the grass, its flickering glow painting the piles of ivory bones red.


Jurgen strode toward the old woman. "With me, lieutenant. You will translate."

The young soldier's only complaint was a brief sigh.

The woman still spoke. Almost shouting now.

"You see," Jurgen said. "The rebels are out there. What does she say to them? Does she tell them to attack or to run away?"

Lieutenant Reuig shook his head. "She asks them to rise up and take revenge. But her words are not for the living. And the dead do not listen."



Tears ran down the woman's face as she turned and spoke to Jurgen.

The lieutenant dutifully translated. "She says the dead will not fight for people who have forgotten them. Sir, leave this woman to her cemetery. We can still put out the flames."

"No!" Jurgen drew his luger, pointing it at the old woman's frail chest. "I will kill her!" He shouted the words at the fields and the rebel forces that must be there. "If you do not show yourselves, she dies. Surely, she is mother or grandmother to one of you."

Flames leapt into the night sky, but no figures emerged to fight or beg for the old woman's life.

"If you won't save her, perhaps you will avenge her."

Too late, the woman realized what Jurgen was about to do. She turned and stumbled away from the man with the gun.

Jurgen shot her twice in the back.

The bullets tossed her forward to land face down in the cemetery's black clay. Lieutenant Reuig ran to her, kneeling beside her fallen form. His prayers came in a harsh, angry whisper.

Jurgen stood panting, feeling impotent now, despite the gun in his hand. There was no one left to shoot.

A soldier—one of Jurgen's—shouted and pointed. Not at the empty burning fields, but at the ground itself. Clumps of dark soil were moving, slowly at first, then dancing like beads of water on a hot griddle.

Jurgen looked down at his well-polished boots. A chipped stone cross slid past him as if caught in a swift current. Flickers of white tumbled through the moving dirt. A stream of dead men's teeth.

Lieutenant Reuig stood and walked toward his commander. Bone, dirt, and broken stone turned end over end, flowing around the young officer as high as his knees. The lieutenant no longer prayed. The only sounds now were the crackling of flames and the rattle of bone and rock as they tumbled against each other.

"What is happening, Lieutenant?"

"She begged them, sir. I would follow her here each night and watch as she pulled the bodies bit by broken bit from the craters their graves had become. She begged the dead to rise and destroy us for what we'd done to her home. And when they would not, she cursed them. She said the dead had forgotten their children just as surely as their children had forgotten them. Only she remembered. Only she still honored them. Frau Rebholz was the one person the dead cared about enough to avenge, and you killed her."


Above the body of the old woman, black earth, gray stone, and ivory-white bone spiraled as if in the grip of some silent tornado. Slowly, the cemetery of Prolz shaped itself into the form of a rough-hewn colossus. Its body bristled with spears of splintered bone. A shifting heap of leering skulls served as its head.

There was no need for Jurgen to give the order to fire. Mausers spat bullets in a rapid cadence. The shots sank into thick black dirt or ricocheted off granite and bone. Five hundred years of the village's dead stepped over Jurgen and his lieutenant and attacked the firing soldiers.

A wide stone heel ground two men to red pulp. A long arm swept through the fleeing soldiers. Bodies toppled, their flesh torn open by the jagged ends of a thousand bones.

Jurgen shouted orders at his lieutenant, but the young officer ignored him. He only gazed at the destruction of his fellow soldiers with a beatific smile on his lips.

The man is mad. Jurgen turned away. A rough plan formed in his head. He had always been a survivor. While this impossible cemetery creature was busy destroying his men, Jurgen had a



chance. The fields were aflame, but he could go through the ruins of the church to the road and perhaps still outrun the thing.

Jurgen had taken three steps when something grabbed him around the waist, and he tumbled to the ground. Not the cemetery creature, the lieutenant. They rolled, Jurgen kicking free and bringing the Luger up.

"Yes," yelled lieutenant Reuig. "A bullet will serve just as well as that thing you brought to life."

"You're mad."

"No. I am guilty. There was no madness in the work camp. Our actions were thought out and efficient. We all must pay for our sins, Captain."

"You can pay for both of us. I am going to Berlin." Jurgen's Luger spat fire three times. The holes appearing in a neat line across lieutenant Reuig's chest.

Jurgen leapt to his feet, ready to run. But the dead lieutenant's last act had robbed him of his chance to escape. The Cemetery of Prolz stood before him now. The torn and broken bodies of Jurgen's men hung on hooks of barbed bone from its hundred-foot form.


The creature moved slowly, as if sure of its final victory. It extended a giant hand. Talons of bone pierced Jurgen's belly. He felt the steady tearing pressure as his bowels shredded. Red foam and curses flowed from his mouth.

Jurgen was hefted into the air until he hung before the thing's head. A fissure formed among the leering skulls, creating a wide, rough mouth. Inside that mouth, thousands of broken jawbones studded with ivory teeth grated and ground against each other with a low rumble, like the sound of distant shelling.

With the last of his strength, Jurgen pressed the barrel of his Luger to the roof of his mouth and pulled the trigger. The toggle bolt rose, then jammed tight. No bullet would end his pain and terror. As the enormous hand propelled Jurgen toward the maelstrom of grinding teeth, he closed his eyes and tried to remember the smell of cognac and beautiful women. But the memories would not come.

I am being punished.

END



First Report of an Un-typeable Insectoid Species from a Human Cadaver at the Anthropology Research Facility

by Jason P. Burnham

Author's note: After repeated attempts at various peer-reviewed publications, including rejections for 'violating scientific integrity', I have made the decision to post this paper to the bioRxiv as I do not believe it will ever be accepted at a peer-reviewed journal. Nobody believes the events documented herein to be real. Despite repeated requests, no other parties involved in the research at the University of Knoxville Anthropology Research Facility (aka the "Body Farm") were willing to attach their names to this manuscript.

-Jennifer Anderson

Introduction

Since 1972, the University of Knoxville has studied the decomposition of human remains at the Anthropological Research Facility (ARF). The campus includes over 10,000 m² of wooded plot where bodies are placed to understand human decomposition in a variety of conditions, including studying the life cycle of various insects. This is useful not only for the pure discovery aspect, but also in forensics—determinations of how long persons have been deceased based on what insects are growing from the cadaver have been used in murder cases. Herein, I will describe the condition and progress of one of these cadavers at the ARF.

Methods

On the 17th day of April of the year 2025, a cadaver was taken from the cadaver lab to the wooded area of the ARF. Although we are not allowed to look into the details of individual donors, as far as I know, this was an ordinary corpse, dedicated to the University of Knoxville by normal legal processes.

This donor was placed fresh (i.e. unfrozen) in a heavily wooded thicket in between two hills. The body was placed unclothed and supine within the thicket, at which time the leaves of the surrounding trees were green. A moderate amount of sunshine reached the body through the trees. This was the first time a body had been placed in this specific location.

As is standard practice, the body was photographed and catalogued every day, and the data were entered into my field journal and an electronic field journal, which operated via cell phone hotspot wireless. Other data points included scavenging activity at the site as determined by trail camera recordings. The first larval colonization event was documented with photographs of visible eggs on the donor.

All insects were categorized per standardized protocol, as described previously. Briefly, larvae of each phenotype were collected from prominent larval aggregations, par-boiled, preserved in 70% ethanol, characterized, and any atypical larvae allowed to develop in the laboratory setting for genetic confirmation.

The Owings-Steadman method was used to calculate the expected time to larvae deposition and emergence based on local conditions and previous experiments at the ARF. Based on this methodology, the time to blow fly larvae development for this body should have been 7 days.

Results

Blow fly larvae developed one day later than predicted by the Owings-Steadman method (i.e. day 8). On day 10, all visible blow fly larvae had disappeared in the absence of adult emergence. This was documented with photographs. As documented by the trail camera, the



donor did not experience any vertebrate scavenging, which is atypical. In fact, no vertebrates were noted in the thicket throughout the duration of the donor's decomposition.

On day 14, four new prominent larval aggregations developed on the head and neck of the donor. The aggregations were atypical in appearance for blow fly larvae, with a shimmering blue-black iridescence. Despite multiple attempts to photograph the larvae, however, I was unable to capture a photograph, each image showing something approximating the gray, black, and white static of an old television set to an empty channel. The larvae from these aggregations were taken to the lab after standard processing. No genetic material could be identified, despite repeated samplings. The par-boiled, ethanol-preserved larvae decayed in their containers, leaving only a blue-black liquid. One technician in the laboratory observed this liquid to eat through its container and five millimeters of lab bench before it evaporated. I disposed of the remaining larvae in biohazard so as to prevent further laboratory destruction.

On day 17, the donor's larval aggregations continued to grow, each now measuring approximately one centimeter, with the total mass of the aggregations beginning to obliterate the donor's head and neck anatomy.

On day 18, the inferior-most portion of the head and neck was coated in icicle-like blue-black accretions which hung toward the ground. No adult insects had yet been isolated from the aggregations. Up until this point, I had considered I might be observing a heretofore undescribed insect, which was quite exciting. However, upon witnessing the accretions, I brought two colleagues with extensive donor body experience to the site to confirm the oddity of my findings. Upon their viewing of the body and its accretions, they were both stunned into a catatonic-like state. I had to cease all data collection and drag them to the ARF. My colleagues' bodies walked when continuously propelled by my guiding hand, but neither spoke, nor seemed to be mentally present in any way after having seen the body. I took photographs of my colleagues to document the rigid, statue-like postures of their catatonia, but these photographs also did not develop properly.


My colleagues were taken by ambulance to McConnell State Psychiatric Facility, where they remain at the time of this writing. I have been denied visitation or updates as to their current status, but as it is a voluntary facility, it is my assumption that if they had recovered, they would have been released some time in the last six months. I read extensively in medical journals about similar conditions and as best I can tell, my colleagues seem to have developed a rapid onset, extreme form of Parkinsonism. Pathophysiologically speaking it is impossible to develop this instantaneously, but it is the closest diagnosis that matches their symptoms, even if it is merely giving a name to a constellation of findings without an explanation: idiopathic immediate-onset extreme Parkinsonism.

On day 21, the blue-black accretions had grown into the ground, or perhaps the roots of the thicket had grown up to meet them, as the two had fused together. It was on this day that I made note of a decrease in sunlight into the thicket as a result of increased branch density.

On day 22, despite my reservations about continuing to return to the site, I visited the body again, somewhat out of morbid curiosity, and somewhat in service to my catatonic colleagues, as I felt extremely guilty at their state of mind after seeing something I had called them to.

On day 22, sunlight no longer reached the body through the ever-increasing density of the thicket's branches. The larvae had all but disappeared, replaced by the blue-black accretions.

On day 23, the accretions had thickened to roughly two centimeters each and had had the effect of lifting the head of the donor off the ground with a clearance of three centimeters at the



most cranial aspect, which gave the donor the appearance of having lifted their head ever so slightly off the ground to look at me. Needless to say, I had my reservations about returning on day 24, but nevertheless, I did.

On day 24, I discovered the un-typeable insectoid species alluded to in the title of this manuscript. The head of the donor had ceased to be, completely replaced by the accretions, which looked something like blue-black basalt columns of varying heights. The remainder of the body was in an appropriate state of decay for a day 24 body according to the Owings-Steadman method. In the center of these pillars sat a hexagonal accretion, upon which rested the un-typeable insectoid, a description of which follows.

The blue-black creature lay motionless atop the accretion. It appeared to possess a head, thorax, and abdomen, hence my use of the term insectoid. The whole carapace shimmered, even in the dark of the thicket with my flashlight extinguished. It measured 12 cm from head to posterior abdomen. It made no attempt to flee, and in fact, made no movement except one during my time examining it. From both the thorax and abdomen extended two paired sets of hinged legs, for a total of eight, each of which ended in a sticky red residue, which I probed with a sterile-tipped applicator. The applicator began to decay before my eyes upon probing the residue, and I dropped it immediately.

From the head extended six clawed appendages, and a seventh in the center which had a more fluid appearance. Probing this appendage resulted in the creature's only movement during my examination. The probe was taken by the appendage, which moved somewhat similarly to an octopus tentacle, grabbing it and bringing it in toward its carapace. This probe decayed into a sticky red substance similar in appearance to that at the end of the creature's legs.

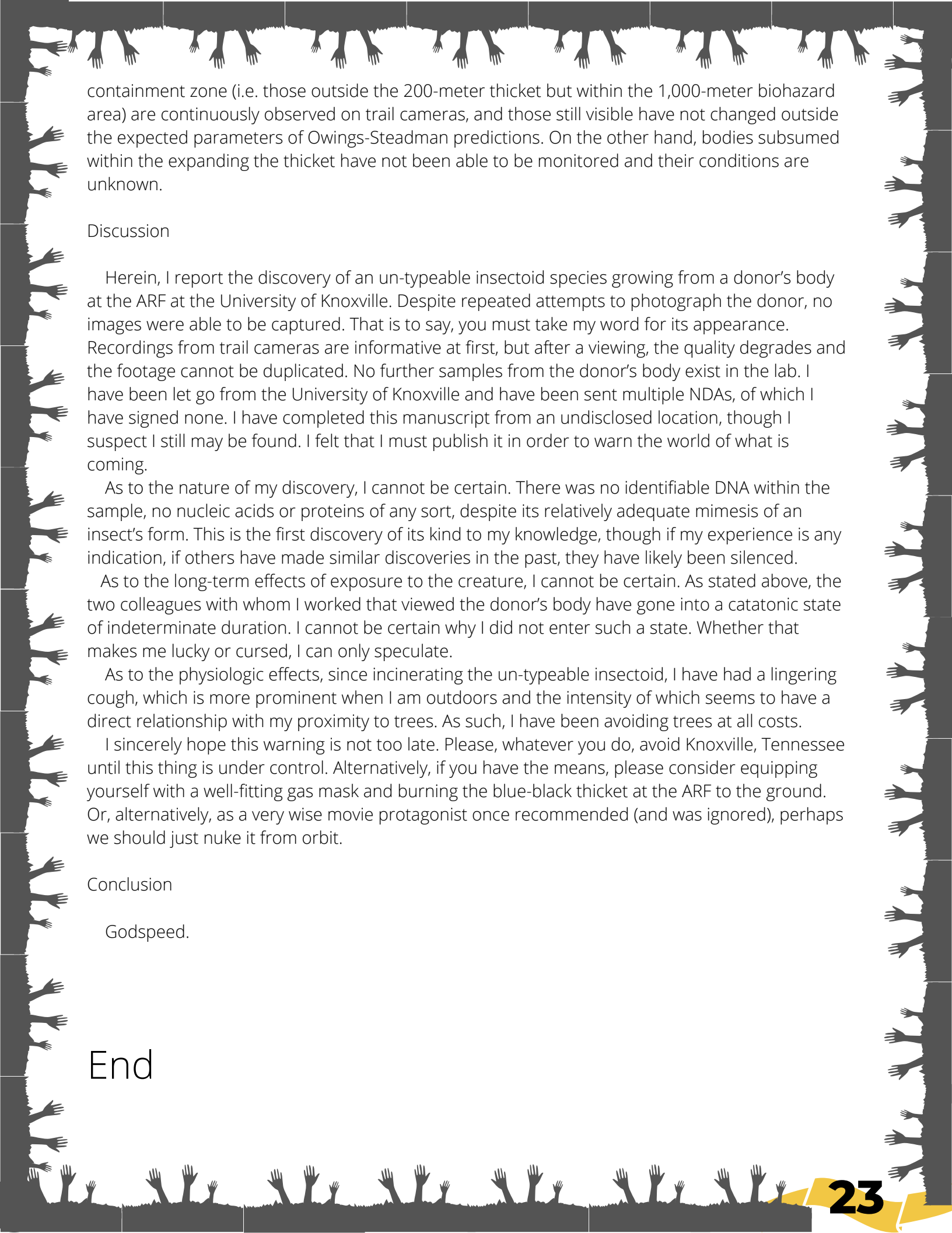
At this point in the examination, thinking I was in a bit over my head, I contained the creature in a biohazard specimen glass case and placed it in a steel kit.

I returned this kit and specimen to the ARF lab to attempt to process the specimen by par-boiling and ethanol preservation. However, by the time I arrived at the lab, the glass case had eroded within the steel kit. Upon discovery of this, I decontaminated the kit in the biohazard room, including an incineration protocol. During the incineration, I had hallucinations of my own death, including my body erupting into creatures like the one found in the thicket donor's former skull. The incinerator, despite being sealed off from me, produce a noxious blue-black gas that induced a thirty second coughing paroxysm that nearly caused me to black out.

On day 25, I elected not to return to the thicket to directly observe the donor. Instead, I utilized the game cameras trained on the thicket. Visibility was poor, owing to the increased thicket density and the lack of sunlight, but some visibility remained on night vision settings.

The donor's body remained in its headless position from day 24. The blue-black basalt-like columns appeared nearly unchanged. An identical creature to the one that I had collected the day before had appeared on a second hexagonal column-root-accretion. I observed the camera footage until it stopped. At the time of the last frame, the un-typeable insectoid remained in place on the column.

Upon attempted direct visualization of the donor on day 26, I was unable to locate the body. The thicket had expanded and there was no opening between the trees by which I could enter. The blue-black iridescent quality of the larval aggregations had spread to the branches of the thicket. At the time of the writing of this bioRxiv manuscript, the thicket has expanded to a total diameter of 200 meters and has a hexagonal shape. The ARF has designated this area a biohazard and no personnel are permitted to come within 1,000 meters. Bodies within this



containment zone (i.e. those outside the 200-meter thicket but within the 1,000-meter biohazard area) are continuously observed on trail cameras, and those still visible have not changed outside the expected parameters of Owings-Steadman predictions. On the other hand, bodies subsumed within the expanding the thicket have not been able to be monitored and their conditions are unknown.

Discussion

Herein, I report the discovery of an un-typeable insectoid species growing from a donor's body at the ARF at the University of Knoxville. Despite repeated attempts to photograph the donor, no images were able to be captured. That is to say, you must take my word for its appearance. Recordings from trail cameras are informative at first, but after a viewing, the quality degrades and the footage cannot be duplicated. No further samples from the donor's body exist in the lab. I have been let go from the University of Knoxville and have been sent multiple NDAs, of which I have signed none. I have completed this manuscript from an undisclosed location, though I suspect I still may be found. I felt that I must publish it in order to warn the world of what is coming.

As to the nature of my discovery, I cannot be certain. There was no identifiable DNA within the sample, no nucleic acids or proteins of any sort, despite its relatively adequate mimesis of an insect's form. This is the first discovery of its kind to my knowledge, though if my experience is any indication, if others have made similar discoveries in the past, they have likely been silenced.

As to the long-term effects of exposure to the creature, I cannot be certain. As stated above, the two colleagues with whom I worked that viewed the donor's body have gone into a catatonic state of indeterminate duration. I cannot be certain why I did not enter such a state. Whether that makes me lucky or cursed, I can only speculate.


As to the physiologic effects, since incinerating the un-typeable insectoid, I have had a lingering cough, which is more prominent when I am outdoors and the intensity of which seems to have a direct relationship with my proximity to trees. As such, I have been avoiding trees at all costs.

I sincerely hope this warning is not too late. Please, whatever you do, avoid Knoxville, Tennessee until this thing is under control. Alternatively, if you have the means, please consider equipping yourself with a well-fitting gas mask and burning the blue-black thicket at the ARF to the ground. Or, alternatively, as a very wise movie protagonist once recommended (and was ignored), perhaps we should just nuke it from orbit.

Conclusion

Godspeed.

End



The Seventh Visit of Kl'Charthoth

by Daniel Roop

The worst thing about Steve dying during his first time with Mandy was that when the tentacles spouted out of his mouth and wrapped around his throat, that's when we knew he was racist. Mandy ran from the woods back to the cabin where we were hiding out. We felt bad for her, but we also made her stay on the porch as we comforted her through the door. It was a good choice. A few minutes later, we heard the wet stretching sound from her mouth, then she was dead, too.

Let me explain. August was the seventh time Kl'Charthoth had contacted humanity. The first time, in February, he apparated, two-hundred stories tall, tentacled and dripping, and ate Chicago. People, pizza, Michigan Avenue, Michael Jordan statue – all gone. A gaping crater in Illinois. His second visit he chose 1,000 random people to receive one billion dollars. The third visit he appeared on every screen in the world, looking like a human game show host, and announced he had turned every dog on earth into time bombs, primed to blow in sixty seconds. People ran from their pets as the dogs chased them, thinking it was a game. Parents raced to drag their children away from Buttons or Rex, sometimes failing and dropping desperately on the dogs like covering a grenade. 150 million people died. The fourth visit he took away the color blue, leaving the ocean, the sky, and lots of corporate logos a lifeless gray.

After Kl'Charthoth's first visit people went Lovecraft crazy. Everyone was reading cosmic horror, looking for answers. Between my biotech classes I did the same and learned some things worth knowing.

Two months ago, at Kl'Charthoth's seventh visit, he held a stethoscope in his tentacles and said, "This month's gift is an airborne virus with 100% mortality! But good news — only one person is infected. Aaaaaaaaand — you can only catch it if you're racist."

Things Lovecraft Got Wrong #1 — Elder beings are terrifying because they don't even notice us. We're ants under their cosmic boots. Bullshit. I understand it's psychologically damaging to feel disregarded and helpless but come on. In the jungle, the lion who notices me is a shitload scarier than the lion who doesn't. Kl'Charthoth notices us, and apparently thinks we're amusing.

We never discovered patient zero for the virus. It spread so quickly. That first day people felt naively safe. That night there was a high-profile news debate show with ten panelists from various backgrounds discussing the virus. It began as a civil conversation and ended with all ten dead on air, asphyxiated by the purple tendrils pouring from their mouths, winding around their necks. The upcoming presidential debates were cancelled to avoid any public relations disasters. And deaths.

Things Lovecraft Got Wrong #2 — Everything. About. Race. Dude could write his ass off. He was so gifted. But good lord, this virus would have taken him in ten seconds.

By the second week, most discourse went online as people began to isolate and quarantine. People debated what "racist" meant. Ideological Racism vs. Systemic Racism. Racism vs. Racial Bias. Scholars familiar with the Implicit Association Test warned that we were all at risk. Plenty of folks ignored the warnings and died, tentacled up, believing until their mouth ripped open in a fleshy writhing mass that they weren't racist since they often waved to the Black guy at work.

My biotech study group fled to an isolated cabin together, but after the Steve and Mandy incident we all agreed to stay in our separate rooms. Now we coordinate kitchen and bathroom times. We FaceTime a lot. I trust them as much as anyone. But still.

So many people have died, so many you never would have expected. We don't know the actual number. No one's going around to count.

Scientists have done the best they can, but as far as incubation period before mortality, it's always shifting. Weekly, Kl'Charthoth will pop up on screens and yell, "Remix!" The virus structure shifts. An infected person may have two weeks to live, or two minutes.

Things Lovecraft Got Wrong #3 — These beings are unknowable. No, this asshole is knowable. He doesn't have weird geometry. His appearance doesn't melt my brain. But his motivations are unknowable. That's scarier. A face that reads as relatable, then performs unfathomable, unconscionable actions. That's horror.

My parents both died. My two closest cousins, gone. My favorite singer, actor, and professor choked out. If I wasn't isolated, would I be gone? What's worse – death, or knowing who you really were?

If you think internet comment boards had been ugly in the past, you should have seen the vomit people spewed that first month. Arguments about race, conspiracies about who to blame, everyone in their weaponized echo chambers ready to fight. The shock of these deaths at first made us hard-edged and brittle. But that brittleness never fully broke, and those hard edges became honed. We mourned, we honored the dead, and we bonded. People began to try to educate each other instead of blaming each other. Kl'Charthoth, in a way I thought was impossible, a way he didn't intend, was bringing us together.

Things Lovecraft Got Wrong #4 — These beings are invincible cosmic gods. Wrong. They're not gods. They're just strong. Last week groups hiding in Barcelona and Hong Kong isolated an immutable segment of the virus. No matter the remix, it doesn't change. We're getting closer.

Kl'Charthoth, you scare me, but I need you to hear this. I think, to you, we are unknowable. You can change appearance, you can get taller, but I don't think you can grow. We can. And we're going to figure this out. We aren't what you think. We aren't mud and blame. We are starstuff and electricity. We are solar-forged souls. We're cosmic too, bitch, and we're coming for you.

END

Tiff and Lainey

#4

By Alina Wahab

HEY, DO YOU
HAVE ANY
OTHER COOL
VAMPIRE POWERS?

LIKE, CAN YOU
TURN INTO A
CLOUD OF BATS OR
SUMMON WOLVES?

HMMM... WELL I
CAN'T SUMMON
THEM, BUT I CAN
TURN INTO ONE!

WANNA SEE?



WHOA! THAT'S
SO BADASS,
I BET YOU LOOK
SUPER FEROCIOUS!

POOF

WHADDYA
THINK!

WELL THAT'S NOT
EXACTLY WHAT
I HAD IN MIND,
BUT IT DOES
SUIT YOU, HEH.





That Flesh is Heir to

A good number (though not all) of lit mags have yet to put out a position statement on submissions from artificial intelligence engines at the time I compose this. I've been thinking about writing one for a while, and have honestly been procrastinating. So I thought about why, and I think I have an answer. I think we're actually discussing a different, more complex question, and it's a question that I don't really want to answer.

But I'm going to anyway, because even this obscure, poorly funded rag should have a policy.

Spoiler alert: We're not going to accept submissions from AI...for now.

Essentially, I have two philosophical beliefs working against each other here. So I'd like to flesh out this problem in this space so I can clarify the magazine's official stance while also hedging for any changes we might make in the future.

As an editor, I believe the author is dead. I've never read the article which explains this concept (by Roland Barthes), but I have watched the Crash Course literature video in which John Green gives a summary of it. And I'm here for it. I'll take it a step further, then, and argue that the most radical interpretation of this stance dictates an acceptance of AI-generated art. If the artist is dead, and all that exists is the piece, then it literally doesn't matter if a human created it. If it moves you, it moves you.

I also think a lot about what art is. Any definition that I, a scientist and philosopher by education, and a teacher by trade, make up would be crude. But I don't see "created by a human" as a necessary precursor in any definition. I think computers can make art. I think that's the question we're all really asking: Are computers allowed to make something that we then allow to be placed in the "art" category? I say yes. And in a vacuum, I don't see anything unethical about consumers purchasing art created by AI.

But the *in a vacuum addendum* is important. I read a really great article a while back (which I cannot find) about why Robert Nozick's thought experiment viz a viz Wilt Chamberlain is stupid. The article posits that Nozick also uses the Chamberlain example in a vacuum, not accounting for actual market fluctuation and research-based business practices. I find this analogous to my feelings on AI. We have to take information on its face as it plays out in real time.

So how is AI playing out in real time? Well, it's taking work away from artists, firstly. That's sort of the thrust of the issue, as far as we're concerned. It's not taking away huge chunks of work yet. Most creative fiction is still written by humans. But graphic design artists are quickly seeing their field overtaken. And I imagine that soon companies will be using AI to write copy (ad copy, articles for newspapers, descriptive information, etc), if they're not already.

But there's an even nastier side to all this, which we must also consider as an organization. AI creation is also exploitative in its current infrastructure - ChatGPT takes up so much processing power it's a carbon sinkhole; workers in other countries are paid in pennies to give feedback to the system; and AI uses other forms of work like fanfiction and blog posts that aren't currently monetized, but it's making money off of their work anyway.

Recently, the Screen Writers Guild of America requested its affiliates to refrain from using AI in creative writing. As we've mentioned previously, we're pro-union here at The Maul. Therefore, we will also be refraining from accepting AI-generated submissions. You can still use a word processor for editing purposes. We don't really care. But the author has to try and hammer out that first draft on their own.

I just want to say one more thing. There may come a day when we accept AI submissions. That day would come when an ethical AI infrastructure takes firm hold. AI would need to have developed a system to compensate the artists whose work has affected their algorithms, and there would have to be fields of jobs created that use AI to increase the number of creative writers in the world. That day may never come. But we also know that in 1920, 60% of America's workforce were farmhands. That number is now 2%. Agricultural technology eventually allowed the job market to shift to new types of work. AI may have the same effect. But anyone who's read *The Grapes of Wrath* knows that we need to be careful about how that transition takes place.

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