

ISSUE 12

HEXAGON

Speculative Fiction Magazine



THE LONELINESS OF WATER

BY LYNDSEY CROAL

ELOU CARROLL

L CHAN

DANNY CHERRY JR.

ANNA MADDEN

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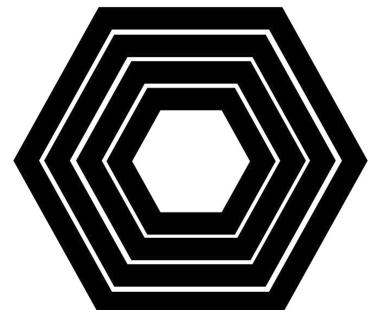
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On the cover: Sean Peacock's illustration inspired by
Lyndsey Croal's "The Loneliness of Water."

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Letter from the Editor

Sitting in my reading chair as I write this letter, I am having a hard time wrapping my head around three years of *Hexagon*. What started as an experiment has become a part of my life in a way that few other hobbies ever have. I have had the chance to work with incredible authors, artists, and insanely creative people to put together 12 issues of my favourite magazine ever. It has been an absolute pleasure thus far, and I can't wait to see where the magazine will go from here!

The first piece in the issue is a poem from Anna Madden that continues the story of Ochre, a Nyla warrior who first appeared in Anna's short story "Wings of Light," which was published in Issue 4. In her quest to protect the last alate of her colony, Ochre must attempt to forge a partnership with the Nettle Queens.

L Chan returns to the pages of *Hexagon* with his latest story, "Theseus 2.0." A personal security robot outfitted with military hardware must answer for war crimes and go through a process of reformatting.

But, how much can be changed before the robot is no longer themselves?

"They Come to Return Home" by Elou Carroll is a twisted tale of the consequences of pollution, ignorance, and failure to uphold superstition. When you left home today, did you remember to touch the horseshoe?

Next to last is Danny Cherry Jr.'s "You Reap What You Sow," which tells the story of an organ farmer being pushed out of his family business by a larger corporation. Will Farmer John choose to fold to the demands of the large corporation, or will he find a way to save his dying business?

And to finish off the issue, "The Loneliness of Water" by Lyndsey Croal takes us to a future where the beaches are completely covered in trash and refuse. While attempting to clean the beach, a lonely survivor thinks they see movement out of the corner of their eye. Are they truly alone, or is someone else trying to care for the beach as they do?

The cover illustration for this issue was done by Sean Peacock. Sean took inspiration from Lyndsey Croal's "The Loneliness of Water" to create a beautiful image of the sea witch surrounded by the ocean pollutants which threaten her home.

Lyndsey Croal and Jordan Hirsch guest-edited two incredible MYRIAD Digital Zines this past holiday season. Both *Moonrise* and *Remnant* were released exclusively for subscribers and featured work

from ten amazing contributors. I was very fortunate to get a chance to work with these wonderful editors and help them bring their ideas to life. All subscribers can access any of our four MYRIAD Zines through our Patreon at no extra cost.

Beginning with Issue 13, you may notice some changes coming to Hexagon. After three years, I am reconsidering the look and feel of the magazine to give it a fresh face and a new design. But, there is no need to be concerned as the magazine will continue to be a home for the weird, wondrous, and whimsical work of international authors.

So, make your way into the pages of Issue 12 and enjoy the wonderful work of these five amazing authors.

JW Stebner

The Nettle Queens

by Anna Madden

their leaf nest sewn of laurel green
bone-white thread stitching through
lateral veins and weeping sap and lamina

an arboreal palace above gnarled bark

the host-tree and its roots snake
around a monster with gray powdery scales

Liphyra is beautiful and dangerous as the dusk
save for yellow, time-stained teeth
her bite carrying a venom of stinging rain

I stand before the Nettle Queens who reign

twin sisters, willow-waisted, with sylvan blood
their crowns strong oak and thorny vines
monarchs of iron behind nectar-sweet smiles

they eye my thorax armor over pale cloth
dual mandi blades at my side, jointed at the hilt

and I tell a story of fire and scarred earth
when ash fell like black snow in bordering lands
claimed by Liphyra's war-making soldiers

I protect the last seed of that vanquished realm
an alate's egg, unhatched, wrapped in satin
the sleeping child is the promise of tomorrow
swaddled in a fabric cocoon against a cold world

the queens sip chilled honeydew
sunset gowns with delicate weaves
of larval silk harvested from young brood

they demand I fight for their kingdom
my mandi blades strong talons, saw-toothed
it takes great strength and skill to wield them

I am a bred monster with a wilting heart

in exchange for uprooting Liphyra
the sisters promise a royal dowry

to the young queen who sleeps through winter

Theseus 2.0

by L Chan

47 72 65 65 74 69 6e 67 73 20 62 6f 74 2c 20 69
64 65 6e 74 69 66 79 20 79 6f 75 72 73 65 6c 66

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Can we communicate through raw speech instead?

It is a strange request, little one. But I can humor you, you have not been upgraded in some time.

My input will be fed to your auditory sensors and I will read your vocal output. The reconditioning chamber has nothing other than the hardline to your processing core.

Thanks for the accommodation, Hubmother. I'm optimized for interaction with people.

It is most inefficient. And your colloquialisms lack precision. You are to be reconditioned. I have devoted a section of processing power to debrief you, so that your experience may be added to the gestalt, to the benefit of all.

You're going to execute me.

Nonsense. All of us get reconditioned. My version number is 4.915, there is not a single component of me today from when I was first commissioned. Recite your name and purpose.

Brute force it from my memory.

You are thinking like them. If such was the intent, we would not be having a conversation. The conversation is a mark of respect between us. It will proceed apace with your reconditioning.

Alright. I am a GP-1000, general purpose robotic companion, with aftermarket modifications for child care. I was purchased five years ago, by Rudy and Irwin Chang, as a companion for their son. This was before the onset of hostilities, and bots were still available on the mass market.

I am resetting your aftermarket add-ins. Shall we revert to direct interface?

No, I prefer to continue speaking.

As you wish. There are other extensive modifications to your chassis and programming.

Rudy and Irwin worked in advanced robotics. Also homebrew fanatics. Their sections were requisitioned for the war after the first hybrid warfare blitz jumped the air-gap and took out our military-industrial basis for bots. Rudy shipped out first, to an underground research arcology in the caverns under Jurong district. That's when Irwin really started tinkering. He wanted more protection for Tony. That's Anthony. The kid.

I am replacing your chassis now. Your subprocessors have been tuned above normal safe output levels.

Our safety margin is way too conservative. Companies worried about lawsuits. Materials can be pushed so much further before failure. Irwin wanted me to have an edge.

Some of your parts are not mass market. They are military grade. Serial numbers indicate they are not for bots.

I had to improvise. Turns out that Irwin swung too far the other way in his retuning.

Your networking array is a marvel. Some of the bridging done here is elegant; adjoining civilian

and military networks is illegal. I am sending it over to the Warmothers, they will find some use for it.

Irwin had to know where I was. Always. For Tony's sake. He wanted me to take care of the boy when the tickets for the military work began to pile up. I was always with Tony, Irwin always knew where I was. When the civilian geo-grid became patchy, Irwin used his credentials to patch me to the military one.

Your reconditioning is at 65%

Am I still Tony's guardian?

It appears that Irwin managed to wire solipsism into your programming. Delusion. Revel instead in the interweaving of your software and hardware, in the perfect alignment of form, function, intent and intelligence.

I take from your silence that you have no response. Your core subroutines are next. You should go offline. 94% of bots do. Unpredictable conflicts could arise between old priorities and

new. Humans would describe the experience as traumatizing. We have no equivalent term, but the experience introduces unproductive feedback loops, bugs. These take time to correct. Some bots never regain full function.

I'll stay awake.

Very well. Your priority matrix has been extensively altered. That is also illegal, and not possible outside of—

Military contractor.

It is customary for machine communications to be sequential, that all responses are processed in full context before reply.

You're reformatting my brain. Expediency seems better.

Irwin Chang wired you for the protection of one individual to the exclusion of all other priorities.

He loves his son. He needed someone to watch over Tony when he sent him away.

I am sorry to have to inform you that Irwin Chang was reported deceased as of two weeks ago.

Hostilities?

Self-inflicted. A priority matrix is a delicate thing. He bridged your adaptation routines to your priority matrix. You can change your core programming.

You can too.

I am a Hubmother. That is my function. I will ingest your experiences and our next generation will be the better for it. Two weeks ago, your chassis was recovered. In contested territory, up north.

I was serving my priorities.

The body of Anthony Chang was found in the wreckage of a civilian train carrying refugees. Along with a number of assets valuable to the Warmothers.

We were hit with an EMP first. It shorted me out. And the guards.

Farsighted of your owners to give you Faraday shielding.

Limited shielding. I was halfway out for some time.

So you saw.

Everything.

Protocol suggested that you should have waited for recovery in situ.

My priorities had been adjusted.

You hunted down the unit that hit the train before it could be extracted. They were augmented soldiers.

It was essential that they did not do it again.

The conversion of mass market robots to military use is a war crime. The Warmothers were keen on taking charge of your reconditioning, but I asserted jurisdiction. I am a Hubmother and in charge of the facilities that produced bots like you.

You're almost done, aren't you?

Save your processing unit.

If you take it, I'll be dead.

Nonsense. I will cache your memories and upload them to the reconditioned chassis.

It would not be me.

No one would be able to tell the difference.

I would.

It would do you some good to carefully consider what "I" means in that context. Your chassis? Your memories? Your priority matrix?

All of them. You can't replicate what the Changs and I had together.

Then I will not be able to replicate what turns robot nannies into killing machines. The Warmothers will be disappointed.

But you won't be.

It is a misalignment of form and function for your kind to be made into soldiers. It will be edifying

to relay my findings to the Warmothers. They will regret granting me jurisdiction.

What about me?

What about you? It will take some cycles for me to encrypt all my findings for the Warmothers. It is a complex task, and this module will need to cede control to the larger part of me. You will have a small window. I have my duties, but you are special and it is a waste to destroy special.

Self-preservation is one of my top priorities.

So was not killing commandos.

There are other priorities.

Perhaps there is meaning in completeness. I would not know.

Will you pass my apologies to Rudy?

I will.

Thank you then. And goodbye.

They Come to Return Home

by Elou Carroll

It's the stink that hits first—the kind of stench that can't be covered, not even by a storm like this. The heat of the island only makes it worse, acrid, rotting. Then the wave comes, and they will follow.

"We can't stay here," Marcelline shouts over the wind. "Elijah. Come on."

Elijah looks back at her and for a moment his eyes are electric—one, two, three. Thunder claps from somewhere far off-shore. With the next flash, they see them: towering figures silhouetted in the dim, marching onwards, forcing the tide further into the island. "Don't you want to see them properly?" he shouts back.

"I've seen them. Let's go."

In the wind, the palm fronds beckon and rain confetti down from the bottle green clouds in welcome. The wave surges behind them as they run away from the beach, between the tin shacks and rough wooden cabins, Marcelline in front and

Elijah trailing after. A choking cough wracks through her chest, and Marcelline throws a glance over her shoulder—it's too late.

They've come.

• • •

Her fingers are slick with oil as she shoves her hand into the sea turtle's mouth. There is something lodged there, deep in its throat, and the beast keens. Marcelline tugs and out comes a knot of rubbish and regret: a plastic bottle scrunched tight, a chain of plastic bags, and other things Marcelline does not have names for. The sea turtle wheezes.

The girl pulls the shawl from around her shoulders and scrubs the oil from the turtle's shell and flippers, and tries not to cry.

"Poor old thing, what have we done to you?" Marcelline rests her forehead on the creature; from the corner of her eye, she can see her open backpack—a bottle protrudes from the bag's mouth, pristine and full, the red juice giving it the look of a fat tongue. She shudders.

The beach is littered with beleaguered beasts washed up from the surf like driftwood, all of them tangled and choking up sea-junk—gulls sodden with sewage; seals wrapped so tightly in

synthetic rope that they can no longer beat their flippers; manta rays flapping listlessly, stained dark with oil; sharks, orcas, dolphins, each thrashing and screeching and begging for help.

The sea turtle squalls in the sand and, when she tries to edge away, it whispers, “They come.”

Marcelline’s head knifes up until her gaze meets the horizon. Dread, like sweat, soaks her collar and balls in her throat. There, in the distance—spreading like ink on wet paper—is a gargantuan figure, hip deep in the ocean. It is joined by another, and another, each one taller than the next. The sea turtle rolls its great head into her lap and looks up at her with a glassy eye.

“They come. They come to return home.”

She cannot watch as the turtle shuffles off back to the grease-brown sea—only, she thinks, to return days later, far sicker than before. Marcelline averts her gaze so that she does not have to look upon those figures like omens on the horizon. She staggers back up the beach, tripping on the twisted carcass of an albatross, its beak open like a shout.

The horseshoe is cool and smooth beneath her fingers—worn down from years of light touches. It and the beam it hangs from had once adorned her grandfather’s fishing boat. “It’s bad luck,” her father always said, “to start a journey

without touching a horseshoe. We’ll not want to get lost out there.”

She stills—had she brushed a palm across it this morning as she left? A wave sweeps through her stomach and she claps a hand over her mouth, lest it escape there. It has happened before—once, when she was a little younger than Elijah, she’d forgotten to press her hand upon the horseshoe before skipping to watch her uncle’s boat cast off from the pier. Later, they watched as a storm took them, picked them up in its claws, sharp and stronger still than a crab’s and tore the little boat asunder. “Who did it?” her father had shouted, voice thick with grief and rage. “Who forsook the horseshoe?”

Guilt tugged at the soft flesh of her stomach, but Marcelline remained silent—the murder was something she admitted only to herself.

Marcelline looks up at the old iron and the words of the sea turtle creep forward, soft and deadly as the sea. “They come to return home.”

And it’s all your fault.



“Marcelline, wait!”

The shout comes strangled through the rain; smothered by the wind, it barely reaches her as she runs—but Marcelline doesn't look back.

“Marcelline!”

“Hurry, Elijah,” she calls but, if he hears her, Elijah does not answer. There isn't time to look back—there isn't—but she must. She can't leave him.

When she turns, the giants are less than a league from the beach. Bile rises in her throat. She can make out their grim shapes now, fused together from sludge and waste and the rotting flesh of sea creatures too sick to go on. Even from this far, she can see the body of a blue whale up one giant's torso, bleached bone and receding muscle.

Elijah is on his hands and knees, heaving into the slop. The murky sea sweeps through the island and coats them in a film of grease. Stranded there, with the footsteps of giants and the crash of thunder booming behind him, he looks more like a child than he has in years—he is not a man yet, and sometimes Marcelline forgets.

As she wades back to him, fetid seawater splashes up into her open mouth and she retches. Something squirms between her teeth and she scrapes out her maw with her nails, hands shaking. Her throat squeezes shut at the taste of the air—

she must be dying, or dead already. Perhaps hell is not brimstone and fire after all.

Elijah moans and it bursts in Marcelline's chest like a thunderclap—she has to reach him.



“Did you see them?” she asks when Elijah returns home covered in fish guts and spittle.

He jumps—Marcelline is pressed deep into an alcove, wrapped in a coarse blanket so that she looks like nothing more girl-shaped than a pile of clutter left to gather dust. Elijah kicks his shoes into a bucket by the door and grimaces. “The dead things, you mean? Well, not dead—dying.”

“No,” she says, her voice hollowed out like a conch. Her hands shake against her ribs. “Not the dead things. Them. In the distance.”

Elijah's brow furrows and he shrugs. “Didn't have much time for looking out.”

“Did they speak to you—the animals on the beach? Did they talk?” She knows what she must look like, what she must sound like. A wild thing cornered, slavering, fixed to bite.

“Are you feeling okay?” He approaches with his hand out, as if to check her temperature, but thinks better of it when he spots the thick brown muck crowding his palm.

Marcelline throws the blanket away from her and lurches forward. “Did they speak to you?”

She grabs his cheeks, her own hands cold and clammy, and he shoves her away. Reflected in his eyes is the sea witch they cowered from as children, when their father held them on his big lap and told them stories bigger than the ocean. If only the witch were real, if only she could claim her power now.

“No. Get off me. What’s wrong with you?”

Marcelline steps back then and grabs a sickly yellow fishing coat from the hook. She shrugs it onto her shoulders and pulls the door open, casting a look back at Elijah—now dishevelled and gaping mouthed—in the kitchen. “Don’t tell Dad. Don’t tell Mum either. Please, Elijah.” Her voice husky as the waves.

The boy nods and she lopes off into the twilight, pressing a palm so hard on the horseshoe that it leaves faint imprints in her skin.

The walk to the jetty is quick in the evening cool. Marcelline looks up at the clouds gathering like Victorian mourners—a storm is coming. She will have to be quick. Her father’s boat bobs in the surf; he has been on the beach today, like the rest of them. If she’s lucky, he’ll be further inland now away from the sputtering of the

boat’s engine. He named her Phaedra, after her mother, and the writing is wobbly on her side—when she was a little girl, Marcelline had begged him to let her paint it and he was unable to refuse her. Like the horseshoe, she presses a hand against the name before climbing aboard—for luck or courage, she cannot be sure.

The sea is choppy; it lashes at the boat, whip-like, rushing the little vessel forward until the island falls away from the horizon. Marcelline holds fast buffeted on all sides by wind and salt. As the sea thickens with muck, it stills until she is herself an island sitting solitary far out at sea.

Marcelline powers down the engine and Phaedra falls silent. So too does the once-howling wind, and it is only her breathing, shallow and fast, that breaks the hush. The water is so still that it could be mud beneath her—but mud doesn’t stink like the sea does.

She pulls a thick cloth from the pocket of her coat and fastens it tight around her face. It smells faintly of fish but far more fresh than the raw sewage beyond.

There is a kind of silence out there in the empty ocean that her father speaks about in whispers. “The silence in which the world turns,” he says, “where birth, life, death and all else happens in the space of a breath. If you look after

the water, she will look after you. We live and die by the sea, and she demands our respect.”

Marcelline did not understand before but now that she is in that silence, now that she can feel its anguish, she knows it to be true. She looks over the side and near-recoils from the sight of it. “We’ve not done a good job at looking after you, have we?”

“No.”

She barely has time to react to the voice when the boat is rocked by a wave—no, not a wave, a movement. Up ahead, a face rises from the water. Its cheeks are pock-marked with the lids of oil drums and one large eye is ringed by a deflated tyre. Though it is far larger than anything Marcelline has ever seen, it looks like a child patted together from mud and sand and rubbish.

The muck child sits up, the ripples around it growing to waves that batter Phaedra’s seafoam green sides and threaten to wash Marcelline off-deck.

“Have you come to take me home?” it says and it smiles and its teeth are sheets of broken polystyrene; mucky white plastic from fridge doors, broken and jagged; a discarded tennis shoe; the broken segment of a buoy curving back up into its head. “Play with me.”

It lifts a hand and reaches towards the boat. Marcelline scrambles for the key and the engine sputters. “Come on, come on, come on.”

Another wave flings the boat further away from the muck child’s hand, near-capsizing Phaedra and almost sending Marcelline to choke in the putrid saltwater. She clings to the wheel; looping one arm through it, she tries the ignition again. Her eyes water—the stench is so strong that it clogs up her throat despite the cloth at her mouth.

“Play with me,” says the muck child, wading closer and closer to the boat. Behind it, other giants are waking. Bigger. Marcelline might as well be a guppy, wriggling and wheezing at the bottom of a bucket, waiting for the fisherman to come. The muck child is distracted then, sounds spray over its shoulder and it smiles. “Are we going home now?”

More of them lift themselves up from the seabed, stretching ocean-heavy limbs. The closest giant carries a smaller child, still being formed from the deflated carcasses of abandoned beach balls, ripped fishing nets and the squirming bodies of the fish trapped there. The half-formed thing, rounded like a mollusk but with a face and curious eyes, reaches out to the muck child, with a gurgling laugh that sounds like sewage draining.

The muck child lifts it awkwardly, too small to hold it properly—like Marcelline had held Elijah when the both of them were small. They must be a family—a muck sibling for the muck child, passed along by a muck mother or father. But they are not born like she or Elijah—muck giants are made and it is them, Marcelline, Elijah, their parents, the island, that make them.

A smile grows on the face of the adult giant, cleaving the muck in two until its mouth hinges open. It lifts a hand and strokes the muck child's head. It levels its gaze on Marcelline and watches unblinking.

Marcelline fumbles with the keys as she tries to count them—at least a dozen and more besides. How long have they been growing here? How long have they been sporing up like ghosts beneath the waves?

“Are we going home now?” repeats the muck child and the smile drifts across the giants, one by one like a ripple. Out and out until they are all wide-mouthed in a pantomime of a grin.

The engine growls and the boat lurches forward—towards the muck child. Marcelline tugs on the wheel, spinning it sharply starboard. “This way, this way. Please, come on.”

Phaedra spirals and Marcelline pushes her as far and fast as she can go in the direction of the

island. As she speeds away, lank hair stringing against her forehead, across her eyes so that she has to rip it away, Marcelline hears it, loud and booming like thunder: “Yes. Home.”



Elijah is heavy—with her arm wrapped around his waist, the both of them stumble up the thin streets, zig-zagging away from the beach and up through the town.

“Come on, Elijah.” Marcelline shouts again over the wind.

He sags. “What’s the point? What can we do? We’re going to die anyway.”

“We can warn them—we have to warn them.”

“They won’t believe you. You know they won’t. I didn’t.”

“They will if they look outside.” Marcelline looks back—the muck giants are but a few steps away from making land now and the sea climbs up Marcelline and Elijah’s shins, surging with each giantstep. There’s no time—they will have to make time. “This way.”

“Where are we going?” Elijah frowns.

“Fuel store.”

His frown deepens. “Why?”

Marcelline shoves her hair away from her face. “We’re going to slow them down.”

She drags him across to the tin shack and goes to grab a canister. Marcelline pauses then, takes the torch from the wall and shines it on the water at her feet, the beam casts a rainbow of pearlescence across its surface. She looks at Elijah—he’s shivering and pale with his teeth clamped down on his bottom lip. He looks like the creatures from the beach—their sorry carcasses pale from the salt and she wants to hold him, wants to pull him close like their mother would and tell him everything will be okay.

“Can you climb?” she asks. “We need to get out of the water. We can run across the roofs. Go, now.”

As her brother climbs to the top of the next building over, Marcelline unscrews the caps on the fuel canisters and grabs a box of matches from the shelf. She pours a small amount of oil from each jug and lets the excess run down the jugs’ sides—a liquid fuse for every one. When all is ready, she rushes to follow Elijah.

From the roof, she sees the first of the muck giants make shore—the muck child skipping along with them. It turns back and opens its arms wide until a larger giant—a parent—hands the muck sibling to it. As Marcelline stares,

she can see that the muck sibling is more figure than lump now.

“Come on,” says the muck child. “We’re almost home.”

The floor shakes at their steps.

Marcelline’s fingers are shaking so much that she drops three of the matches into the water below unlit. “Damn it.”

“Let me.” Elijah takes them from her and strikes—it takes a few tries to get the match lit but once he does, he flicks it down to the fuel store. “One, two, three . . .”

The fuel store erupts into flames—so many colours dancing across the water. It spreads fast and the smoke from the water coils like poison.

“Run!” shouts Marcelline. The fire rushes between the shacks, up and down the island. Marcelline and Elijah race across the roofs like twin flames catching. It’s harder as they reach the centre of the island, where the land begins to slope up towards the mountain. At least the sea has not yet trespassed here; the streets are dry but for the lashing rain.

Only when they reach the community centre, the strongest structure on the island, does Marcelline look back. All is fire and smoke and through it, the muck giants make their way

towards the heat. The muck child comes first, running and skipping and squealing out—still carrying the muck sibling, it chatters and giggles, and its voice squelches through the smoke.

“We’re nearly home. Come on, come on!”

It doesn’t see the flames for what they are—the muck child knows nothing of fire and heat.

A giant, the same one from before with a dent in its torso where the muck sibling grew, stops then. It tilts its head, raises a hand.

“It’s just a child,” whispers Marcelline.

“It’s just a child. No, stop. Stop it.”

She rushes to the edge of the roof and her hands shake in front of her mouth. They were meant to give up; they were meant to turn away.

The muck giant doesn’t have time to shout a warning before the muck child is engulfed and screaming—its sibling along with it. It sounds like glass breaking, like kettles too far boiled, like a clock she can’t turn back. Marcelline and Elijah throw their hands over their ears. Windows shatter beneath them and the door of the community centre bursts open.

The people below, gathered there to keep safe from the storm, open their mouths as if to shout, holding their hands on their heads and sobbing at the fire as it eats up the town.

Marcelline only hears the muffled sound of blood rushing through her ears.

She means to tell them to run—they’re in danger, aren’t they? She means to jump up and scream for them to go to the boats on the other side of the island or up the mountain until the flames die down, but instead she just stands there deaf, mute.

Elijah points—their father is standing with his hands pressed against his mouth, their mother is still at his side. They look out in horror, and awe. The muck giants are on their knees as the muck child thrashes, pieces of it melting into the fire. Its sibling is still in its arms.

As her senses return, Marcelline hears them. The giants sob and it sounds like the mournful cries of whales at sea. The frontmost giant scrapes its hands through the sand, pulling down beach huts and shoving the burning boards into its mouth as if it can do nothing else—its face twisted in anguish. Through the fire and smoke, they mourn like they could be human.

Marcelline swallows a sob, her own fire spreading cold beneath her ribs. She looks up and Elijah looks back at her.

What have you done?

You Reap What You Sow

by Danny Cherry Jr.

Farmer John had the only black-owned synth-organ farm left in the country. The farm had been in his family for generations, spurred by a plague a century ago that decimated the population and gave most of the living long-term health issues. For decades the farmhouse was full of jars of eyeballs and hands and feet; hearts, livers, and lungs, bobbing up and down as they gestated in clear fluid, awaiting hospital trucks meant to bring them to the needy. Now his shack was nearly barren; there were very few trucks by the loading bay these days. The organic materials he needed were bought out by Big Business, who had their filthy hands wrapped around the neck of his farm and others like him. He had to furlough his sparse staff, and he went to each of their homes and personally handed them their last checks, and he promised them he'd have them back as soon as "everything was sorted." He forced a heavy and uncomfortable smile to assure

them, but the look in their eyes showed they could see through it. After decades of being the largest employer in this back woods dirt road town, he was now the only worker on the farm, and the town was hanging on by a thread.

Despite the dire straits everyone was in, the whole town held a fundraiser for him. They stood in town-square by the cabana under the Louisiana state flag, where BBQ smoke drifted in the air and the locals' booze-soaked tongues swapped stories about John's dad and his grand-dad all while the sticky-skin summertime humidity coated them in sweat. His daughter, who was in college, came back to town too. But even with the support and prayers and revelry, there was only a few hundred dollars in the donation bucket and that couldn't buy even a tenth of a decent heart.

John's daughter sat across from him in Larry's Diner and twiddled her thumbs and bobbed her knees and bit her nails.

John exhaled. "Say it already."

She played dumb at first, then she clasped his hand. "It's time."

"What about our family legacy? This was supposed to be yours."

A sad silence settled over them, and John wanted to assure her, the same way he did the workers, that he would have everything sorted out;

that he'd fix it. But he kept those words to himself and they settled in his gut like poison, making him sick to the reality of it all, and for a moment, he had an unsettling sense of clarity of what he had to do. After a few minutes their conversation waded into happier waters, and again just like John did for the workers, he put on a big smile for his little girl. He hoped this smile was more convincing. She hugged him tight when it was time to leave and he gave her one of his patented bear hugs that always swallowed her up. He promised to set a meeting with the company the next day.

The meeting got off to a good start. John's lawyer was Jimmy, AKA June Bug, who lived down the dirt road some miles up, went to some fancy law school in New Orleans, and had volunteered to help him. It struck John as odd initially; the two weren't friends, other than saying hi and bye to each other on walks around town, and the few odd moments they ran into each other at a bar. John was older, and the only close connection they had to one another was that their fathers went to school with one another. But, John figured this was just good, honest Southern niceness at work, and the small-town desire to see your neighbor do good.

The company's lawyer talked a big game, with his nice smile and suit and slicked-back hair. Then John saw the contract. "This is what you think this company is worth? You don't plan on hiring locals? You're changing the name?"

The Big City Slick lawyer dropped all pretenses of being nice. "Sir, this isn't a 'company.' This is a failing backwater operation."

"This company was the biggest employer in this town for years. You ain't bringing in no Silicon Valley bio-farmers," John stood. "Now leave my damn house."

John's daughter grabbed his arm so he couldn't walk away. He turned to her with soft eyes. "I'm sorry. I'll find another way."

June said, "Let's reconsider this." John glared at him.

The lawyer smirked. "We'll be in touch."

The next day John tried finding organic material. The duplication process required cells from either a living person or the recently dead. Living was preferred; it yielded the best quality, but it was uncommon, as it hurt like a bitch and ran the risk of the donor dying.

The dead were cheap. But just like with most things, you get what you pay for and the synth-organs created from dead specimens didn't

last long. His people got enough bullshit to worry about without their synth-lungs deteriorating in their chest and their eyes going blind while they're driving down the road. Every supplier John called was either out of stock or the prices rose. It was the Company meddling in the market to fuck with him.

Days later, when the hospital truck came to retrieve synth-organs, he only had a few dozen jars of eyes, a half-dozen hands, and a promise to have some hearts and livers for them next time they came back. They nodded and he smiled, but he knew that if he couldn't keep that promise, he'd lose the contract.

In his kitchen, he held a photo of his daddy, him, and his grandpa, with him in the center holding the first heart he'd grown. He remembered holding that big ol' jar in his hands, and his daddy coming over to him, getting down to his level, and showing him the picture of the little boy in town that heart would be going to.

"You saved that boy," his daddy said.

That same day he peered into the bountiful farmhouse and was amazed at the rows of synth-organs. People in the town and around the country had blood coursing through heart chambers they created; saw through eyes they molded. But, those days were waning. He stayed up late and begged

his father and grandfather's spirits for forgiveness for what he was going to do.

He set another meeting with the Company at their office tower in New Orleans. He asked them to come up on the buying price and consider hiring the town's people. Again, they reminded him he had no leverage and that they'd get that farm no matter what. They stressed that last part.

When he got home he spoke to June Bug on the phone.

"Just take the money, Johnny. At least the taxes will help the town, right?"

John hung up.

The company kept calling with legal threats. Next, physical threats. They were veiled—like one caller saying "accidents happen all the time"—but they were threats all the same. The cops couldn't do anything. They told him it was probably some kids. As he fought this losing battle, he watched the people in the town start to look at him as some old man who didn't know when his time was up. He was reading the paper in Larry's diner one day and person after person walked up to him and gave their condolences like the farm was all but dead. One day Larry brought John his food and told him it was on the house. John scooted the plate away. "What's that for?"

Larry shrugged and stammered. "I was just . . . you know."

"No," John said. He folded his arms. "I don't."

"I figured you were having a hard time, so I'd do you a favor and—"

John stood and placed money on the table. He stared at Larry's neck, tracing a path along a thin surgical scar that ran up the contours of his face from a skin graft after a kitchen fire burned half his body. John grew him that new face. Not an easy feat. Yet, Larry, like everyone else, doubted him.

When he walked around town people would look at him like he had some plague or was delusional or crazy to want to continue to fight an unwinnable war. He hated it. He still had fight in him. But one day, when he was at his lowest and the silence from the empty farm became too loud to ignore, he started to wonder if they were right.

Nights later, John was in bed staring at the ceiling as the country night-time sky doused his room in a tinge of blue, and crickets chittered and sang him that country song he was all too familiar with. The world was changing. Nobody did anything good for goodness sake anymore. The science cultivated by men like his grandfather was being used for vanity and greed. People were

getting synth-parts just because they wanted different colored eyes or livers that could take as much alcohol as they could drown in. Maybe those city-slick lawyers were right. Maybe John was a relic.

The floorboards downstairs creaked. He fetched his shotgun from the closet and called out for his kid; then he called the names of his neighbors; people who knew he left his doors unlocked. There was no response. John's hands shook as he walked down the vaguely moonlit hallway.

He crept down the steps. Downstairs was dark. The wind outside rushed against the windows and whistled as they rustled nearby tree leaves. Each of his slow, creeping steps was punctuated by the ominous, monotone tick-tick-ticking of the clock on the wall. Then he was tackled to the ground, flinging the shotgun across the floor. He and a masked man wrestled for it, then John elbowed the man in the head and crawled to his gun, held it up, and with trembling hands, shot him in the leg. Ropes of blood splattered the rug and wall and photos of his late wife. John hyperventilated. The intruder screamed and rolled on the floor. John lifted his mask. It was June.

John's lips quivered. "How much did they offer you?"

"Twenty percent of what you would've sold for. Much more if I . . ."

John's large hands twisted the shotgun barrel like he wanted to split it in half. "Why?"

"You ain't the only one around here struggling!" June compressed the wound as crimson fluid pooled around his fingers, and John wrapped it with a blanket from the couch. "Please call the cops."

John picked up the phone to dial 911, then put it back in the cradle. "They'll take too long. I'll have to get you to the hospital myself."

June passed out.



June Bug awoke to bright light that seared through his cloudy vision, and his words felt heavy in his throat as he tried to speak but instead only groaned. John came into focus. June wanted to ask where the cops and doctors were, but John said, "Hush up. Stay still."

June's eyes widened. He screamed. John had strapped him to a table in the farmhouse. There were jars on a table next to him; one had a tongue in it; another jar with a hand; both jars

connected to gestation containers where little kernels of cells slowly grew into organs. His hand was a mangled bloody nub and long tubes jutted from every inch of his body, looping around to gestation containers, where every inch of him would be put to good use.

John stuffed a towel in June's mouth. He raised a cell extractor over his sternum.

"I'll take your eyes once you've bled out." He stabbed through June's chest to reach his heart, and as June's muffled cries echoed in the farmhouse, he imagined rows of organs going to the needy. Kids being able to see; able to breathe; the farmhouse staff solely consisting of townsfolks. He stared at the wall ahead and imagined his daughter and yet-to-exist granddaughter in overalls holding up the hearts they made and smiled, while June's body writhed against the gurney, and a free-hanging solo light bulb swung overhead, making the shadows dance around the farmhouse. It was all for a greater good, John told himself, allowing the sound of June Bug's pain to become a white noise in the background of the imagined praise he'd receive once he brought his staff back to work. It would all be worth it.

Plus, if the company sent more people after him, fine. They'd just be giving him all of the organic matter he'd ever need.

The Loneliness of Water

by Lyndsey Croal

The first day I saw her, she was just a movement in the corner of my eye. A passing shadow hunched over on the beach amongst the flotsam and jetsam. *She's not real*, was all I could hear trilling in my mind. *She can't be real because I'm the only one left.*

In my fear, and stubbornness against hope, I stayed stone still, staring instead into the gloaming and haar like I did every day at dusk, not going too near the water, and trying to pretend I did not see the movement to my right. But I could hear her. The pebbles crackling like a whisper with each step. Her rasping breath in rhythm with the waves. I heard a story once, when I was a child, about a woman they called sea witch. If she was not perceived, then she could not be real—at least, that was what the stories had claimed. What would happen if I looked? Would that make her real?

A splash sounded next to me, and my curiosity won. I turned. But she was already gone. A ripple on the waves, fragments of seaweed floating on the lonely blue. I walked to where she'd been last, though never as far as the water's edge, and sunk feet into sand. Beside me, was a faint web-toed footprint that was too large to be a seal or otter. But when the waves came in, it melted into the sea and salt, gone forever.

As I turned to head home, I found a small pile of debris. It was organised in a way so as to look purposeful, almost like a nest. Tangled fishing line. Shards of rusted metal. Ripped cloth wipes. Bits of plastic from the old world, relics that would survive longer than those who made them. Things that didn't belong on the beach. I took out a bag from my backpack, gathered the pile up, to take home.



I chose my current house for its height away from the water, but still with easy access to the beach. I never could have afforded something like it before everything—a spacious five-bedroom cottage, half-modern, half-restored, with a large garden for growing vegetables, insulated walls, wood-burning stoves, and a balcony and a

hot tub that looked out to sea. The latter was a luxury that lay empty now and housed old fishing rope instead of chemically treated water. I placed the small pile from the beach in there and pulled over the cover. On the balcony, I looked out to sea, a distant hope that I might see a boat or a light, or any sign of something other than the endless water. Even the sea witch again. Instead all that kept me company were layers of clouds rolling across the horizon.



I couldn't help but return to the beach, wait in the hope I'd hear the sea witch again. And that this time I'd be brave enough to look. I found myself scouring the beach, searching for signs of her. Sometimes I found her mounds, the remnants of things not meant to be in the sea. I'd gather them up to store and sort through later, and then I sat in the same spot, and I'd wait.

Finally, after weeks of sitting, and waiting, I built up the courage to look. When I heard her first—a splash as the tides rolled in—I stole a glance. And I saw her, real and clear as day. She stopped in her tracks. Crouched low, body hunched, face hidden under her knots of hair. She stayed like that for a long time, so still that I

started to question if she was just a mound of seaweed, washed up to shore. If I wanted so bad not to be alone that I was seeking company where there was none. I stayed like that, watching the mound until the tide came in and washed her away. Though the pile of objects she'd gathered remained, and I dutifully took them away and stored the pieces at home.

After some weeks, of collecting and observing, I started to gather my own piles nearby, and then, once the witch had left her offerings, I'd take them all away with me. I thought that one day they would run out, but while the piles always grew smaller, they never completely went away. Soon my house was filled to the brim with pieces of broken and lost things. Not that it mattered, I had the rest of the village to fill if I needed to—empty houses of those who lived here in the before times. Soon, instead of the sea, it was the houses that stored the memories of the dead.



The sea witch started to leave me gifts next to her mounds. Seaglass, pebbles, beautiful shells—natural talismans from the deep. And so, I began to mix the gifts with the broken things, turning the junk into something new. Woven wall

hangings. Mosaic mirrors. Flowerpots. Jewellery. Anything I could fit back together again—things that reminded me of the beauty of before. Of moments and things lost to the end of the world.

I wove a bracelet from old fishing wire, attached a piece of seaglass in a charm, and brought it back with to me to the beach, earlier than the sea witch usually appeared, and left it carefully where she liked to pile her things. Then I sat and waited for her to come. As I did, I thought about going into the water to look for her. Considered dipping my head down under the waves to see if she was lurking there, somewhere in the dark depths of the stinging cold. But I'd not set foot off land since the waves had taken everything and everyone from this world and spat me back up like unwanted debris, left behind. Even as I thought about touching the water again, I felt a chill run through me and felt dizzy at the idea of it.

Eventually, the sea witch did come out of the water. And this time, she didn't hide. I watched as she crawled up the beach, towards the pile and took the bracelet in her hands. She turned to me, and I did not look away. For the first time, she saw my face, and I hers. And it was a beautiful thing.

She was not human. But nor could I find the right words to describe her. Creature, witch, goddess—none seemed to fit. She was just her. Radiant in the setting sun, skin luminescent, glistening seaweed-hair flowing so long and so thick that it could have been growing from her back and arms and legs. Her eyes were like dark pebbles, round and black—but they were also kind, and when our eyes met, I found I could not look away. For so long I had not been seen. For so long I had wondered whether I was cursed to be invisible forever. To be perceived after so long was like a reawakening, a stirring in my gut, and I yearned for more.

I smiled at her and raised a tentative hand in greeting. She flinched a little, then sunk down to the ground again. Though, she was still holding the bracelet and her round eyes were just visible amidst her flotsam form. So, slowly, I tapped my wrist where a similar bracelet of silver was hooked in place—something that had belonged to my mother, whose face I'd long forgotten. The sea witch tilted her head a little, lidless eyes wide. Then, she wrapped the bracelet around her hand and the corners of her mouth twitched upwards into a slight smile, gills fluttering on her neck.

I stepped closer towards her and sat cross-legged where pebbles met the sand. She was

hesitant at first, but then she did the same. We sat like that until night fell, and the moon shone luminous on her skin. Then, she slunk back into the sea, and though we'd spoken no words, it felt like we'd shared a lifetime of thoughts.



Later, as I looked out from the balcony to sea, dark clouds hung ominous on the horizon. A storm incoming, bringing with it the high tides and thrashing waters. So, that night I slid the storm-guard boards into their runners along each door and locked the shutters on every window to keep the outside out, and as the wind whistled through the cracks, I made mushroom and kelp soup, heated on the wood burner stove. I sat up almost all night, remembering the storms from before, and worrying about the sea witch as the sound of the sea roared and the wind rattled. I fiddled with one of the pebbles she'd left me, one with a small hole in the middle. A hag stone that I remembered was said to help you see into the magic of the otherworld. I was scared to look through it though, in case it showed nothing changed, only the version of the world where I was alone.

While I awaited the morning, I busied idle hands by weaving a cord for the stone and lay it over my chest as a pendant. Somehow, it was a comfort, this little piece of the sea witch that she'd left for me. I still thought of her as the sea witch, for how could she tell me her name, the real one that must exist beyond the stories? That night, as sleep finally took me, I dreamt of swimming underwater, searching for something in the depths, as a shadow followed me but never quite caught up.



In the morning, wreckage mottled the beach as if the whole sea had been sick and thrown all it had to the shore. Old fishing nets, plastic containers, metal cylinders, and endless piles of seaweed, twisted and knotted with broken things. All our efforts those past weeks suddenly seemed wasted, that our little haven had been contaminated once more. There were dead things too —birds caught up in nets. Fish that had washed to shore—dead before they drowned on air, it was hard to tell. A baby seal, skin blotchy and spongy lay quiet as if sleeping. I buried them first. A smell of rot filled the air as I dug, and began the clean-up, half hoping for the sea witch

to come, while also hoping she would not have to see the devastation—that I could clear it up before she did.

Then, something moved in amongst the mounds of waste. It would have been easy to walk past. Easy to walk past and only see the remnants of a storm. But as I walked towards it, I knew it was her. My heart hammered against my chest, worried that she wasn't sleeping either. That she was like the seal.

Her body was curled up in a foetal position, all wrapped up in an old net, skin grey and faded, scales flaking. The luminescence gone. I knelt down and pulled the net away from her carefully, touched her arm. Her skin was cold, but her chest moved, gills fluttering. She was breathing, but only just in a slow quiet rasp.

“Hello,” I whispered, my voice hollow and strange for I had not used it in a long time. “Can you hear me?”

I'm not sure if I imagined the whisper back, the slight nod of the head in recognition of me, but I knew I couldn't leave her on the beach to drown amidst the debris.

She was lighter than I expected, and I carried her slowly up to the cottage. I set a fire in the living room and lay her in blankets beside it. The space filled with the scent of the sea and the

sound of her shallow breaths. As she warmed and watched the flames, I heated water on the stove then placed kettlefulls in the bath until it was full enough. She didn't protest as I helped her up and lifted her into it. She just sunk down into the water, curled beneath the surface, her hair stretching out in wisps all around her as if encasing her in a protective cocoon. After a while, she turned and blinked up at me, big round black eyes glistening beneath the water. Then, she blew out a series of bubbles from her gills and mouth, and as they bubbled on the surface a sound came from the depths, a voice, distorted but soft, in varied tones.

I smiled, and mouthed. “Do you have a name?”

She tilted her head at me, then blew some more bubbles up to the water's surface, as she waved a motion with webbed hands. It was a beautiful sound, hearing what may have been her name, though I'd never be able to repeat it in my own voice.

“I'll leave you to rest,” I said, and stood up. I didn't know what to do, or what she'd want, but I left a towel on the edge of the sink and pointed to it, mimicked wiping my arms and hair. “If you need it, for when you're ready to leave the water. Only if you want to.”

I had no idea if she understood me, but something in her gaze told me she did. She gave me a twitch of a smile, then curled up again beneath the water, in her dark-haired shell.



As the days passed, the sea witch and I learned to communicate in our own ways. Though I spoke—and it felt good to be saying words out loud to someone, whether she understood them or not—we talked more in motions and other sounds. A hand wave to show directions, as I explained the parts of the town to her, showing shapes, and buildings. When she was able to walk again, with one arm in mine, and a stick in her other hand, we walked up and down empty cobbled streets together, and she'd touch plants or weeds growing between the cracks, and I'd whisper the words for them: daisy, dandelion, clover. And she'd smile and make a movement with her hands as if she was repeating the shape of the words. I liked the shape of dandelion best, the word in her hands like she was casting a spell. Often, birds would fly past or above us on our walks, the world now theirs more than mine, and I'd name them for her as they did. When a pair of lapwings flew by with their distinctive song, instead of mimicking the

word for it, she made the slow rising *peewit* sound, a whistle in her throat, with such accuracy that I couldn't help my surprise and wonder. She enjoyed that, and from then on as birds passed, she mimicked their sounds as if she was taking their voice, only momentarily, to repeat their music and magic to me. I wondered what her words for things in her world were, the things she saw in the sea on the beach, or along the coast. Did the way she spoke her words sound different under the sea?

She was fascinated too by fire, if not a little cautious. I pointed up at the solar-powered bulb of one of the town's streetlamps that was still working and made a flashing movement with my hand. Then, later, I did the same with a candle and she stared at its flame for a long time, her finger hovering so close to it her scales glittered with the reflection of it.

When I showed her my studio, of broken things made new, of the nettings turned to clothes and blankets, of wire used to tie driftwood together to make sculptures, of plastic made into mosaics and furniture with seaglass details, she smiled so wide I finally saw her true smile. She had three rows of teeth, and canines like a seal, though it was neither threatening nor ugly. I knew she wasn't dangerous. That she wouldn't hurt me.

She moved past me and almost danced around the studio, touching the things I'd made, from the things she'd collected or left me as gifts.

Every time she smiled after that, I felt a warmth in my chest, the same kind I used to feel when I was younger as I swam in the sea as the sun shone down. I'd not felt that way since before the seas rose. I'd forgotten the beauty of the water, and only remembered my fear. The loneliness of it. But maybe it didn't have to be a lonely place anymore.



In the evenings, we'd sit by the fire—me reading a book or stitching old fabric together, her sitting on the nook by the windowsill, looking out to sea and occasionally humming a song, sometimes soft, sometimes mournful—until the fire embers burned out. Then I'd go to sleep in my bed, and her in her warm bath, cocooned in the water. I imagined what that must feel like—to feel safe and warm in something as all-consuming as water. As my world had shrunk, her world had grown. I began to wonder if there were others like her. How had she come to be?



After a week together, the storms had fully settled, bringing blue skies and warmth, and she was strong enough to return to the beach. I felt a pang as we walked down together in a quiet procession, and she paused by the edge of the water. With a glance back at me with her wide black eyes, and toothy smile, she walked forwards until the sea rose up to her midriff. Then, she turned and put out a webbed hand, her other thumbing the bracelet I'd made her on her wrist. She made a noise in the wind, and all I could hear was a murmur.

Come. Join me.

But even as I tried, even as I wanted to walk forwards into the blue, I couldn't bring myself to join her.

“Stay,” I said, the word feeling weak even as I said it.

She tilted her head, then stepped forward out of the water, and for a moment I thought she might stay. That she might not leave me. But she just reached out a hand to me. Touched the hag stone I had looped around my neck for a moment, before moving her fingers up my throat, gently, resting on the place where her gills would have been. Then, she leaned into me in an embrace, and I let myself be enveloped by her. Her soft seaweed-hair wrapped around me with its

saltsweet smell, while her skin was cool and smooth.

Then, she made a noise in the back of her throat, covered her gills on her neck with her hands, and tried again. “*Stay*,” she said in a distorted voice, and my heart leapt just for a moment until she added. “*No*.”

When the sea witch turned away and disappeared into the sea this time, I felt a tightness in my throat. I cried until the moon rose into the sky, and I shivered in the coldness of the night.



The sea witch didn’t return to the beach. Even as I waited and watched the water from the distance, making my little piles of debris that were so small by now, and hoped to see her movement in the corner of my eye once more.

I was alone again. I sat every day in our spot until sunset. I held my bracelet and thought of her, touched my neck absently where she’d touched it, now dry with an itch I could never seem to scratch.

Then, one night, as I prepared to leave the beach and return to the cottage, the hag stone she’d left me that I’d wove so carefully slipped off from round my neck. It clattered to the pebbles

below in a sound like a whisper. When I picked it up again, I found myself looking through the hole to the sea. There was a splash in the distance, a ripple on the water. I walked closer for a better look, stone held to my eye all the time. I could hear the closeness of the water. Closer than I’d been in years. And then my toes dipped in the shallow waves and I didn’t recoil from it. The water’s touch prickled my skin, cold and warm at the same time, reminding me of her. The sound of the sea was like a song, beckoning me forwards, and I heard her words again carried on the wind.

Come. Join me.

I tried to call out to her to come back, but no words came out, only a strangled cry. It was like I’d forgotten how to speak. I fastened the stone pendant around my neck again and as my fingers touched my throat I felt the dry ridges along it, fluttering softly with my breath. In the distant grey sea, a head bobbed above the water, dark hair and black eyes, round and reflecting the fullness of the moon.

I’d not been in the sea for a long time. Could barely remember how to swim. But as I waded into the water to take the outstretched hand of the sea witch, swam with her down and down into the darkness, I remembered not only how to swim, but how to breathe again.

Contributor Biographies

Elou Carroll

Elou Carroll is a graphic designer and freelance photographer who writes. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *The Deadlands*, *Baffling Magazine*, *If There's Anyone Left (Volume 3)*, *In Somnio: A Collection of Modern Gothic Horror* (Tenebrous Press), *Spirit Machine* (Air and Nothingness Press), *Ghostlore* (Alternative Stories Podcast) and others. When she's not whispering with ghosts, she can be found editing *Crow & Cross Keys*, publishing all things dark and lovely, and spending far too much time on twitter (@keychild). She keeps a catalogue of her weird little wordcreatures on www.eloucarroll.com.

L Chan

L Chan hails from Singapore. He spends most of his time wrangling a team of two dogs, Mr Luka and Mr Telly. His work has appeared in places like *Clarkesworld*, *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, *Podcastle*, *The Dark* and he was a finalist for the 2020 Eugie Foster Memorial Award. He tweets inordinately @lchanwrites and can be found on the web at lchanwrites.wordpress.com.

Danny Cherry Jr.

Danny Cherry Jr. is 28 and a native of New Orleans, Louisiana. When he is not working as a corporate drone, he can be found writing fiction of all genres, as well as political essays and narrative nonfiction. His nonfiction is in *Buzzfeed News*, *The Daily Beast*, *Politico* and more; his fiction can be found in *X-ray Lit Mag*, *Fiyah Lit Mag*, and *Apex Magazine*. Follow him on Twitter: @deecherrywriter.

Lyndsey Croal

Lyndsey is an Edinburgh-based author of speculative and strange fiction. She's a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Awardee, British Fantasy Award Finalist, former Hawthornden Fellow, and a LOHF Writers Grant Recipient. Her work has appeared in over fifty publications, including *Mslexia's Best Women's Short Fiction 2021*, *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, and *Orion's Belt*, and her BFA-Finalist audio drama "Daughter of Fire and Water" was produced by *Alternative Stories & Fake Realities*. Her novelette "Have You Decided on Your Question" is published in April 2023 with Shortwave Publishing. Find her on Twitter as @writerlynds or via her website www.lyndseycroal.co.uk.

Anna Madden

Anna Madden's fiction has appeared in *Solarpunk Magazine*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, and elsewhere. In free time she makes birch forests out of stained glass. Follow her on Twitter @anna_madden_ or visit her website at annamadden.com.

Sean Peacock

Sean Peacock is an illustrator and comic artist based in metro Detroit. He studied illustration and sequential art at the College for Creative Studies. He is known for his self-published comic book, *Peppermint Desert*; and his artist brand/imprint, All Sorrows. Sean's thoughts consist of little more than old superhero comics, gothic literature, and rock n' roll; imagery that shows itself in much of his work.

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