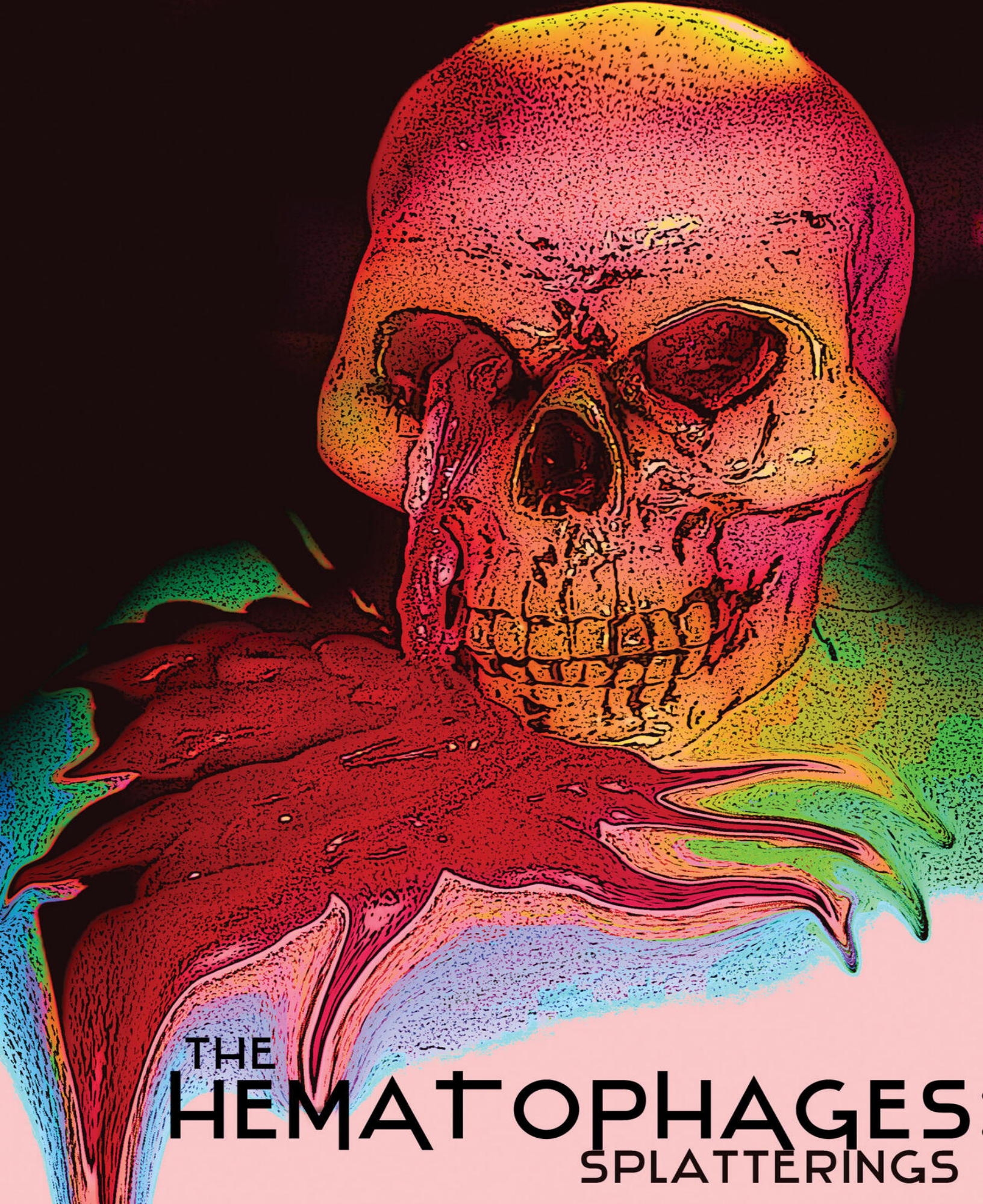


STEPHEN KOZENIEWSKI



THE
HEMATOPHAGES
SPLATTERINGS

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Praise For

The Hematophages

"...a thought-provoking space horror masterpiece."

- Daily Dead

"Equally terrifying, funny, gory, and heart wrenching – *The Hematophages* is a masterful cross-genre blend of horror, science fiction, and just a tiny hint of Bizarro."

- Brian Keene, World Horror Grand Master

"...a heady mix of haunted house and monster story, and there's plenty of both psychological terror and gore."

- Analog Magazine



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I expect this book to do very well. You know why?

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Because blood cells, of course.

“The Blood-Red Lake” © 2023. First appeared on roosterrepublicpress.com, Two-Thousand Word Terrors.

“Derelictus” © 2023. First appeared in *Negative Space Volume Two*, Dark Peninsula Press.

“Blackfish” © 2025. First appeared in *Strange New Moons*, French Press Publishing.

“Gerstein” © 2026. First appeared in *The Hematophages: Splatterings*, French Press Publishing.

The Hematophages: Splatterings



**Short Stories from the Universe of The
Hematophages**

Stephen Kozeniewski

For Don Sakers. I miss you, man.

Preface

At an event someone once asked me what I was most famous for. Naturally, this is a ridiculous question for an indie horror author. Christopher Golden is fond of saying, “My level of fame depends on the room I’m in.” For me, it doesn’t even matter which fucking room I’m in. I’m nobody.

But, taking the question at face value, faking it until I make it, and probably because there was a potential book sale on the line, I responded, “Well, I’m probably best known for *Braineater Jones*.”

And into this incredibly lightly-sketched out scene, because I can’t recall where it was or who I was talking to, leaps, Indiana Jones-style, my dear friend and curmudgeonly frumpus Wesley Southard.

“What?” Wes demanded, doubtless still in front of the potential customer. “You’re the *Hematophages* guy. That’s all I ever hear anyone say about you.”

Hmm. Well, that was an eye-opening (ha!) comment. I suppose you never really can get a feel for your own reputation. And unless you have good friends like Wes, or, perhaps more importantly, blisteringly honest friends like Wes, you may never really know what people think of you one way or the other.

I went on to explain to Wes and the person who had initiated this exchange some abridged version of the following:

By the numbers, *Braineater Jones* has the highest sales, both in units and in revenue, of anything I’ve ever published. This was my debut novel, the story of an amnesiac zombie attempting to solve his own murder.

I go into more specifics in my first collection-cum-autobiography *Yes, I am a Vampire*, but my back-of-the-napkin guess is that I’ve probably sold about fifteen thousand copies of *Braineater Jones*, for a total of roughly thirty thousand dollars. It debuted in October, 2013.

The Hematophages is a blending of splatterpunk and science fiction about lamprey-like aliens which infest people’s brainpans. It is my second most popular novel, and, without digging up dozens of royalty statements from my various publishers, I would vaguely estimate that I’ve sold around ten thousand copies for about twenty thousand dollars. Now for the record scratch moment: *The Hematophages* came out in April, 2017.

So, at this point you're either pulling out a pen and a piece of paper to do the math yourself, anxiously waiting for me to lay out the math for you, or else you've already skipped over all of this and are hip-deep (ha!) into the first story in this mini-collection, "The Blood-Red Lake," which would not be a terrible decision, all things considered. But, if you're still with me, the actual conclusion is that it's a bit unclear which book is more popular.

The Hematophages has about two thirds as many sales as *Braineater Jones*, but it's also been out for about two thirds of the time. So, you could argue that they're equally popular – although in absolute terms *Braineater Jones* is objectively *more* popular.

Plus, *Braineater Jones* probably got a special boost because it was my debut. Family members and friends still cared enough to buy it just because I'd released a book. People were willing to take a risk on a new author. For months, approaching a full year, I was only promoting one thing and I was promoting it all day, every day, and that was *Braineater's* hilarious hijinks..

The Hematophages came out four years later and its sales were arguably more organic. No other novel I've released comes even close to those two. My third most popular novel, *Billy and the Cloneasaurus*, came out in 2014, so it had time on its side – but it's only had about a quarter of the sales of *Braineater Jones* or two fifths of *The Hematophages*'.

So...there's clearly something about *The Hematophages*. It would be easier, both for the purposes of recounting a half-remembered conversation with Wes Southard *and* for the sake of this preface's simplicity to say that *The Hematophages* is my most popular work. But in absolute terms it's not.

Then again...

It *is* my most critically lauded work. First off, it was nominated for a Splatterpunk Award in 2018, the inaugural year of that estimable ceremony. It was named one of the top novels of 2017 by Cedar Hollow Horror Reviews, Daily Dead, RA for All: Horror, not to mention such legends of the horror field as John Boden, Bryan Smith, P.T. Phronk, and Brian Keene.

I can still recall when Keene called me – out of the blue – and said I had to be on his incredibly popular podcast *The Horror Show*. I had been on a few times before, the first time because I begged and the next few because I was local to the area and he needed a seat filler. But never, and I mean never, before had he called me and said, "I'm out camping. I'm reading *The Hematophages*. I'm bumping next week's guest. You need to be on because I need to talk about this fucking book."

Later that year, when Keene revealed his top reads of the year, I breathlessly clicked through the list, desperately hoping *The Hematophages* would show up in the top ten. *Braineater Jones* had shown up at number twelve on his Best of 2013 list, which is nice, but not as nice for marketing purposes as being able to plaster “One of World Horror Grand Master Brian Keene’s Top Ten Books of the Year” all over social media.

Somehow, somehow, Brian Fucking Keene, my greatest living inspiration, had named *The Hematophages* his number one book of 2017. Not twelve. Not nine, barely creeping into the list. Absolutely dead fucking best. Doubtless my appearance on *The Horror Show* and Keene’s subsequent endorsement helped to catapult it to its nomination for the then-nascent Splatterpunks.

Braineater Jones had been well-received. It had even been up for a Voice Arts Award. But, while I do like to trot out that old chestnut from time to time, particularly when it makes for a good mixed metaphor, the truth is that the Voice Arts nomination was really honoring the incredible work of my audiobook narrator, Steve Rimpici, and not me. My Splatterpunk nom was all my own.

I lost both, of course, so it’s kind of a moot point. Despite eleven years of trying I had all but given up on ever being recognized with an industry award. Then, in 2024, I finally bagged half of one. (Every other weekend one of us has to drive it over to the other’s one’s house to display it for the next two weeks.) I’m very proud to say that I now share the 2024 Splatterpunk for Best Short Story with the legendary Chet Williamson.

Speaking of short stories, if you’ve picked up this volume, you’re doubtless eager to jump into the shorts that follow. So, I will let you get to it. However, in case you haven’t read my previous collection *Yes, I Am A Vampire*, I should warn you up front that I take great pleasure in story notes and front and back matter, like this preface. So, if you’re willing to come along, I will be happy to take you on the full, real-world journey of how *The Hematophages* and its sister stories came to be. Alternatively, if you want to just skip the interstitials and enjoy the blood-drinking, that’s fine, too.

Finally, if *Splatterings* is the start of your journey into what I am now going to dub the Hematoverse, rest assured that you can enjoy each of these brief tales on their own with no prior knowledge. But if they do tickle something in the back of your skull (ha!) remember to seek out the original

The Hematophages and its prequel novella *Skinwrapper*, both of which are currently published together in a single volume from Crossroad Press. Alternatively, if you're a veteran ink surfer, well, you probably have some idea what you're about to get into.

Either way, enjoy!

Stephen Kozeniewski
Air Studio International Headquarters
January 3, 2026

The Blood-Red Lake

I wake up to the feeling of something tugging on my hand, which is dangling off the bed. That might normally be the start of a crummy spook story, but I assure you this is no crummy spook story and there is no monster under my bed. It is only Marina, my daughter. She is holding her rag doll Petunia under one armpit, as is customary for her. I can surmise from the fact that she is attired in her blue-and-white bathing gown why she is bothering me so early.

“Why all atwitter, little apple-of-mine-eye?” I ask.

“Papa,” she replies, “I should very dearly like to go swimming.”

“Well, what’s to stop you?” I says. “You have my permission at all times, provided it is not past sundown and neither do you swim out past the buoy.”

I had lain that buoy myself, no more than an airtight cask attached to a heavy rock, in order to mark for myself the finest fishing spot in our lake. That it could delimit the girl’s safest swimming area was merely happenstance.

“And I can see,” I continue, “though it is a mite early for an old man such as myself to rise, the sun does indeed shine on God’s green Earth. So why do you disturb my slumber so?”

As though stricken, the girl casts her face downward. She is ashamed to explain herself to me, but I am even more ashamed that I have made her feel so. I take her chin in mine hand and raise her eyes, not quite tearing up, but not quite not, to look into mine own.

“Tell me what is amiss, child,” I say, as kindly as I can. I know it has been rough on her since the passing of her Mama, and I have no desire to make her life any rougher with unkindness.

“The lake is red like fire, Papa.”

Now this is a tale I have not heard before, though I have heard many from her of various imagined people and events. I shall beat her roundly if she is lying, but I have a queer feeling in my belly, and there is no deception in her face, lighthearted or otherwise.

To my feet I rise and, slipping into my morning shoes, I walk to the window. It is a beautiful morning in Zarephath and the sun is nearly risen, casting a full painter’s palette of purples and oranges across the horizon.

And though it may be a trick of those same early morning lights, I see that Marina is not fibbing. The lake we live upon is a bright red, or as near to be as to make no difference.

“How queer!” I say in wonderment, “Though I have heard of such things before. This must a bloom of red algae, daughter of mine.”

“Is it safe, Papa?” she asks.

“So far as I know, though admittedly that is not very far. Come, let us investigate further.”

Our cabin is set up higher on a hill to avoid flooding in the rainy months. I must be careful to make it down upon two legs, but Marina, being yet young, delights in rolling down the hill to the dock. I no longer chastise her for such behavior. Her clothes would be no less muddied at the end of the day either way, I think. And it brings me quietude to see such joy in her since her mother’s passing.

Consequently, she reaches the dock before me. It is a most unusual vision. The lake is red like carpenter’s dye. I have seen nothing like it before. But I have heard many a tall tale at the various public houses and others dens of iniquity I visited in my younger, less godly days of such an occurrence. It is a bloom, I have heard theorized, of algae or some other diminutive animalcules, but of no real harm, and will likely fade soon enough.

“I think it is harmless, enough, my dear.”

“I don’t know, Papa,” she says, shaking her head to and fro. “I’m scared.”

Now this has me concerned. No child of mine, man-child or woman-child, ought to live life in fear. I see no harm in the color of the lake and I intend to teach her not to live the life of a coward. A coward dies every time he shrinks from life.

“Well, then, perhaps I shall show you there is nothing to be fearful of.”

Having said so, I doff my outer clothes. With an almighty whoop I tear down the dock and leap into the air as high as I am able.

I have done this many hundreds of times since we settled in Zarephath. But as I strike the surface of the lake it feels not at all like it should. The texture is thicker than it ought to be. I do not even sink in what seems a reasonable amount of time. I would not call the material thick like a gelatin, but neither is it runny as water ought to be.

I have overleapt, perhaps, and the lake's red fluid ensconces me totally. I struggle to the surface and cannot swim as normal. The feeling is dreadful unpleasant and highly bizarre. When I open my eyes again, my lids stick together. I must practically force them open.

And that smell. Oh, merciful Jesus, that awful smell. I've smelt nothing like it since my time in Mexico, during that charnel house of a war. I might be there right now, back in that field hospital, the sawbones supposedly attending to my wounds, dying men all around me. Oh, yes, it is the stink of blood. And this lake has turned to blood entire.

I whirl, such as I can. I am a strong swimmer but whirling in this muck is a mighty undertaking.

"Marina!" I try to shout. Knowing the girl's proclivities, I must warn her off. She will not have allowed an old man to be braver than her and will be jumping into the lake herself directly.

No word can leave my lips, though, for it is instead swallowed by a yelp of pain. I am bitten on my foot, and again on my chest. There must be half a dozen angry, biting fish latching on to me all at once. But perhaps it is not so much the bite of a fish or shark but the suckling of a leech.

I must fight to stay afloat with one hand, but with my sinister I grab the leech a-biting on me just below my solar plexus. It is a struggle to grab ahold of such a creature, soaked, as I am, in blood. My fingers are not as strong as they once were, and the beast is slippery, so perhaps it is more through sheer will and devotion that I am able to yank the heathen beast off.

I hold it aloft. A vile thing. A jawless eel. I recognize it, and have heard it called some places a lamprey. A blood-drinking monstrosity. But why, with the lake's water itself transubstantiated to blood, would the lampreys flock to devour me?

My strength is fading and my head dips below the surface. My mouth is full of the blood of the lake, just as their mouths are full of my blood. The sanguivores are draining me of my very vigor.

I've lived a long life. And in other circumstances I might even have accepted my end and succumbed to their cruel embraces. Only one thing makes me fight.

Marina. Someone must look after her.

With all my strength I fight, putting one hand after the other. It is a scant few yards to shore, but it feels like the journey of a thousand miles. Thank God and Jesus almighty in Heaven, Marina stands yet on the shore. She has

not, as I had feared, plunged into the bloody water to be attacked herself. Perhaps she saw what happened to me and was frightened all anew.

“Marina, darling!” I cry out.

But she is not herself. Petunia is in the dirt, ground underfoot. This is not like her at all. She has always taken enormous pains to attend to that unliving doll as though it were her very own child. Something terrible has afflicted my daughter.

“Marina?” I repeat tentatively.

A loud, sickening noise punctuates the morning stillness. It takes me a moment to apprehend what has happened. My daughter’s left eyeball has popped out of her skull, pushed out from within. Her eye dangles at about the corner of her lips, dangling only by a bundle of nerves.

I am frozen in place, unable to move even as the lamprey eels that yet hang from me swarm and viciously attempt to pull me into the water. Then one of them emerges from daughter’s brainpan.

“Old man,” Marina intones in a hollow, scooped-out voice, “there is nothing left of your daughter. We have devoured her brain down to the stem.”

“We.” That horrible word. Like an actor responding to his cue on stage, Marina’s right eye violently explodes outward as well, with the speed and practically the noise of a pistol shot. The “we” that has eaten my child from the inside out is now revealed, as a second lamprey unfurls from the now-empty eye socket.

These things, not ordinary terrestrial fish, but possessed of some arcane and downright blasphemous intelligence, have burrowed into my darling child’s head and taken control of her body. They have possessed her, as Satan’s legions are sometimes said to do. But my daughter was an innocent, never ungodly. I saw to it that she said her prayers each night.

Perhaps they are something other, even, than my simple imagination can conceive of.

Marina’s body kneels down, both of her eyeballs swinging in the air like the strings of a marionette, unceremoniously cut. She takes both my cheeks in her tiny hands, those hands I’d held each day on our walks around the lake and into the woods. A smile lights up her face. But it is not my daughter, pleased to see her papa. It is those piscine devils, delighting in human misery.

“Now it’s your turn,” my child’s toneless voice says.

Both of the eels rear up into the air, and, as one, the creatures of pure and inhuman muscle batter downward into the crown of my head with a stunning force.

I tumble backward into the blood-red lake.

Story Notes

(The Blood-Red Lake)

Length: 1,800 words

Originally Appeared On: Two-Thousand Word Terrors
(roosterrepublicpress.com)

Publisher: Rooster Republic Press

Original Publication Date: April 3, 2023

Connections to Other Work: Takes place in *The Hematophages* universe, particularly during the timeline of *The Black Magpie* vs. *The Hematophages*.

Around 2002, when I was in college, I wrote a movie script called *Hunter of the Dead*. My initial intent with the story was to rescue the folkloric vampire from its hokey Hollywood descendants. Then, as is presumably standard for writers when they start researching folkloric vampires, I realized that a monster counting a bunch of seeds spilled on the ground being defeated by the power of prayer and chastity would make for a pretty crappy story.

I ended up producing a nice *Forever Knight* pastiche instead. It didn't really matter, though, because I had written my "script" in nothing even remotely akin to industry standard format and also nobody can sell a speculative script without connections in Hollywood. So, it sat, unused and moldering, in the virtual trunk of my computer hard drive for a very long time. After over a decade it rose from the metaphorical grave almost like some kind of...I dunno...supernatural beastie that hibernates or some shit.

In April of 2014 I pitched and sold *Hunter of the Dead* to Permuted Press. Twelve years having elapsed since I wrote the first version and not being satisfied with turning in a pretty bog-standard vampire novel, I began to wrack my brain for ways to make the novelization more original than the script I would be cribbing from.

The best idea I came up with during this monthslong brainstorming session was vampires in space. First of all, fuck you, and second of all, my

take on it actually turned out to be pretty clever. I've always loved science fiction and there just isn't that much sci-fi horror. There's *Alien*, *Event Horizon*, and *Dead Space*, and there's some stuff from the '50s and '80s when the genres weren't so clearly delineated, and that's about it. Why not bring the idea back?

Looking for inspiration for an alien species, I began to research vampire-like terrestrial animals. I immediately hit upon the most grotesque blood drinker in all of creation, the jawless lamprey eel. Without even altering its physiology in any meaningful way I'd hit upon a perfect alien parasite.

Soon I was haunted by a single scene. Two spacefarers walk down a corridor in their ship. One grabs the other and hisses like a vampire. Then, instead of biting their victim's neck, a lamprey bursts out of its eye socket and bites instead.

Thus were the hematophages born.

Unfortunately, there was no way to port this idea into *Hunter of the Dead*. The whole point of pitching that novel was that I had already created all of the characters, settings, and worldbuilding. I could've probably turned the screenplay into a boffo novel with a slight change in mythos or viewpoint, but a complete alteration of the setting and even genre was way too much. So, unable to come up with an original take to revamp (ha!) *Hunter of the Dead*, so I simply injected a healthy dose of hyperviolence into the novelization and relied on my twelve additional years of writing experience to carry the day.

The Permuted deal fell through. (Read *Yes, I Am A Vampire* for more on *that* debacle.) Sinister Grin Press approached me with a deal to pick up my orphaned manuscripts. This time, along with *Hunter of the Dead*, I pitched its oddball cousin.

The Hematophages came out in 2017 and, as I described in the preface, was something of a surprise hit. In June of 2018 Dunwich Edizioni, an Italian press, offered me my first foreign translation deal for it. And, strangely enough, they asked for a little something else for marketing purposes: a novella or short story to release with their newsletter.

And so I found myself at a crossroads. I promised myself I would make this mini-collection equally accessible for new fans and old, so, without any direct spoilers, suffice it to say that *The Hematophages* has a very...definitive ending. In the same sense that *Hamlet* has a pretty

definitive ending. Then again, Steve Coogan made the brilliant *Hamlet 2*, which I seem to recall being the exact justification I used to myself when dipping back into the Hematoverse well for the first time.

The result was *Skinwrapper*, which is, by a wide margin, my most popular novella and one of my more popular works overall. (I'm sure you're sick of all that "one fifth of this, one seventeenth of that" bullshit from the preface, so I'll just leave it at that. Also, it saves me from having to look up the sales numbers.)

I started from a fairly simple premise, which was that every in-universe character was terrified of the mere mention of skinwrappers in *The Hematophages*. Since the protagonists triumphed in the one showdown with them in the novel, I had never really fleshed out *why* even the toughest spacefarers in-universe were so terrified of the infamous space pirates.

During that same time in my life I had done some work on screenplays and audio serials for Serial Box (now Realm) and Black Box Entertainment. So, the idea of breaking into other forms of media, particularly movies and television, was at the forefront of my mind. I made a conscious decision to write a few shorter pieces which could easily be adapted to the screen.

Consequently, I wrote two novellas set in very limited spaces, which would, therefore, in theory at least, be inexpensive to film. *The Thing Under Your Bed* takes place entirely in a child's bedroom and *Skinwrapper* in a coffin-like cryogenic pod. (The movie rights for both of those are still available, by the way, if anyone from Hollywood happens to be reading this. Have your people contact my people.)

I turned in the finished product to Dunwich and then found myself in the interesting position of seeing one of my works published exclusively in translation for over a year before it became available in the original English. Publishing is a weird business sometimes.

The success of both versions of *Skinwrapper* was...sobering. As I outlined in the preface, my greatest success to date had been *Braineater Jones*. That had led to me thinking of myself as the zombie guy and writing numerous short stories in the Braineaterverse. But the success of both works in the Hematoverse begged the question...should I be the sci-fi/horror guy?

I began efforts on both direct and indirect sequels to *The Hematophages*, but let's talk about that more in the next set of story notes

because these have already gone on for five pages and I haven't even gotten to talking about the particular story you just read yet.

But in general now you understand why I was pursuing every avenue to expand the Hematoverse. In 2022 my dear friend Wile E. Young and I began working on a very unusual project.

Wile E. is a bit like me. Or, at least, our careers have followed similar trajectories and we often face the same pressures and concerns. The difference is that Wile E. began publishing about six years after I did. Wile E. had major success before long with *The Magpie Coffin* (2020), the first major splatter western.

Like all bourgeois white men, I've always been a big fan of westerns. However, I was never the biggest fan of some of the movers and shakers behind the splatter western fad of the early 2020s, so I never got into bed with any of them, which is fine by me. (Want to know more? Buy me an Old Crow the next time you see me at a convention. For now, neither important nor particularly juicy.)

I was and remain a huge fan of Wile E., however, and one night I had a flash of inspiration from an unexpected source. I was reading *Behind the Door* by our other dear friend Mary SanGiovanni and...

There it was.

Zarephath, Pennsylvania, the imaginary setting for Mary's story. One presumes not particularly far from where she and I live. A town with a supernatural "Door" that grants wishes which only ever go completely haywire.

And a single line in Wile E.'s book. Salem Covington, the villainous titular Black Magpie was trained in all of the occult teachings of America, including pow-wow. Pow-wow magic, the occult nerd will know, is a discipline native (sort of) to central Pennsylvania.

And in an instant it all came into focus. The Black Magpie had, canonically, studied pow-wow magic in central Pennsylvania, the location of the cosmic entity behind Mary's Door. And that put Salem only a poorly worded wish away from my own cosmic monstrosities, the hematophages.

Or, as our friend and grinchy fucknozzle Wesley Southard likes to put it, "A western set in Pennsylvania about fighting aliens."

Anyway, after securing Mary's permission to use her intellectual property of Zarephath, Wile E. and I pitched *The Black Magpie* vs. *The*

Hematophages to Paul Goblirsch of Thunderstorm Books who, as I recall, said “Yes,” before we could finish our first sentence.

I finished my half of *Magpie vs. Hematophages* in 2022 and turned it over to Wile E. Young for fine-tuning, which, one presumes, is still ongoing here as I write this in early 2026. Nevertheless, high on my own supply, and having sufficiently established to my own satisfaction that *Magpie vs. Hematophages* is canon in my own universe, I stumbled upon a submission call for short stories from Don Noble and Nicholas Day of Rooster Republic Press. These two fine gentlemen are the very same who provided the cover of the volume you now hold in your disgusting, unkempt little hands.

The Rooster Republic call was for their Two-Thousand Word Terrors, and I thought, “What must it have been like for those inhabitants who lived around the lake in Zarephath when it first turned to blood and filled with Hematophages?” (That’s a scene that happens in the book that you’ll maybe get to read one day.)

“The Blood-Red Lake” pretty much fell out of me after that, fully formed. I seem to recall writing it in a single night, perhaps two tops. (Two thousand words are not so very many, after all.)

During my re-read for this version I noted three points of interest in this story beyond what is textually obvious. First, in the very first paragraph I mention a monster under the bed. This is an obvious reference to my then-forthcoming novella *The Thing Under Your Bed*, which I mentioned earlier as being in the same vein as *Skinwrapper*.

Second, I never use the term “hematophage” in the story, nor explicitly state what’s going on. The average reader can probably infer that the lampreys are not all they appear to be without needing a full explanation of what happened and how it connects to some greater mythos. It’s probably a slight thrill to the Kozeniewski fan to realize what’s going on, but I don’t think it hurts the story to read it cold.

In any case, in the sole instance where the narrator uses a term other than “lamprey” or “demon,” he says “sanguivore,” which is a knowing and almost exact inversion of “hematophage.” (*Sanguineus*, Latin for “blood” plus *vorare*, Latin for “to devour” vs. *hematin*, Ancient Greek for “blood” plus “phaegin,” Ancient Greek for “to eat.”)

The third point of interest is that this story (sort of) violates the naming conventions I came up with for short stories in the Hematoverse. But, we

shall outline that and much, much more in the next set of story notes.
Onward to one of my all-time favorites, “Derelictus.”

Derelictus

The headless woman never stops screaming. Her agonized wails are relentless. I can't even gather my thoughts to make a proper plan with this unbearable pressure in my ears. I can barely even concentrate, but through the fog only one option seems reasonable. I'm on a sanctioned deep space salvage mission. Hestle Corporation will have to cough up for my aural regeneration surgery.

"Okay," I whisper, unable to even hear the word through the endless shrieking.

I take the two digital lock picking rods out of my kit a second time. They're specialty tools, capable of cracking almost any door code in a matter of seconds. Due to their length and appearance most pearl divers call them chopsticks, which is typical of our wry sense of humor. I'll never forget, though, my training officer during corporate training who called them knitting needles.

I take a deep breath and hyperventilate for about a minute to prep myself. I type the six digit helmet release code into my jotter. I confirm, double, and then triple confirm. The corporation doesn't want to lose any of its human resources due to user error, so all potentially catastrophic decisions need to be repeated in triplicate.

I blow out all the air in my lungs. It's counterintuitive behavior to the uninitiated, perhaps, but I've been a pearl diver for too long to even consider holding my breath anymore. I'm much more worried about my lungs rupturing than I am about passing out from a brief lack of oxygen.

I'm leaning hard on all of my training and experience now. Evacuated lungs suck, but I've endured this hundreds of times before. I know from trial and error that I can survive like this for a solid thirty seconds. That might be enough time. If not, I will have to suck it up and do one ear now and one ear in a moment. I press the red release button and my helmet pops off.

My eyes flash dry and my brain begins to expand in my skull. Without hesitation I saddle each of the "knitting needles" in their respective earlobes. No time for a countdown or any other preparation. With one sharp shove, I drive both of the long, metal implements deep into my ear canals. I

can feel my left eardrum ripple and shatter. It is not so much like an explosion, as I had expected. It feels more like a wet, slow penetration.

Right is lagging. I must be subconsciously holding back. Blood is pouring out of my left canal now, but unlike it would in regular gravity, it just congeals into globules and floats away. The balletic dance would be perversely beautiful if not for the circumstances.

Great, black cigarette burns appear in my line of vision. I'm down to a few seconds left, but I'll be damned if I have to endure this horror show a second time. I shove right in as hard and as fast as humanly possible.

The pain is exquisite, but there's no time to brace myself or acknowledge it. I'm about to pass out, and if I don't get my helmet back on before that happens I'll die. I let go of the knitting needles, which float off in opposite directions, slam the helmet back on my head, and press the red button.

Immediately my boom suit repressurizes. I don't bother to turn the gravity back up. Some of the puke has floated away during my time helmetless, but now my helmet is filling up with the blood leaking from both of my ear canals.

I would love to just press both of my knuckles to the sides of my nose and brace myself for a few minutes, but, of course, my faceplate is in the way.

It takes me a moment, between the pain, near-death experience, and existential dread which is only being held off by the prevalence of the first two problems, to realize that I can no longer hear the screaming. I nod. Okay.

The adrenaline fleeing hits me like a ton of concrete dropping from above. I collapse. In null G, of course, that just amounts to me floating, face forward, my grav boots the only things holding me in place.



Blacked out, the day or so leading up to this fateful mission replays in my head in fits and starts.



If not for the silicate powdering agent the *RV Borgwardt* is peppering across its hull, the massive obsidian derelict would be totally invisible.

And I do not call it “obsidian” to be poetic or coy. If this ship is not made of literal black volcanic glass, it is made of some substance so resistant to both the human eye and any conventional sensor equipment that we are lucky we didn’t crash into it. Considering that the hulk’s size dwarfs even the impressive bulk of our salvage vessel by several orders of magnitude, such a crash would have reduced us to something akin to a thin metal pancake.

It is massive. It is black. Or, if not black, then light cannot penetrate it. I can only make out its shapes and contours for as long as the silicate powder twinkles across its surface before swirling away into the inky vacuum of space.

The holographic display above our conference table is tracing out a wire diagram as information from the silicate slowly fills in the gaps. We all watch, rapt, as the hologram slowly evolves from the merest fingernail of information into a nearly complete blueprint of the hulk.

Helena Marsters, the chief of security, stops picking her teeth with a dagger long enough to whistle in appreciation. “That thing’s a behemoth.”

“Are we done powdering its nose?” That was Diane, the newly promoted director of the *Borgwardt*. Somehow she is the only person in the room not sitting on pins and needles waiting for the holographic blueprint to fill in. Instead, she is flipping through and approving requisition forms on her jotter.

“Yes, madam director,” says Kelly Overland, the operations puke who is in charge of the holographic projector (and just about every other piece of technology on this tub), though this is over the PA as she is physically located in operations. I’ve long since stopped thinking of speaking to a disembodied voice as strange, though my daughter Cece still sometimes talks about the lady in the walls.

Diane struggles to her feet by bracing herself with her chair and pulling up on her crutches. Helena jumps to her feet to offer Diane a set of spectrometry spectacles. As a security goon, Helena constantly wears them, observing the heart rate and vital signs of employees in order to identify insider threats, malingerers, and the like. Diane, old school to an extreme, waves off the technological assistance.

Even without the ocular aids, though, Diane spots something I missed. “What’s this?”

Using her crutch as a cane, Diane leans forward precariously, causing several of the staff members behind her to sway and nearly leap in to grab her in case she falls. She never falls, of course. Sometimes I wonder if she uses her disability in a strange way an advantage, since her employees often underestimate her.

Diane points at a strange set of markings on the underside of the hulk’s mass and, pinching at the hologram as though it were a vidscreen or jotter, expands it.

“Derelict, U.S.,” Helena states. “Indicates the origin is the ancient terrestrial nation the United States.”

I squint. She might be right. The words are only semi-legible, scrawled as they are with what might be red paint. But all the letters are capitals, and there’s no comma or periods.

I look very closely. Clearly it was done in haste and by amateurs, probably to claim salvage rights. The spacing between the letters is quite uneven, but I’ll be damned if the last two letters are supposed to be separate from the first eight. It looks like one word to me.

It seems the director agrees with my assessment. Diane snorts and says under her breath, “Not bloody likely.”

The intercom buzzes, and Kelly the operator’s disembodied voice agrees with us as well. “That’s very unlikely, Helena. It’s tough to scan, but neither the shape nor the structure indicates centuries-old technology. In fact, if anything...”

Kelly trails off. That’s unusual for her. Diane is not one to tolerate such weaseling.

“In fact, if anything,” the director prompts loudly.

“Well, at first blush it doesn’t match anything we have any data on. I’d say it was very advanced technology. If it’s human in origin it’s from no corporation we’re familiar with.”

“So, it’s either from a long lost, super-advanced corporation, it’s a timeship from the future, or it’s alien in origin,” Diane said, cutting through Kelly’s cautious words.

Helena is clearly irritated at being contradicted. She folds her arms, brandishing the dagger she had so recently been using as a toothpick in a semi-threatening manner. “Alien in origin,” she says, dismissing the other two ridiculous options as quickly as the rest of us have. “So you’re telling me that somebody didn’t christen that beast in English? U.S. Derelict, it’s as plain as day.”

“The word’s the same in English as it is in Cosmic,” Kelly says over the PA. “Both languages use the Latin alphabet. It could be a joke from a later salvage expedition. Or a warning.”

My thoughts exactly. But something Kelly said tickles the back of my mind. I lean in toward the display.

“Latin alphabet,” I repeat in what I think is a whisper, but in the suddenly silence of the room, my voice is as loud as a blaring klaxon.

“What are you thinking, Winter?” Diane asks.

I trace my fingers along the writing in the hologram. “I was just thinking this looks more like a V than a U. Like it’s a Latin word.”

“What kind of egghead fucking pearl diver is leaving messages in Latin? Derelictus,” Helena says, as though the word is a half-rotten tomato she’s accidentally taken a bite out of. “What does that mean? Derelict? Thanks guys, we already knew it was a fucking derelict.”

“Well, somebody dig up a Latin dictionary app and find out,” Diane says. “Meanwhile, have we completed our silicate powdering scan, Kelly?”

“Yes, madam director,” Kelly replies.

Diane gives a half nod, half shrug. “All right. Then I guess the next part is up to you, Winter. How long will it take you to suit up?”

I shrug, attempting to look nonchalant, but if this were an old Earth animated streamie the pupils of my eyes would be currency symbols. Corporate policy states a team can’t pick apart the hulk until the Master Salvager has done a solo inspection. It’s my job, but the bonus for a solo pearl dive on an unidentified hulk has got to be astronomical.

I make a note to check with my union steward before I dive. I don’t want to get screwed out of my money on a technicality, like if they identify it later. This is a so-called leap of faith, and I want that in writing before I strike out.

“Half an hour,” I say. “Maybe an hour with extra leap of faith prep. I haven’t done one, ah...”

The truth is I’ve never done a leap of faith myself. Sure, I’ve done lifelike simulations during training. And every few years since, I think maybe every three, I’ve had to do brush-up training.

“...in a while,” I conclude, hoping my confidence has carried me through the sentence.

Diane nods and doesn’t contradict me, so what I wanted is accomplished at least. All meetings in the conference room are recorded, and now I’ve got the director dead to rights agreeing that this is a leap of faith. Let them try to chisel me out of my bonus now.

I turn to go but before I get through the door a harried-looking young intern with pencils in her hair bob and a polystyrene cup of coffee in her hand bustles in.

“Sorry, ma’am,” she mutters as she nearly bowls me over.

“Not at all,” I reply, but instead of hurrying through the door to get kitted out for my pearl dive, I wait to see what the fuss is.

The intern hands Diane the coffee cup. Judging by the trail of droplets running outside and through the hallway, it’s only about half full at this point. But the intern clearly has bigger worries than the director’s coffee at this point.

“Madam director, we’ve received an emergency distress signal. There’s been a skinwrapper attack.”

Every sphincter in the room tightens into a nugget at the mere word. There isn’t an ink surfer alive who hasn’t been trained all her life by water cooler talk, corporate propaganda, and personal experience alike to be terrified of the notoriously bloodthirsty pirates. I was salivating over that bonus, but even I won’t object if we need to redirect to save someone from being slaughtered by fucking skinwrappers.

“Which vessel?” Diane asks sternly.

Most ink surfers have at least a general idea of which vessels are operating in the same general vicinity. Sometimes we’ll trade information, supplies, or simply pressed hams against the nearest porthole to fuck with one another. But someone like Diane, who’s plied multiple trade routes over a decades-long career, probably knows half the directors in the corporate fleet personally.

“The *CS Blue Whale*,” the intern, still obviously a ball of nerves, says. As soon as she does everyone in the room goes back to their chattering side conversations. Helena even chuckles and I turn for the door.

The intern, still wet behind the ears, doesn’t understand our disdain, but she will. Every corporation has a different naming convention for their vessels. Hestle uses proper names of famous explorers. The voidfaces of ObRep (obviously) just use soulless alphanumeric. There’s only one corporation in the galaxy who names their tubs after stupid extinct terrestrial animals.

“AginCorp?” Helena says. “Fuck them.”

“I tend to agree, if not with the profanity of our security director, then with the sentiment,” Diane says. “Winter?”

“Already on my way, madam director,” I reply with a smile.



Staring forward into oblivion is, in a way, what we are all always doing, but for me, right now, it’s literal.

There is nothing in front of me. Not the familiar starscape of the ink. Not even the slightest hint of an emergency light in a mostly dark sleeping cabin. So that I cannot fuck up my trajectory as my operator Kelly remotely guides me in, my boom suit is deactivated. Some pearl divers are never able to accept this loss of control. Only long years of experience allow me to tolerate it. Still, in the past I’ve always at least been able to see the vessel I was approaching.

I have never faced such absolute emptiness before. This must be what total sensory deprivation is like, though I have never submitted myself to that particular torture. What I’ve come, in the last half hour, to think of as *Derelictus* is surely out there. Kelly is shooting me towards it at speeds which would be dizzying planetside, and yet the vessel is still wholly invisible to me.

It would be a great comfort to turn back and look at the familiar silhouette of the *Borgwardt*, but in the deep ink like this, even that slight

movement would be enough to throw off my trajectory. My boom suit is totally inert.

I think of all the souls that must have gone mad in the past, locked away in dungeons in absolute darkness like this. They used to call them oubliettes – places of forgetting. Places to be abandoned.

“You still with me, Overland?” I whisper.

“You know it, baby,” Kelly’s wry voice responds.

I relax. I’m not much of a romantic, and I know about Kelly’s...issues. But I sometimes think we might make a nice couple. I always request her as my operator, and not just because we work well together and trust each other. She’s a joy to flirt with.

“Be gentle with me,” I say coyly.

“Oh, don’t worry,” the voice in the machine replies. I can practically see her smile. “I’ve done thousands of insertions just like this.”

“Ooh la la,” I reply.

But then the jocularitas is over. “How’s Cece getting along with the other kids?”

I pause, hoping to turn back to less painful thoughts. Joke my way out of dealing with my feelings.

“Not well,” I admit. It’s a strong understatement.

Cece is...different. Not right. The corporation frowns on the fact that I chose to keep her. Not enough to fire me, but enough that I may never get another promotion or plum transfer. But I can’t imagine life without Cece. She’s what keeps me going. And, I suppose, the reason why I won’t pursue any relationship more concrete than flirty shop talk with Kelly.

“You still planning to settle down? Run off to Lahiniti and live the groundbound life?”

“Give up ink surfing? Never!” But my protest is weak, particularly in my own ears.

“You could do it. Especially with the big bucks you’re going to make from this leap of faith.”

I nod. It’s on my mind. I’m always right on the edge of retiring, and it always seems just a few more voyages off. No matter how many chits I sock away, I could always use a few more. What if Cece comes down with a fever? What if our domicile gets destroyed in a storm? Then I’ll be cursing myself for not having saved more when I was pearl diving.

“Kelly,” I say, only realizing the words are true as they leave my lips, “I’m scared.”

Nothingness is looming before me. I haven’t seen anything in what feels like a million years. I could be swallowed up by it. For all I know I could already be out of contact.

Then a familiar puff of silicate powder brushes the hull of *Derelictus*. I gasp in shock. Without the perspective of a slow approach that I am used to, I suddenly feel as though I am about to bash into the hulk’s hull, smash all of my bones to chunks, and liquefy what’s left of me.

With my suit off I can’t move so much as a centimeter but in a panic I begin to say, “Kelly, Kelly, Kelly...”

“Don’t worry, Winter,” her soothing voice replies, “I’ve got you. We’ve done this a million times together, you and me. I wouldn’t let you get hurt.”

I don’t respond, but hope the gratitude has still been received.

“Sixty seconds,” Kelly announces.

I can now see, just as the puff of silica disappears, the open airlock I am heading towards. Airlock is not exactly the right word, considering the alien nature of the *Derelictus*. It’s more like an alcove or a natural nook, still exposed to space. But it’ll serve as a spot to attempt my ingress.

“How much did that blast of powder to make me feel better just now cost the corporation?” I ask.

“Nothing,” Kelly says flatly, “I paid for it out of my account.”

“Overland!” I say sharply, “You cannot be endangering your own retirement for my cowardice!”

“Thirty seconds,” she says simply in response.

“Hey, Kelly?” I ask.

“What?”

“Did the research geeks ever figure out what ‘Derelictus’ means?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I assumed derelict like everyone thought. Hang on, I’ll upload a Latin app to your jotter in case there’s more graffiti. Approach complete. Boom suit reactivated.”

“Activating grav boots,” I reply.

My suit thrums to life as my feet dangle scant centimeters over the relative floor of the alcove. Normally I would use simple mag boots to navigate the metal deck of a vessel being salvaged. But since we have been unable to identify the obsidian-like substance *Derelictus* is made of, and

have no way of guaranteeing it contains iron, I have instead been fitted with expensive gravity simulator boots.

As soon as they activate, and I am attached to the surface of the *Derelictus*, a hideous, bloodcurdling scream, sustained for far longer than even the most well-trained opera singer could have held it, reverberates in my ears. I grit my teeth, attempting to tolerate it, but the scream continues long past the point I can bear it.

“Kelly!” I shout, but I cannot hear her response if she makes one.

“Audio off,” I say, or at least, I think I say, though I couldn’t blame my boom suit’s internal sensors for not hearing me over the piercing din. When it does not stop, I repeat the command, louder, as loud as humanly possible, and yet my suit still does not register it.

My head is starting to thrum and I pull out my handheld jotter. I call up the suit’s controls and manually order audio off, but according to the jotter, audio is not on. Stupid thing must be fucked up by weird signals on the hulk. The screaming does not cease and now my head is beginning to pound, a migraine imminent if not already in the offing.

Great. Thanks to some malfunction in my suit, I am in danger of permanent hearing loss or worse. The infirmary will not cover damage due to user error, so I must first eliminate all possible equipment malfunctions, which would be a lot easier to do if I could concentrate for even a second.

No one could possibly sustain a full-throated scream for this long. Perhaps my suit is replicating or amplifying some brief original broadcast. Frankly, I did not expect to pick anything up on the derelict, except maybe some old logs or ledgers. Returning to the screen of my jotter I try to switch frequencies, and though I can hear the clicking of a variety of freq changes in my ears, the horrible noise does not subside.

I try to kill comms entirely. It’s not a wise move, as it cuts me off from Kelly and the entire team on the *Borgwardt*, but it beats going deaf. Killing comms changes nothing.

Perhaps I can find the source of the broadcast and stop it. I turn back to *Derelictus*. Technically I am still outside the ship. Ahead of me there is a porthole leading to the interior. And through it there is a woman staring at me.

“Hello?” I say, or I think I say because I can’t hear anything.

She is...translucent. Her figure seems to be a chalk outline in the air, her body insubstantial. In a word, she’s what ancient superstitions would have

called a ghost or disembodied spirit. In all my travels I have encountered strange phenomena, galactic will o' the wisps and lights deep in nebulae where there was no source of light at all. But never before have I encountered a spirit in the form of a person.

The woman is beautiful. Gorgeous, really. Reminiscent of Kelly. But even more deeply reminiscent of my lost wife, Cece's mother. I have never seen anyone who looks so exactly like her before. It takes my breath away, something I always thought before was a mere turn of phrase, but, here I am, not breathing, and not because of any issue with my life support system.

She is, I think, dressed in the clothing of a different era. I do not come to this conclusion lightly, having been to great bustling ports of call like Yloft. I have seen the fashions of half the galaxy, and this gossamer woman is dressed quite unlike anything that is popular in any world or any subculture I have ever encountered.

And her mouth, I am not shocked to note, is open. She is screaming. This is the source of my agony. She simply screams, a being trapped in pure agony of some sort, though whether spiritual or physical I do not know.

And I am glossing over the most disturbing part of all. Though I can see the woman's head through the porthole, I can also see that it is severed. With her arm held aloft, she dangles her head like an ancient lantern. And the severed head simply will not stop screaming.

I glance back over my shoulder. I could return to the *Borgwardt* now, but my pay will be docked and I'll lose my entire bonus for this leap of faith if I do. No, I can't do that. Not with Cece counting on me.

"Kelly," I attempt to say, though I cannot hear my own words, "I'm boarding now."

I look down at my jotter and type out a message.

Voice comms issue. Boarding now.

After a moment, much to my relief, I see a response.

Yeah, I can hear the screaming on my end but turned it off. Some kind of jamming signal? Will work it from this end but no promises. Good luck getting aboard.

Okay. At least I'm not mad. Something is physically screwing up comms, but whether the seeming ghost is a hologram or a previously unknown phenomenon or what, at least it's not just in my head.

From my toolkit I draw a digital lock picking rod. Most pearl divers call them “chopsticks” but my old instructor called them “knitting needles” and consequently so do I. I am shocked at how long it takes to work. I have never seen a knitting needle take longer than a few seconds to crack any door code from any corporation, yet I stand here for what must be minutes, staring through the porthole at my headless screaming friend, waiting to get inside. I draw out a second one to double the calculation power, something I have never done before outside of an “oh shit” simulation.

Finally, grudgingly, as though merely acknowledging my relentlessness, the hatch opens and I finally step inside *Derelictus* proper. At first I am careful not to bother my old-timey, headless, screaming friend. She has not been sucked out into the void, so she either has no physical form, which would support the hologram theory, or exists in a different phase of reality, which is some high-concept bullshit better left to the particle physics team on board to work out than a simple pearl diver like me.

I attempt to place a hand on her shoulder, and it passes right through. No matter how many times I attempt to interact with her, even up to and including moving to occupy the same space as her, she does not acknowledge me or stop screaming.

Fuck this. Lost bonus be damned, I’m not risking permanent hearing loss. Cece needs a mother she can talk to. The corporation will have to understand. I’ll tell them we need to mark this hulk as unsafe for humans to enter. They can send someone else, but I’m the best pearl diver aboard the *Borgwardt* and if I can’t figure it out then no one can. Let AginCorp or the skinwrappers come and endure this excruciating pain. I’m through.

I turn back to the still open hatch.

My ship is gone.

“Kelly!” I cry out, though I can’t even hear the words. The pain from my ear canals is so intense tears are streaming down my face. “Can you hear me? Diane?”

I turn to my jotter, and with a trembling hand, type out a message. I wait and wait for a response, but none comes.

“Kelly, you’d better not have fucking left me here. It’s been ten minutes!”

I check the chronometer on my jotter.

No.

That can’t be right.

I started this salvage at 1730 ship's time on Tuesday the 7th. This says 1328 on Friday the 13th. I sure as shit haven't been here for three days.

Wait.

That doesn't add up. The jotter's calendar says it is now last month.

Dammit! Now even my jotter is betraying me, affected by a computer virus or maybe a deep space phenomenon akin to the screaming spirit. This whole derelict is fucked.

The world is spinning around me. The screaming won't stop, and now it's combined with the gut punch of losing comms with the *Borgwardt*, which seems to have left without me.

I haven't felt this bad since corporate orientation, when I drank about seven beers too many before I was even really old enough to know how many drinks I could handle. I'd spent the rest of my conscious night on the floor, counting fibers in the rug, desperately trying to stave off dizzying nausea until the bliss of blackout unconsciousness had finally taken me. I feel that way again now.

"Fuckers!" I think I say, though I still can't hear anything. I slam my gauntlet on the bulkhead. "You left..."

I don't even get out "me" before my mouth is full of bile and I puke into my helmet. I pass out a moment later.



I awaken to blackness and for a moment I think I am blind. My nose is full of a miserable smell and my ears are still ringing with endless screams. A hell of a way to go. My tongue darts at the poison capsule in one of my fillings, but thinking of Cece I immediately push that thought out of my mind. Still, situations like this are why pearl divers all carry a poison tooth. Lost, abandoned, and blind is very close to a hopeless situation.

But I'm not blind. I just can't open my eyes. I try again and it's so hard it's painful. They're crusted shut with something. My hands naturally scrabble to my face, but, of course, they can't get through my face shield. I

usually don't make rookie mistakes like that, but I'm too fucked up right now. The screaming won't stop and my ship has abandoned me.

What has happened, I guess from the smell filling my nostrils, is that when I puked and passed out some of the bile dried and sealed my eyelids shut. I reach for the safety knob on the front of my boom suit and switch it off. Then I turn the dial from the yellow six o'clock position all the way down to 12:01. That's taking it from my preferred middling gravity level to almost null G. I begin to float inside my suit. My eyelids are floating, too, and after a moment I'm able to open them, not exactly with ease, but easier than before I turned off the gravity.

I still feel woozy but I check my jotter. As I suspected, the damn thing is broken. It's running backwards, and seems to have been since I passed out. It now states that we are ten years in the past. Cece hasn't even been born yet.

I grab my right gauntlet with my left and snake my right arm into the torso of my suit. I rip away two swabs of cloth from my undershirt and plug my ears but still – still! – the horrible wailing does not diminish. It's as though the headless screamer is inside my skull.

Decision made. I will intentionally deafen myself.



Which brings me back to where I began.



When I recover, the screaming apparition is still there, but to my delight I am unable to hear her.

I check my jotter. Still no word from Kelly or anyone else. And the chronometer is still running backwards at a prodigious rate. It is official: I am five years old again.

“Goo goo, ga ga,” I say with a sigh. At least I think I do. It’s strange, the absolute nothing in my ears. I tongue the top of my mouth, wondering at it. I know I’m speaking. I can tell by the movement of my tongue. But aside from the sensation of blood continuing to slough out of my ear canals, I can feel nothing.

I close my eyes but I have to stop that immediately, because Cece’s beautiful face is the only thing I can see, like a sunset dominating the horizon. My eyes snap open again. I check outside the open hatch but the *Borgwardt* remains stubbornly missing.

The grim realization strikes me that they may not have abandoned me after all. Wasn’t there a report of skinwrapper activity in the area just before I left for this dive? Maybe they’ve been destroyed. No, it might not be that bad. Maybe they were simply chased off, in which case they could still come back for me.

Either way, my only hope for salvation is to explore the hulk. I must locate the ship’s superluminal communications array to get in touch with either the departed *Borgwardt*, or, failing that, another nearby Hestle ship. Hell, I’d even take imprisonment by another corporation over starving to death out here. I would not be taken alive by skinwrappers. No one in her right mind would, but that’s putting the cart before the horse. I must raise someone on the comms first before I can accept or decline their rescue.

Once I get a distress signal out a secondary goal would be to find food, water, and possibly breathable air. A boom suit battery lasts basically forever, so it can recycle breathable air basically forever, but it would be better not to have to rely on that. Besides, if I can’t find a livable atmosphere in here every bite of food or drink of water will be essentially as painful as my recent self ear surgery.

“Okay, Cece,” I say aloud, still unable to hear my own words, “time to find my way back home to you, baby.”

I close the open hatch, but checking my jotter it seems the internal area has not repressurized. If there’s a second set of airlocks deeper inside I may still be able to find breathable air, though. I wave tentatively to the headless woman, though she does not acknowledge me.

I take a step and then another. This damnable hulk. The inside is exactly as I would have imagined, all obsidian black. I have no diagram of the ship and can see nothing except the occasional set of lights, resembling the emergency lighting aboard the *Borgwardt*.

I run my gauntleted hand over one set of lights. Clearly these are symbols, possibly letters, but I recognize none of them. Maybe this is an alien vessel after all. I set my jotter's translator app on them, but without access to the *Borgwardt*'s far superior linguistic and translation databanks, it is a hopeless battle. So far all of the runes continue to be translated as question marks.

After nearly fifteen minutes (or negative three months according to my malfunctioning jotter) the knitting needles crack the code of the strange door and I find myself deeper inside the hulk. The hallways of *Derelictus* are shiny and black and impenetrable. Everywhere I look I see sleek nothingness, broken only by the occasional incomprehensible symbols.

I do not know how long or how far I have wandered. This place is a maze and I do not know if I can even find my way back to the airlock where I entered and encountered the gossamer woman.

My mind is racing and I think I have a working theory, but it is too horrible to imagine if true, so I try not to dwell on it. But in the seemingly never-ending darkness there is little else to occupy my time.

It has been...days now, I guess. Time is long past meaningless. According to my jotter it is thousands of years before the common era. I have not hungered or thirsted since coming aboard. In fact, the last sensation I remember truly feeling, aside from desolation and abandonment, is the pain of my impromptu ear surgery. But that, as I said, was an infinity of centuries ago, or maybe a few minutes. And it was before I descended into this labyrinth, when I was still merely on its gateway.

I have abandoned all hope of finding any of my goals. There is no communications array here, nor food, nor a breathable room. It is just me, trapped in my boom suit, until I die.

I go to sleep.



I am shaken awake by a heavy blow to my helmet's faceplate. It rattles every tooth in my jaw.

I look up and am shocked to see the first solid human being since coming aboard. No, she is not entirely solid, but far less translucent than the headless woman. That would seem to lend credence to my thought that we are all existing in different phases of reality aboard this ship, whatever that means.

Just as the headless woman seemed to be dressed in 19th century clothes, this more solid person is dressed in a toga, as though she stepped aboard straight out of ancient Rome. It takes a moment for me to realize that means she is not wearing a boom suit.

She is speaking, her mouth slow, deliberate, as though talking to a fool. I point to my ears, but stop. I glance down at my jotter.

It reads, *Tempus anulus est.*

Then, below it is the translation. *Time is a ring.*

I forgot. Kelly downloaded a Latin translation app into my jotter just before I set foot on the hulk.

"Yes," I reply, still finding the sensation of not hearing my own voice while speaking strange and disconcerting, "I know this theory. The Big Bang is followed by a Big Crunch and time begins again."

The words, backwards to me so that they can be readable to my conversation partner, pass slowly across my glass face plate. She looks quizzically at me at first, amused perhaps by the novelty of our communication method, especially if she truly is from ancient Rome, and given the strange way time works aboard the *Derelectus*, I cannot entirely discount the possibility. But then her amused face turns to quizzical, and it occurs to me that neither the Big Bang nor the Big Crunch would be concepts familiar to her.

"Let me explain," I begin to say.

No need, my jotter replies on her behalf. *I have watched the stars collapse in on themselves and then explode back out, many, many times.*

She turns to a porthole and gestures for me to join her. She points out at the stars. I am so used to watching stars from a starship, that I immediately spot what's strange. The stars are moving, not in their usual fashion. In only the short minute or two that we stand there, I see constellations bloat and change.

This vessel sails through time as though it were a sea. And it cannot stop.

"How do you know that?"

I speak to its original crew sometimes, when we can interact, as you and I are now. This will last but briefly.

I nod. "We'll stop being in phase with each other."

They come from some time a hundred thousand years from now. They meant to travel to the past, but there was a malfunction and now they can never stop or get off. It picks people up by mistake sometimes, as it did with me. But there's no way off. Believe me, I've tried. I got outside once, but only for a few minutes, and even from there, there was no way to escape.

"You left that message on the ship's side."

We are forsaken.

The entire sentence translates from a single word: *Derelictus*. My heart sinks as I finally understand.

"So out there time is passing in reverse. But in here we're...outside of time?"

Yes. You can take that helmet off. It makes no difference.

I plug in the code three times, then punch the button. In the infinity of years and less than a second that I have been aboard this hulk I have already begun to suspect that I am functionally immortal. My head does not explode and I do not have to expel my breath this time. I haven't eaten or drunk anything since I've arrived here. I stop breathing just to test it out. I can hold my breath, it seems, forever.

Feel for your heart, she tells me through my jotter.

I press my finger to my carotid, my femoral, anywhere that a pulse can be felt. There is nothing. It is not that my heart is not beating. It is simply that time is not passing. Our bodies cannot age, cannot decay.

"I can't live like this," I say.

You'll learn to. There is no alternative.

She shows me her wrists, slashed through many times. She has tried to kill herself. No doubt the gossamer woman tried the same, cutting her own

head off. They are not specters, but people from different times which this bizarre anti-time ship has passed through.

She is beginning to fade now, becoming more like the headless woman as her solidity fades.

“Will I ever see you again?”

In a thousand years, perhaps. Or no time at all. It is as random as the tides.

This is purgatory. This is Hell. Not only will I never see Cece again, but the most I can hope for is a conversation with another living being once every thousand years.

There are bad things out there in the universe. I have, perhaps, stumbled upon the worst. I bite down on my tooth capsule, three light bites, two hard, and one more light. As with all things which cannot be undone, I must repeat the code thrice. My mouth fills with a poison a thousand times more powerful than cyanide.

And yet...

Here I stand.

Unmoved.

Untouched.

Perhaps intuiting what I have just done, my fading conversation partner says, *Do not grow desperate. You may still mutilate yourself, as you can see. And trust me, you do not wish to go through eternity without a head or without a hand.*

But I am desperate. I am mad with desperation. The thought of never seeing Cece again is bad enough. But to never see her again and endure that for all eternity?

No. No. Anything is preferable to this. Death a million times so. And I have technology which no Roman or any other phase ghost aboard this ship has ever imagined.

I activate the plasma torch on my gauntlet. I will burn myself to atoms with a fire as hot as a white sun. I turn it on myself and it is a good thing that I can no longer feel pain. The air is immediately dense with the scent of burnt hair and scorched skin.

I hold my hand, quivering, until I must brace my wrist with my other hand. My eyeballs melt in the sockets of my blackening skull, yet still I stand there, holding the torch on myself. My skin sloughs away, turning to ash as it billows upwards. My organs vaporize, all burning away within me,

until, for a brief instant, I am nothing but a charred skeleton, still retaining some semblance of my form.

But even immolating myself is not enough. My body has been smashed to ash, but my consciousness, somehow, remains wholly intact. I am doomed to exist here, formless, on this great, dread vessel for all eternity.

I am forsaken.

Story Notes

(Derelictus)

Length: 7,200 words

Originally Appeared In: *Negative Space: Volume Two*, Dark Peninsula Press

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Connections to Other Work: Takes place during the time period of *Skinwrapper*, features characters and settings from *The Hematophages*.

“Derelictus” is one of my favorite children and it’s going to be a juicy story to dissect. But that discussion will make more sense if I talk a little more about the worldbuilding.

As I discussed in the last set of story notes, *The Hematophages* was a sci-fi take on the vampire story. *Skinwrapper*, the followup, was a sci-fi take on mummies. As I thought about expanding the universe, I decided that each novel or novella would be a sci-fi take on a classic folkloric or movie monster.

Further, I wanted a plan for titling. I had already established that the word for the sci-fi version of the monster would be the title, plurals for novels and singulars for novellas. For short stories I wanted to go in a slightly different direction. I decided the name of each short would be the vessel or location featured in the story.

Attentive readers may have noticed that each of the megacorporations in the Hematoverse have different naming conventions for their fleets, and this is something that Winter comments upon in “Derelictus.” Hestle, the main corporation of the books, utilizes the names of famous explorers and heroes. Trista Borgwardt is a great reviewer, author, and friend of mine. (As is K.P. Ambroziak, the namesake of the lead character in *The Hematophages*, although that is less pertinent to this particular discussion.)

AginCorp, the next most fleshed out megacorporation, utilizes the names of terrestrial animals on a roughly size-based scale. *The Blue Whale* of *Skinwrapper* is the largest ship in their fleet, whereas *Blackfish* and

Patagonian Sea Lion, which we will encounter in the next story, are still large but more modest in scale than that.

My idea with this plan was that it would force me, in the shorts, to flesh out other corporations with different naming conventions because I wouldn't want to name all of my stories in the same fashion. I thought the title "Derelictus" was a particularly clever use of the idea.

Now, "The Blood-Red Lake" is a bit of an odd duck because it takes place on Earth in the past, so there is no vessel or planet or space station to name the story after. And the actual lake of the story presumably has a real name, so I took a bit of poetic license here. But, in a way, this was exactly what I wanted to force myself to do with the short story naming convention rule: come up with clever ways to not keep naming every story "U.S.S. Enterprise," "Battlestar Galactica," etc.

"Derelictus" was one of the first stories I wrote under this rubric. (While it was published first, "The Blood-Red Lake" was written later.) Readers enjoyed *Skinwrapper* but also told me that they missed the people and plot of *The Hematophages* and wanted to find out more about them. A prequel is thin gruel sometimes, although at one point I thought it was the only direction I could go to expand my narrative.

So, while I have been working on a direct, mainline sequel to *The Hematophages*, I took the opportunity with "Derelictus" to revisit some of the characters in the original novel. And that necessarily meant setting it, at least for the first part, on the *Borgwardt*.

Diane, Helena, and Kelly are all characters the fans have met before, though, obviously, chronologically later in their lives. Winter, the main character, necessarily would not have been around for the events of the novel.

Speaking of disposable characters, in *Star Trek* and most science fiction in that vein, the fans rarely gave much thought to the loss of a redshirt. Horrible deaths, usually of characters who were seen only briefly (or never) were just MacGuffins for the heroes to solve some mind-bending mystery. With Hematoverse stories I have found fertile ground in simply inverting the formula, and barreling full bore into the direct, first-person accounts of people suffering some of the worst fates imaginable.

Which leads to another rule I have, so far, used for all the stories set in this world. First-person present is a very odd tense and one that is used relatively rarely in commercial writing. Not never, but not often. If you

don't know exactly what I'm talking about, usually people speak in first-person past-tense: "I went down to the store and got some tomatoes."

While you might on occasion say, "I'm at the store getting tomatoes," if someone calls you on the phone and asks, it's an odd way to narrate a story. Stories are almost always recounting the past. First-person present is a bit of a fake out, then. It's suggesting that somebody's narrating something as it's happening, as though you're right there in their brain, listening to their internal dialogue.

For my purposes, using this style accomplishes two things. First, it makes the horror immediate and visceral, because it's happening (theoretically) in real time. There isn't even the remove of realizing what happened. It's the difference between "It took a bite out of me" and "It is taking a bite out of me." It's living in the animalian ever-present, with no chance to ever process trauma because it's never in the past.

Second, first-person present-tense eliminates any possibility that there could be a framing story. "Of course, as you know, everything turned out all right in the end, because I'm here telling you about it." That's implicit in almost every narrative, and in some cases framing stories are very important to draw a contrast between what happened in the past and what became of it. Private Ryan lived through the war and had a whole family, in stark contrast to all of the guys who never got the chance. No one in the Hematoverse gets a guaranteed happy ending because no one "lived to tell the tale."

It's an off-putting style because the brain is subconsciously wondering the whole time, "how is this story being related?" There is no journal, there is no storyteller, somehow, magically you're just behind the narrator's eyes. And without that, the story kind of doesn't make sense. But I'm okay with that. For a horror piece, I don't mind if the reader is put off or uneasy. In fact, I desire it.

Video games use the first-person present narrative in a certain sense. You "are" the character you're playing in most cases. So, when Aric Sundquist put out an open call for survivor horror stories a la video games like *Dead Space* or *Resident Evil*, submitting "Derelictus" was a slam dunk, and much to my delight, it was accepted into *Negative Space 2: A Return to Survival Horror*.

Finally, let's talk about the origin of "Derelictus." The idea came from one of my favorite writing prompts for horror: what is the worst fate you

can imagine happening to you? One of the glorious and generally unexamined things about science fiction, I think, is that there are so many horrifying answers to this question. With time travel, space distortion, mind control, and the like all sorts of personal Hells can play out for all sorts of characters.

My first published anything anywhere ever, a drabble called “Clockwork Offal,” featured in *Yes, I am a Vampire*, set out to answer the question of the worst possible fate when I wrote it in 2013. “Derelictus” is another pass at the idea by a more mature writer, as, in a certain sense, is “Blackfish,” the next story in this book.

Blackfish

One month.

I am busy carving the sixth diagonal tally mark of my stay here in quarantine into the bulkhead. It is tough trying to scrape away plasteel with a sharpened spoon, but I have nothing else to do today.

Except my exit interview, I suppose.

If the vectors of cosmic destiny are kind I'll be out before the day is up, free to finally meet my baby girls. I pause work on my final tally mark to pull out my jotter and pull up the photograph Samantha sent me. It is the only outside communication which the IT department has allowed through to me in the past thirty days. They have not allowed me to make any transmissions myself and seemed grudging about even letting the photo through.

I understand IT's concerns. The Fereen were legendary for their knowledge of genetics and computers both. If anyone could have developed a biological disease transmissible by a communication signal, it would have been them. And so I must be completely quarantined, both physically and technologically until the infirmary and IT determine I'm over what I picked up down on that moon. Or they might decide to blow me out the conveniently located airlock I am carving into.

In any case, they let my wife's photograph go through, perhaps to keep me from slitting my radial artery. I've already read every novel, pamphlet, and instruction manual I had saved on my jotter before entering quarantine five times over. I'd kill for something new to read, but most days I just stare at the girls.

I have no idea what their names even are. I've memorized every line of both of their faces, but I have no idea what to call either. Samantha and I discussed a few options during the pregnancy. She liked to joke with me about it. Peanut Butter and Jellinda. Frances and Earnestina, so she could call them Frank and Earnest.

Honestly, I don't much care what they're called, as long as they're both healthy. If Samantha really went through with scribbling some nonsense on their birth certificates, I'm never going to protest. But the tradition in my family, going way back to the old days before we'd come over to AginCorp from our Cartie roots, was to name kids after the moms. No generation in

my family had gotten an original name before the third sister came along. So, if I had my 'druthers, the beautiful little ones would be Sam and Annie.

I sigh, long and impotently. Sam and Annie. Sam's the one on the left. My namesake is on the right. That's how I think of them anyway. Little healthy girls with ten fingers and toes. I've counted the fingers on "Sam's" left hand a hundred times. It's the only limb that's visible in the shot. So, she has five at least.

I go back to scraping at the airlock bulkhead, trying to get my latest crosshatch about two centimeters deep, the same as the other twenty-nine I've carved so far. It had been hardest for the first ten days or so, when my symptoms had been at their worst. My knuckles had felt like they were trying to crawl out of my hands, and I could barely hold anything. My jaws had felt like they were distended, trying to escape my skull. The whole thing had been nightmarish. But over time the pain – as well as all the *other* symptoms – had diminished.

A clucking tongue announces its presence. "I really wish you wouldn't do that."

I nearly jump out of my cot. The shiv clatters to the floor.

Ms. Dillinger, the head of the records department, stands in the antechamber to my isolation cell. That wall is transparent plasteel, so, to all appearances, save a little buildup of dust and the odd scratch, she could be standing in the same room as me. Similarly, the intercom system is so invisible and perfectly calibrated that if I didn't know better, I might think I was just chatting with a colleague and forget I'm trapped in an airtight, soundproof dungeon.

"Ms. Dillinger," I whisper.

She is a severe woman. Everything about her appearance is severe, from her hair bob to her pantsuit, neither of which are popular styles aboard the *Blackfish*. I hardly know her, except to see her in the hallways. We're not even on a first name basis.

"Anneka," she replies crisply, belying my last thought, but I'll be damned if I can even remember what her first name is. "I see you've been scratching up that wall for a while now. That's really not safe."

"I guess," I say, gesturing at the airlock, "but so has everyone before me."

Soon – well, not real soon, maybe in another year or so – the entire wall will be taken up by tally marks. Then some poor welder will have to come

in and smooth the whole thing out so the process can start all over. Ms. Dillinger isn't wrong, per se, in that gradually weakening a bulkhead wall is never a good idea. But this is not how I want to spend my first human interaction in over a month.

She unfolds a chair and sits down. I pick up my sharpened spoon from the floor.

"Well, I'm done anyway."

"In more ways than one, let's hope," Ms. Dillinger replies, a big, distressingly false smile splitting her otherwise normally miserable face in such a fashion that makes me think it's the first time she's ever done so.

"Yes, let's hope," I agree, not quite amicably.

"Are you ready for your exit interview, Anneka?"

"I've been ready for a month now."

She pulls out her own jotter and, rather unnecessarily, a large, old-fashioned stylus with a beaded chain. The chain, I realize, is around her neck. Honestly, she doesn't need anything to tick off boxes on her jotter, so I don't understand the purpose of this device. It must be some kind of shibboleth for records employees.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Can you just mark the correct response on all of those questions?"

"Anneka..." she says testily.

"I feel perfectly physically healthy today," I respond.

"And mentally?"

I glare at her. She lowers her stylus and gives me the first authentic look I've probably seen from her ever, as rarely as we interact with each other.

"Anneka, I don't want to be here any more than you do. There are a trillion other, more valuable things I could be doing, but my supervisor ordered me to attend to your exit interview personally, so I don't really have a choice. And you and I both know the only thing standing between you and your wife and daughters..."

She taps her jotter meaningfully.

"All right," I say.

We buckle down and get through the first few hundred questions in less than an hour. Mostly I know when a "Yes" is called for, but every once in a while the questionnaire makers seem to have thrown in an answer where "No" is expected, seemingly to ensure that test takers are actually paying attention when filling in the bubbles. Ms. Dillinger doesn't offer me any

answers, per se, but she does glare at me hard when I seem about to respond incorrectly, and on at least three occasions repeats the question, carefully emphasizing the words I need to hear to make the correct selection.

I'm not entirely sure what the purpose of all the health questions are. This room is designed to scan its occupant non-stop, all day, every day. They already know the location of every stray hair on my body – and there were plenty of those in the beginning of quarantine. But, dutifully, Ms. Dillinger completes her task with the records department's equivalent of gusto.

"Good, good," she says finally, "the hard part's over with. How are you holding up?"

"Could I have a glass of water, actually?" I ask.

Ms. Dillinger nods and gestures to my food and beverage storage unit. I forgot for a moment that it is not up to her. This device is entirely cut off from the food supply of the rest of the ship, for obvious reasons. I haven't had a decent, fresh piece of fruit in a month. Everything is freeze-dried or worse. I press a few buttons and the device provides me with a glass of my own delicious, recycled urine.

"All right, now tell me what occurred on the ice moon."

I pause, purse my lips, and look at Ms. Dillinger. "This is the essay portion of the interview?"

She nods. I take a deep breath.

I pause mid-thought, my lips trembling. I had actually been about to tell her about kissing Samantha goodbye, pressing my forehead against her belly as I had before each mission in the preceding eight and a half months, and wishing great luck and fortune to my daughters. I don't know why I thought the story started there, although, I suppose the fact is, for me, it did, and the story will not complete until I finally lay eyes on my twin daughters.

"How much background do you need? I mean, is this report for us or for..."

I gesture vaguely "up," indicating the suits back at AginCorp HQ.

"Most of the report has already been prepared. Anything to add?"

She holds up the screen of her jotter and presses it against the transparent plasteel. This is an odd way to do business, but I can't blame her. I'm still not supposed to receive transmissions until I've cleared

quarantine. I look it over, gesturing occasionally for her to scroll when appropriate.

They've got the basics down. For anyone who failed remedial galactic history there's a recap of the fall of Fereen civilization two hundred thousand years ago. The writer has an elementary knowledge – she's clearly no xenoarcheologist – but she nails the broad strokes. I wrote my thesis on the late Qruum Dynasty, so I would have worded it differently, but her analysis is frustratingly error-free.

Biology dictates civilization, she gets that right. The heavily muscled, furry race, each individual nearly twice the size and build of the average human, were such capable laborers and so quick and untiring moving overland and swimming that they never developed much technological transportation.

Instead, they turned inward, developing gene-splicing and computer simulation technology which dwarfs even modern day human accomplishments. And then, ironically, they were wiped out by a climate catastrophe and were unable to colonize even their nearest moons since they had never developed even rudimentary space travel.

Or so we thought.

Six weeks ago the *Patagonian Sea Lion*, on a routine milk run dropping off tourists and the odd wide-eyed grad student to the Fereen homeworld, detected a sub-liminal transmission. I nodded with satisfaction that the captain had at least been wise enough to follow the protocols people like me had been warning about for decades. They hadn't accepted the transmission, which could very well have wreaked havoc with the Sea Lion's telecoms array and, quite possibly, personnel. Instead, they reported back to HQ, and the *Blackfish* was dispatched to check it out.

After we made our preliminary examinations of the ice moon we discovered something extraordinary: a ziggurat in the planetary-facing southwest quadrant. It had been covered in ice for millennia, and only recently had a slight change in the homeworld's orbit brought it closer to the suns and warmed the ice moon enough to reveal the architecture.

The background is all there already.

What the report's writer leaves out is that it should have been noticed centuries ago. The robber archeologists who first "discovered," by which I mean, "pilfered" the Fereen civilization (the kind of scumbags who made jerky for their pack animals out of the mummies) always just took it at face

value that the Fereen never left their own atmosphere. They never bothered to survey the moons. And, in the cardinal sin of xenoarcheology, every succeeding generation assumed that the oldheads had done their due diligence.

Which put me in the unique position of discovering something new, something revolutionary, even, in a field long since considered to have been completely picked over.

“Well, we had a lengthy discussion in the xenoarcheology department about how best to explore the ziggurat and limit the damage that a Fereen transmission could do.”

“What kind of damage could a transmission from a dead society do?”

“Well, we believe that when the Fereen understood their planet was going to become uninhabitable they sought out ways to transmit their genetic code to other species. In some cases it would not be voluntary.”

Ms. Dillinger does not seem shocked, although this is very much verging on pseudoscience. “So other species might be forcibly transformed into Fereen?”

I nod. “At least, it’s a danger we’ve considered. It’s why there’s a longstanding regulation not to accept any transmissions from Fereen technology. It wasn’t really a problem until six weeks ago, so we’re fortunate the *Sea Lion*’s comms department followed rules to the letter. Meanwhile our IT department did everything it could to study the transmission from the ziggurat. That’s in the report. And ultimately those of us responsible for the physical examination settled on sending a single explorer.”

“Why were you chosen?”

“I was the Fereen expert onboard. Most xenoarcheologists consider Fereenology kids’ stuff and focus on less well-known species. But in this instance my interest in kids’ stuff put me in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.”

“So what happened when you landed on the ice moon?”

I pause, trying to work up the words for a response. How to explain perfection? How to boil down the cosmic ballet into a sentence?

“I’ll never forget the moment I first laid eyes on the ziggurat. To think that those creatures built this monument with their bare claws. Even after a lifetime of studying their ways, I am still, at times, taken aback by what they were able to accomplish. They developed atomic theory thousands of

years before the comparable philosophical data points in other species, and yet they never invented the internal combustion engine. And this ziggurat was a testament to a completely solipsistic species.

“When I first set the boot of my boom suit on the lifeless surface, my breath was taken away by the sheer scale of it. Humans, even when trying to build monuments to their own egos, always think in a certain scale, a scale of a species that is two meters tall at best. The Fereen were twice that size, and it showed. It was enormous. Internally it was decorated with glyphs, some of which we’ve never seen before.”

She’s no doubt seen the photographs I took.

“How is it possible that a species that never developed the rocket reached their own moon?”

I pause, thinking back. I suppose I’m what you would call fluent in Fereen and yet the stories described on the walls of that ancient and cyclopean structure were flummoxing. All I had were guesses.

“Desperation, I think. I think they turned their computational technology to the problem. And after running tens of thousands of simulations in the space of a few years, determined how to get offworld. But even then time was short. What should have been a thriving colony on the ice moon lasted only a few generations. Long enough to develop a strange new dialect, but not long enough to save the species.”

“Do you recall what happened before you passed out?”

Surprisingly direct. My boom suit was recording everything I said and did, so they should already know.

“I was attempting to examine a computerized altar.”

“Do you have any knowledge of how to utilize such a device?”

What a stupid question. The same lunatic “experts” who chopped the Fereen mummies into jerky ripped out all of the computers. A few multi-trillionaires across the galaxy must own a few intact copies, completely contrary to the bylaws of any corporation, but they’re certainly not letting the xenoarcheology community know about it. There’s a passage or two in a book or two from the robber archeologist era, but that’s about it.

“No. No experience whatsoever. But I’m as close to an expert as anyone’s ever going to find.”

“Do you know what your actions caused?”

Hmm. Perhaps they’re going to try to nail me on incompetence. That would be a new one. But I remember. Oh, yes, I remember.

“I did nothing,” I said. “I got as far as trying to start the ancient computer and then...”

There had been a blast of purple energy. The thing was ancient. Hundreds of millennia old. If I hadn’t destroyed it by starting it, anyone else would have. I had pressed the most basic input, the simplest Fereen glyph. “On,” it might translate to, or simply “yes” or “peace” or “life.” Anyone would have pressed that button, anyone with an iota of knowledge.

“And then you woke up here?”

“Yes.”

“Can you describe your symptoms over the last thirty days?”

Pain. That’s it. Pain. My knuckles shifting, my muscles bloating, my jaw distending. Hair everywhere one moment, then back to my usual self the next.

“You think I set off a computerized Fereen retrovirus transmission? Anyone would have done it. It was the damn on switch.”

“I just asked about your symptoms.”

“Join pain. Inflammation. Nothing special. And it subsided after a few days.”

Ms. Dillinger nods. “We all suffered...much the same.”

My eyes widen. “The transmission reached the ship?”

She nods. “We have all been dealing with the symptoms you’ve described. Pronounced hairiness. Muscular pain. Bone density shifting and changing. As though the Fereen, reaching out from two hundred millennia in the past, were attempting to change us all into their failed species.”

“Then you kept me here...”

Her eyes are glowing embers. They weren’t keeping me in quarantine because they were worried about me. They were worried about themselves.

“A last line of defense.” She points at my jotter. “The director had set up a dead woman’s switch which would have given you total control of the *Blackfish*. With an explanation, and an official order to blast us all out into space before re-oxygenating the ship and returning to AginCorp space.”

I am shocked, but...not that shocked. Stories of catastrophes like this are impossible to ignore. We’ve all heard them, we’ve all seen holo movies about being a sole survivor, event films like *The Manifest Destiny*. In some ways the company likes to prepare us from birth to take their orders in the event of such a disaster. I can’t even say, in the brief moment that I give it consideration, whether I would have refrained from spacing my wife and

two daughters. It's something that's been ingrained in us from the earliest moment of our lives.

"I think that's everything," Ms. Dillinger says, "unless you have something to add?"

I shake my head. "No. I just want to meet my daughters finally."

Ms. Dillinger's face falls. "I'm afraid that's not possible right now."

A darkness falls over my field of vision. In a moment it will turn into a redness, but for now I work hard to regulate my breathing. "What do you mean?"

"The nursery is off limits right now. You may visit your wife, of course, and any of your colleagues that you like. But there are...concerns about the infants."

I fly at the transparent plasteel separating us and Ms. Dillinger recoils in surprise, then attempts to regain her dignity. There was no way I was ever going to break through the barrier.

"Are they all right? My girls? Are they healthy? What's the matter?"

Ms. Dillinger holds up her hands in mock surrender. "Your children are perfectly healthy and perfectly safe. There are just...concerns. You can't see them right now."

Oh. Oh. They're worried about exposing someone like me to newborns. They think the virus can be passed on. They think the children are more susceptible to it.

From her posture, I can see that Ms. Dillinger is waiting for me to reassure her.

"I understand," I say. "The company knows what it's doing. I'll...wait."

She nods, without smiling. "That's very...mature of you. This concludes your exit interview."

With her stylus, she punches a few more buttons on her jotter. The final report submitted. Every "I" dotted and every "T" crossed.

The transparent plasteel wall opens at last. I walk up to Ms. Dillinger, a smile on my face, as though I am nothing more than glad to be there. The edges of the grim line of her mouth tug lightly upward.

She is surprised, as I knew she would be, as I wrap my arms around her in an embrace. She pats my arms rather than truly returning the hug, as though to say, "I am tolerating this, but the feeling is not mutual."

Then I position the point of my sharpened spoon on the back of her neck. Just hard enough to draw blood and let her know that I am serious. If

I press now I will sever her spinal cord. I am not an expert in anatomy and I do not know precisely where the space between her vertebrae are, but we both know I am serious.

“What are you thinking?” she hisses.

“I’m thinking you’re going to take me to see my daughters.”

Our eyes are centimeters from each other. Hers are darting. She is thinking.

“Anneka,” she says, feigning calmness, “Trust me, you don’t want that.”

“Trust me, I do.”

“Anneka, you don’t...”

I twist the point of the shiv. Not enough to do any real damage, just to remind her that it’s there.

“Stop talking,” I say, “and take me to the nursery immediately.”

She purses her lips. My fingers flutter on the handle of the spoon and I press it, just slightly, but it’s enough. She’s done fighting me.

I step out of the way, without removing the shiv from her neck, and she proceeds to the outer hatch of the prison area. With her passkey she opens it and we proceed into the hall.

“Can you just remove the...”

“No.” I know what she’s going to say. Just remove the shiv and she won’t protest. She’ll take me where I want to go. But I’m done playing.

“If we run across a security patrol...”

“I don’t care. Get us there without running into a patrol. Or else you go from hostage to corpse.”

She swallows a lump in her throat. She walks, tentatively at first, like a newborn colt, but slowly finds the rhythm of moving with a tiny blade just barely piercing the back of her neck.

It has been so long since I have wandered the hallways of the *Blackfish* that it’s surreal to be back. I used to know every inch of this ship like the back of my hand, but now it’s like visiting a ghost of a place I used to know.

The prison block is not far from the nursery. I don’t really know what I’m going to do if we run into another employee, let alone a security goon, but I am hellbound and determined to see my daughters. They can dock a month of pay. Hell, they can dock a year of pay. I don’t care. Most likely HR will sweep it all under the rug and things will just be awkward if I ever have to see Ms. Dillinger from now on.

It turns out to be a pointless anxiety. We don't come across anybody. And in just three heart-pounding minutes we're at the hatch to the nursery. I finally pull the shiv out of Ms. Dillinger's neck. A tiny bead of blood trails down her back, but she is essentially unharmed. Her hand nevertheless shoots up to clutch the back of her neck.

"Open it," I say.

She fixes me with a steely glance.

"Anneka, this is a really bad idea. Just...don't do this."

Her voice cracks and I realize it's not just being threatened that's panicking her. What's wrong with my babies? What haven't they told me?

"Are my daughters dead?"

Dillinger opens her mouth and then closes it again, shaking her head. "No."

My heart unclenches. "They're ill?"

She pauses. "Ill. Yes. You shouldn't see them."

"Let. Me. The fuck. In."

She moves her card to the panel of the door. Her entire affect right now is saying, "I tried to warn you." I don't know what all the cloak and dagger is about, but I'm past caring. It's been thirty days I've been cut off from my entire life and I don't care why they want to keep me from seeing my daughters, but I'm through with it.

I walk through the hatch. There are thirty cribs lined up, six rows of five, just like a classroom. I check the screen on the wall. There are only seven occupied cribs right now. I'd be shocked if the thirty cribs ever get all filled up.

I smile. So, Samantha was thinking of me when she signed the birth certificates. Two of the cribs are occupied by Samantha and Anneka Norris.

I walk over, ready to meet my daughters for the first time. Sam and Annie. They're what have gotten me through my incarceration.

I pause at the lip of my final dive. I can picture both of their faces in my head. Every contour, every centimeter. Then, smiling, I finally look.

It is Ms. Dillinger shaking me now. I've been...gone for a few minutes, I suppose.

"I tried to warn you," she says.

I make no movement.

"They...I don't know. I'm not a doctor. But I guess in adults our bodies are...stronger? Every human cell has been rebuilt so many times, it's...the

RNA. Something. I don't know. But for a newborn..."

She trails off. It is best that she does.

My babies, my beautiful Sam and Annie are gone.

They are not my children. They are small, hairy wolf-like creatures. Twice the size of a normal baby, stretching the limits of their cribs. The remnants of an ancient civilization, one that I have studied all my life, reaching out through the limitless millennia and demanding to be reborn.

Story Notes

(Blackfish)

Length: 4,400 words

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Connections to Other Work: Set in the universe of *The Hematophages*.

As I mentioned earlier, my debut novel *Braineater Jones* was published in 2013. For you aspiring writers out there, industry-standard publishing contracts are for five years, so don't ever sign a contract with a publisher for longer than five years without consulting some professionals.

So, as you can probably infer, the rights for *Braineater Jones* came back to me in 2018. In the intervening years I had learned enough about the industry to begin self-publishing, or at least to dip my toe in the pool. Christ knows I've learned so much more since then it's embarrassing and I keep learning more every day. Perhaps it's more accurate to say: I was arrogant enough to think I could start self-publishing in 2018.

I was also smart enough to know that calling yourself self-published is dumb. So, like most self-publishers I invented a company and a logo to put the patina of respectability on my self-published works. I wasn't a self-publisher, I was published by French Press Publishing! Why, look at the back of this very book you're holding, I'll bet it's got a fancy logo on it. For all you know, based on that fancy logo this book was published by a bunch of movers and shakers in New York City ("Yeekhaw!") and not by me in my basement.

Anyway, fast forward to 2022 and my good friend Somer Canon was having a rough time. She'd been burned by a number of publishers, but that's her story to tell, not mine. My part of the story is I realized I had the wherewithal – editing experience, cover artist contacts, etc. – to publish other people as well as myself. I told her all I could really promise her was

that I wouldn't fuck her over and her royalties would all go to her every month, on time, but, sadly, in the small press world, that alone clears a pretty high bar.

With the publication of Somer's *You're Mine* the dam, so to speak, opened. I mean, not really, because the proverbial water which has poured over the proverbial dam is five books and two anthologies, but, still, I began publishing a few other people alongside my own work.

Joining me in this publishing endeavor is Kayleigh Dobbs, whose canny marketing is, in all likelihood, the reason you are reading *The Hematophages: Splatterings* right now in the first place. Kayleigh serves as my acquisitions editor and, so, whenever we go on an acquiring blitz I tell people what I'm looking for (the *Dune* of horror) and what she's looking for (werewolves.) For our second anthology, I finally let her get it out of her system and just made the subject werewolves.

I always insert a story from each of the editors into the anthologies I edit. I recently learned some people consider this gauche, but, gauche or not, it's the decision I made for *Strange New Moons*, so I knew I'd have to come up with an idea of my own.

I honestly figured we'd get a bevy of robotic and otherwise science fictiony werewolves, being as the submission call was for unique and unusual takes on the mythos, but we got hardly any and accepted none. So, on the one hand I was spared having to come up with a truly revolutionary idea, but on the other hand, I knew I'd have to muck about in the Hematoverse to find something that would work.

For even more background on "Blackfish," perhaps more than you can reasonably tolerate, the Fereen are a practically antediluvian invention of mine. I'd venture to say I came up with them in 2003 as part of an unfinished (well, unstated, really) story called *Starboy*. (The reason I can trace this to 2003 without even checking my hard drive is because I clearly cribbed the title from the classic Loren Bouchard/Brendon Small joint *Home Movies*.) *Starboy* may eventually see the light of day in some version because I'm still kicking it around, although I doubt it.

In the worldbuilding for *Starboy*, the Fereen were a reptilian race so obsessed with pack hierarchy that when they developed a society they had to know exactly what number in the pecking order they were, even if it was into the billions. With the advent of technology they began wearing electronic numbers on their chests at all time in order to be able to always

recognize their superior and inferiors at a glance. And that was about it for the Fereen for a while.

I joined the army and around 2006 I met a fellow officer who is not a public figure so I will not name him here. But we began planning to write a role-playing game of all things, with his insight being that there is not truly great sci-fi RPG. (At least, that was the case in 2006. I'm not sure if it still is.) We planned to call it *Second Star*, in reference to Peter Pan/Captain Kirk's directions to Neverland, "Second star to the right and straight on 'til morning."

My friend was experienced in rules and game theory, but he lacked skills in what's referred to as "fluff" in RPG writing, that is, background information and story hooks. I, on the other hand, can hardly tell a D6 from a D20, but in my night job I do nothing but write fluff! I sent him practically all of the worldbuilding notes for various novels on my hard drive, and the Fereen was one of four species which caught his interest, with one caveat:

He wanted them to be furry.

So, I refined and redeveloped the race for our as-yet still unpublished RPG (I'd venture to say now that twenty years have elapsed with no forward progress it's never going to happen.) But when the time came to write my story for *Strange New Moons*, I figured the Fereen, whether in reptilian form or lupine, were my intellectual property since I created them and developed all of the lore surrounding them. And so, ironically, the Fereen made their debut in neither *Starboy* nor *Second Star*, but in the Hematoverse.

The origin of "Blackfish" is similar to "Derelictus" and several other stories before it. I asked myself what the worst possible fate that could befall someone is. The body horror of an alien species transforming humans into themselves is neither unique nor original. Nor is the whole genetic ark/message in a bottle angle. But as I toyed around with it, I realized that the greater tragedy might not be in what happens to you, but in what happens to those you love.

This, then, is my answer to what the worst fate that could possibly befall a parent is. There's nothing worse than losing a child. And Anneka has "lost" her children in the sense that she'll never be able to watch them grow or have families of their own or even live as people. But in another sense she is stuck with these new creatures, these horrific cuckoos. She'll be stuck

always knowing that her children are trapped in some sense in those cages of otherworldly flesh.

I'm glad I cut the story off where I did, but I can envision a whole other story set a few years later about the ethics of dealing with the Fereen changelings. Would euthanasia be appropriate? Would it be legal? Would they even be able to communicate with the creatures? Would Anneka be driven to the utter brink of madness seeking a "cure?" Or might she have already simply taken her own life in despair?

Well, hell, now I guess I have to write that. I've never written a sequel to a short story before.

The character of Dillinger is named after Gavin Dillinger, who was the co-author of my latest novel, *Looney!* Doubtless there is a female equivalent to the name Gavin, but I decided to take the path of least resistance and just make her Ms. Dillinger.

Oh, one final point of interest. Since the story was to appear in a werewolf anthology, my plan was to call it "Sea Wolf," in keeping with the AginCorp vessel naming convention and my own short story naming system. But if you've never assembled a werewolf anthology before, let me assure you there will be no lack of "Wolves," "Moons," "Claws," or "Fangs" in the story titles. (Seriously, people, take the titles in a different direction from now on.)

So, I reverse-engineered the problem. I looked up what animals are known as sea wolves and came up with two: the Patagonian sea lion, which is also mentioned in the story as a different vessel, and the orca whale. But I didn't like "orca" or "killer whale" because they both seemed weirdly specific for having nothing to do with the story. So, I settled on a *different* nickname for the orca – "Blackfish." It felt appropriately mysterious.

Now, finally, let's close with an original written exclusively for this mini-collection.

Gerstein

A castle in space.

The image, I suppose, is a childish one, born of a girlhood misspent reading colorful, three-dimensional holobooks about gruesome dragons, noble knights, and the code of chivalry, all of which probably never really existed. Nevertheless, it is a pervasive one that seeing *Medical Satellite Gerstein* with my own eyes through transparent plasteel does nothing to dispel.

“Any response?” I ask the room, my hands clasped formally behind my back, fingers of each wrapped around the wrist of the other.

It is how the crew would imagine a cheerless debt collector to stand, and so I strike the pose as much to maintain my profession’s creepy, unwholesome aura as for any practical reason.

“None so far, ma’am,” the Public Affairs Officer says, firmly and politely.

The woman is probably used to no work more strenuous than copying and pasting memoranda into the proper format before sending them in a shipwide communique. She doesn’t like me here, making her sing for her supper. I don’t care.

“Keep sending it,” I say, putting a firm, unwelcome palm on her shoulder, “exactly as written.

The PAO nods.

I don’t care what anyone in the command suite thinks of me. They are a hired crew, half a step up from a taxi service, really, and by and large beneath my notice so long as they deliver me to my destination, which they already have. But all debt collectors are charged to uphold a certain mystique. It goes easier for all of us if we act like hostile jerks to everyone all the time.

I draw up the facility’s specs on my jotter. I didn’t pay that much attention to *Gerstein*’s history when reviewing the case, but now that I am looking at it, I am wondering what the hell the plan was here.

Apparently the medical satellite was the brainchild of LifeCo :)’s R&D department. The concept was to experiment with conducting construction directly in space, with materials mostly found there, rather than building

something planetside and launching it into orbit or hauling all of the components into the ink launch by launch.

The main construction material in space being rocks, the medical satellite had been carved out of an appropriately shaped and sized asteroid.

There is no reason, I suppose upon reflection, why a space station could not be made of stone. Assuming the stone were not overly porous, it would be airtight. The main problem was entry and exit, so an airlock had been constructed with standard plasteel, looking for all the universe like a bigger asshole than me. But past that, the entire facility is laser carved out of solid rock.

The idea, as it turned out, was a total flop. What LifeCo :) has saved on material transit had paled in comparison to the cost of hiring extravehicular laser carvers for monthslong hitches. They had abandoned the grand plans for *Gerstein* less than halfway to completion. Apparently the relative basement of the place was littered with half-finished tunnels which had at one point been intended to be entire wings of the facility.

And so here I stand, staring at a one-of-a-kind, unfinished floating space castle.

I hold out my hand to the PAO, who obligingly hands me the microphone piece of her squawker.

“*MedSat Gerstein*,” I say flatly, though not emotionlessly enough to be confused for a voidface, “this is Senior Agent Willa Berlifitzing, representing Surety Collections. I could threaten you. But I don’t need to, do I? You know what I’m holding in my hand right now.”

This is a misnomer, of course. There’s no physical object in my hand. But everyone thinks that the fiscal nuke is a physical thing, a switch on a box, I guess, that once flipped can never be unflipped.

The actual process is a little more boring. I actually fill out a few forms and send them to my supervisor, who will countersign and forward the packet on to the appropriate case officer on Surety Prime, who will then actually process it. It takes a few hours plus transmission time, so it’s not quite as fast as flipping an off switch.

But the result is the same. Every bank in the galaxy, including megacorp internal credit unions, will immediately blackball the client. In this case, it’s the sixty-seven nurses, doctors, orderlies, and administrators inhabiting *MedSat Gerstein*.

Once fiscally nuked, their life savings will be gone and they'll never be able to access another fraction of a chit for as long as they live. Instant financial death. Perhaps someone could learn to hunt and build a cabin after that, but otherwise, literal death will soon follow, and, worse, perhaps, your inheritors will receive nothing from your lifetime of efforts.

"If there's anyone alive over there, I recommend you unclench your big plasteel anus and let me in. Otherwise, I'll be happy to turn around and leave. You have sixty seconds to respond."

I might have said "comply," but somehow letting them think the decision is theirs always plays better. This isn't my first rodeo, not by a longshot.

The squawker crackles to life seventeen seconds later, a record. I always time them.

"This is Dr. Frederica Metzen, *Gerstein's* Medical Director. You'll forgive me for my delayed response to your auto message. I'm knee-deep in very important research."

"Of course, Dr. Metzen," I purr back to her. Why not let them think their lie is convincing? It hurts me not at all.

"I will, of course, grant you access if you wish, Senior Collections Agent. But first you must sign our quarantine waiver and agree to remain here for the duration."

A quarantine. Well, that's a fresh one. Often there's a canid or a broken airlock, but I've never been confronted with a confabulated quarantine before. It doesn't matter. The key is getting your foot in the door, then making sure they can't nudge you back out.

"Yes, of course there's a quarantine, Dr. Metzen. I'll sign anything you like. Expect me imminently."

The PAO opens her mouth and then almost immediately closes it. Why should she tell me anything? I've only rented their ship for the trip here. An overpriced cab, on Surety's deci-chit.

"Something I should know?" I say, and the woman jumps with a start.

"Well...actually, Senior Agent...there *is* a quarantine notice in the sector."

"Show me."

She pulls it up on her vidscreen. The notification is vague at best, and the fact that they retained such a pointless communique at all makes me question the PAO's judgement.

“A bad outbreak of worms on Yloft? I will attempt to avoid eating any raw meat which may have originated there. Ready the dinghy.”



Metzen herself is there to greet me at the airlock. That in itself is unusual. Normally I have to pass a veritable gauntlet of flunkies before meeting anyone with even an iota of authority to settle a debt.

Based on her voice, I expected Metzen to be a wizened old-timer in a lab coat, maybe glasses and a bob to complete the stereotypical ensemble. But she is nothing like I imagined.

If the woman's over thirty I'd be shocked, which suggests a precipitous career trajectory. The manic glint in her eyes seems to confirm this, as well as telling me she'd rather be anywhere, doing anything at all rather than greeting me. The feeling is more than mutual, and I wonder again why she didn't send a lackey in her stead.

“Senior Agent Berlitzing,” she says, inclining her head slightly, albeit in no way deferentially, and surprising me by correctly spitting out every syllable in my impossible-to-pronounce surname.

“Dr. Metzen,” I sniff, “LifeCo :) would appear to have a serious problem here.”

Metzen hefts an eyebrow up into the air. “None that I'm aware of.”

“You've been turning away patients. Your facility is hemorrhaging profits.”

“Turning away patients is actually mandated during a quarantine, Senior Agent,” she says, folding her arms as though trying to explain the quadratic equation to a particularly dense patch of moss.

I snort.

“I hardly think an outbreak of worms on Yloft should be affecting treatment in the Horsehead Nebula. Stock up on antiparasitics.”

Metzen stares at me as though I've lost all of my faculties. “This is hardly ringworm, Senior Agent. Do you really have no idea what's going on in the sector right now?”

“The sector is a bit outside the scope of my remit. However *Gerstein* not drawing a profit decidedly is. If you don’t have an excellent remediation plan, I’ve been authorized to repossess this facility. And by the way, this is more a concern for security, but one of my mothers was killed by one, so I’ll say it anyway. Patients turned away from a facility like this are prime recruits for the skinwrappers. Swelling skinwrapper numbers in this sector is worse than a dereliction of duty, it’s practically terrorism!”

Both of my mothers are perfectly fine. I just want to put the fear of a vengeful deity into the woman. But little to my surprise, it doesn’t work. She probably has no conscience.

“You’re worried about skinwrappers and late utility bills? Very well, then, Senior Agent, I think you do need a tour of the facility. And a bit of an education.”

It’s rare that a deadbeat manages to put me on the back foot. But her behavior is flummoxing. Well, I suppose there’s no harm in it. I’ve heard every excuse in the litany of very weak excuses. I doubt Metzen can impress me with hers, but why not hear her out? She seems like a madwoman.

I sign her farcical quarantine form and as soon as we pass beyond the airlock I am reminded of *MedSat Gerstein*’s bizarre and unique architecture. The black, rock hallways strung with hanging lights remind me more of a planetside mineral mine than a hospital.

We pass into the emergency department. The counter and much of the “furniture” has been carved directly out of the rockface, another intended cost-saving measure. But I’m sure it’s done them no favors with repeat patients. I’d never seek medical treatment in this prehistoric-looking place. Thankfully, there are jotters and vidscreens in the appropriate alcoves, otherwise I might think that I’d truly stepped into an antediluvian castle, or, better yet, a Neanderthal’s cave.

Then I noticed the oddest element of the ED.

“Where is your staff?” I ask.

“As I stated earlier, Senior Agent, we are on lockdown.”

“Mmm,” I mutter. It’s not an answer, but I don’t wish to push this particular point. If there are no patients coming in, I suppose there is no reason to man the triage station.

“Come,” she says, gesturing down a hallway that leads to the Intensive Care Unit.

There is still no nursing staff here. However, all of the rooms are occupied by patients. I glance into the first one and am shocked to spot a decapitated head in an mechanical bell jar.

The technology to preserve a severed head has always simultaneously intrigued and repulsed me. A bevy of wires and electrodes connected to the head, some internal and some external, somehow manage to preserve some semblance of what we call life. A rather lengthy section of still-attached spine dangles from her neck, wagging like a tail and making her resemble some kind of perverse tadpole.

I've watched a number of holo-documentaries on the subject and yet I've never encountered a preserved head in person before, though I've shut down many hospitals. The preservation procedure is exceedingly rare, reserved only for the rarest of cases and richest of clients.

Privacy rules be damned. I step into the patient's room, practically daring Metzen to stop me. She says nothing and I don't look back.

"You've never seen a decapitation patient in real life, I take it?"

Damn. I hope I haven't spoiled my mystique by gawking at the medical marvel. This is her domain. She's trying to make me feel like a rube. Damned if I will.

"No," I admit, returning to my power posture position, "but I've done some research on the subject."

"It's a fascinating procedure, really. Notice anything odd? Anything you've never seen in a holo-doc before?"

She hands me a flashlight. Taking it, I notice it is tacky, though not slick, with some kind of clear gel, a disinfectant, perhaps.

Before shining the light into the bell jar, I wave a hand in front of the patient's eyes. She is either asleep or drugged up. Too bad. I would have liked to get her perspective.

Then I notice what Metzen is talking about. The patient wouldn't be able to speak to me even if she were awake.

"What is this green fluid she's suspended in?"

Metzen's lips carve a light smile into her face.

"You're very perceptive, Senior Agent. That is something I've just developed to help combat the outbreak. It's a weak, low-nutrient replacement for human blood, combining with numbing agents and sedatives."

"What would be the value of that?"

“It would keep any parasite that consumes blood malnourished, lethargic, and weak.”

She holds out her hand for the flashlight. Only after I have returned it to her do I notice she is wearing latex gloves. She probably didn't even notice the disinfectant gel coating.

Metzen turns to leave, but I don't move. Some riddle is tickling the back of my mind. The decapitation procedure is exceedingly rare, reserved only for the rarest of cases and richest of clients.

“This patient came in before the quarantine?” I ask.

“Actually,” Metzen says, “this is a member of my staff. A victim of the outbreak you don't believe is of any significance.”

“What was her condition before infection?”

“Kacey was perfectly healthy before the infection.”

I hope my eyes don't widen in alarm. Our battle of wits is far from over, and I don't care to cede the slightest ground. Still, whether or not I express it externally, I am shocked.

“Then you gave her the procedure in response to the parasites?”

Metzen seems far away.

“It was the only option. The only way to keep the parasites...placid. Euthanasia would have been more humane, but LifeCo :) has refused all of my requests. ‘The human capital is too valuable,’ they say.”

I hope my lower lip doesn't tremble.

“How many requests for euthanasia have you made?” I ask, my mouth dry as bone.

“Sixty-six,” she replied quietly.

On a station of sixty-seven. She's the only one left.

I place one hand on my sidearm and the other on Metzen's chest. She doesn't resist as I slowly direct her back into Kacey's room. Not turning my back to her, I draw my plasma pistol and back into the hallway.

I'd been so enthralled by spotting a decapitation patient that I hadn't looked into any of the other rooms. But now I am horrified to see that every room contains a mechanical bell jar.

Metzen has removed the heads of her entire staff.

“Your personal finances are impounded,” I say, though my voice sounds far off and my head is swimming. “This facility is impounded and...”

“Senior Agent!” Metzen cries out.

She's there on top of me. Despite my best attempts to fight back, she has my by the elbow and is...holding me up.

"I know it's a lot to take in," she says evenly, "but I haven't gone mad. Please, will you let me show you something?"

I shake my head, but the simple movement makes me so physically ill I nearly vomit. Something's...happening to me. But Metzen isn't taking advantage. She's assisting me, like a swooning patient.

I'm so lightheaded I can't even keep my thoughts straight. But we are moving along, the ground almost floating beneath us.

We pass through wing after wing of the hospital. And it is a charnel house. Unseeing eyes stare at me from behind green fluid suspensions. Spinal cord tails waggle involuntarily. Room after rock-carved room is full of her staff, women she must have known, women she must have hired, women she must have eaten lunch with and laughed with every day.

Soon we are in the bowels of the hospital, the strange, liminal, unfinished place. Every stone corridor in Gerstein feels strange and medieval, but here they are half as wide, roughly hewn, with only a few tributaries sprouting off into dead ends. This must be where the laser miners gave up when the project proved not to be cost efficient. It feels like being deep inside an insect's hive.

My neck is flaccid, so she must physically direct my gaze toward a naked skull ensconced in the wall.

The skull has been sloppily stripped of most of its flesh, but bits of meat and tendon still cling to the crevices. It sits in a small alcove with a bowl-like depression filled, little to my surprise, with the green numbing fluid.

Metzen props me against the wall because I can no longer stand under my own power. She dips a finger into the green goo and sucks at it like a child would a sugar treat. I open my mouth to ask a question, but my mind is too hazy to speak.

"The plague started with just one vector. Her. She's ObRep, if you can believe it. A voidface doing the one thing voidfaces never do: laughing, smiling, joking. Simulating the full gamut of human emotion. That's how we knew something was wrong. So, we scanned her, inside and out."

She holds up her jotter, an advanced medical model. She scans the skull in the alcove. I am no expert, and my eyes are impossibly blurry, but I have seen such imaging before from time to time and I don't see any worms burrowing through it or anything else odd. There is the grotesque matter of

a brain still hiding behind a flayed skull, but aside from that the scan looks normal.

I shake my head, still unable to speak.

“I know, you’re not an expert. But my crew was. And they found nothing. Every brainscan was perfectly ordinary. And yet?”

Metzen raps on the skull three times in slow succession, as though entreating for entry at a ghastly manse on a dark, foggy moor.

And the skull begins to bleed.

From its empty right eye socket a trickle of red effluvia begins to drip, and then, within half a minute blood is pouring out like a miniature waterfall into the green fluid below.

I then watch, equal parts enthralled and horrified as a lank, skinny worm – no, an eel – slowly winnows its way out of the eye socket. The thing is gaunt-looking, unhealthy, shaking with ague. Its jawless mouth works, and its eyes, sunken into its wrinkled and withered flesh, plead for mercy with all the seeming of a sentient being.

It coughs, to the extent that such a creature can. Its mouth is crusted with dried blood, and it vomits up a little more. I have never seen a well version of such a monstrosity, but I cannot imagine it is healthy for any species to vomit up a veritable plume of blood every time it tries to move. The thing is deathly ill. The result, no doubt, of prolonged exposure to Metzen’s green numbing solution.

Meanwhile, the chap of the skull shudders, as though attempting to open. Some internal sinew might be working which has not yet been stripped away, or perhaps the eel-like creature itself is simply shaking, but the effect suggests the skull itself wishes to communicate.

Metzen comes and drags me back to my feet, since I have sunken to the corridor floor.

“This is your ringworm infection, Berlitzing. They hate us. They hate us and they hate us and they want to destroy us. And even with all of our medical science, we can’t even detect them. I don’t know what it is, some natural camouflaging technique or some skill they plucked out of one of our brains.

“That’s what they do, you see. They burrow through the body and into the brainpan, devour most of the brain and then connect to the very base of the spine. They learn whatever they can from the stump of our minds and then they control us like puppets.”

I have no words, even if I could express them. I gesture desperately.

“Oh. You think this is cruel. Don’t let its pitiful appearance fool you. These creatures call themselves poet-warriors or some such nonsense. I suppose it’ll be incumbent upon me to develop an actual taxonomy, but frankly that’s been at the bottom of my to-do list.

“This particular specimen is...oh, its name is some sentence-long affair, but it boils down to Lays a Lot of Eggs. And she sure did lay a lot of eggs. Eggy infected my entire staff before we could even come to grips with what was going on. I had to secure myself in my office and release knockout gas throughout the rest of the facility. Sort of a gaseous version of what I put on that flashlight.”

Stupid. Stupid!

I’m not ill. I’ve been drugged. I struggle to escape, but it’s pointless. I’m too far gone. Metzen comes and cradles me in her arms, rocking me back and forth like a child.

“Don’t worry,” she says, “you won’t feel a thing.”



My eyes flutter open. The world is hazy. Hazy and...

Green.

I swallow, or, attempt to, but there is no phlegm in my throat because there is no throat. The haze is lifting. I am neither in a gurney nor a wheelchair. I am suspended in a bell jar in a thin, green viscous liquid. And the bottom of my spine is dangling from me like a tail.

“Help!” I mouth, but no noise escapes my lips because I have no lungs.

I can see my lungs. Well, I can see the torso that contains them, and the rest of my body, lying on a bed across from me.

Metzen rises from a carved rock chair. She is in full surgical scrubs, her apron still spattered with my blood. She pulls off one of her latex gloves.

“Welcome back to the world of...well, it’s life after a fashion.”

My mind is no longer clouded like before. The effects of the drugs have mostly worn off, and it occurs to me that is probably because I have been

reduced to a scant five kilograms or so of body mass.

In any case I am shouting, screaming, yelling a hundred things at her, all derogatory, some threats. But not a word of it is audible

“Yes,” she agrees, placing a hand on my bell jar as though patting me on the back, “I’m afraid it’s going to be a rather one-sided conversation from here on out. So let me attempt to guess what’s on your mind. One word at a time is better. I can attempt to read your lips.”

I scowl and fume but there is no value in it. I can do nothing in this state but play her game. I have no tokens left to play my own.

“Others,” I exaggeratedly mouth.

“Oh, others will come for you? Who? Those hired cabbies? I already told them you were staying for a while to give me a full audit. They’re long gone.”

My heart sinks. Well, no it doesn’t. I’m no longer attached to it. Perhaps...perhaps I should have been nicer to the transport team. Learned some of their names at least. Maybe they wouldn’t have been so quick to abandon me.

“And if Surety wants to send somebody else after you later, that’s fine. I can always use more test subjects.”

“Test...subjects?” I mouth. This time Metzen has no trouble identifying the words.

“Well, of course,” she says. “What do you think I’ve been doing here all this time? I won’t let my staff’s sacrifices be in vain. I swear it. I already developed the numbing agent. That’s a palliative of sorts, as is the decapitation procedure, but I’ve hardly found a cure yet. There must be something that can destroy the poet-warriors without harming the hosts. There’ll be a lot of death, but there is in every plague.”

I shake my head...my whole body...or try to, but I have no shoulders anymore with which to do it. Instead, frustrated, I mouth, “Not sick!”

“‘Gnostic?’ Oh, ‘Not sick?’ You’re not infected yet. Well, ‘infested’ is probably the more appropriate word. No, you’re not. So, to be of any value to my research we’ll have to fix that.”

Metzen tucks my bell jar under her arm and departs the operating procedure for Eggy’s alcove. Again, she knocks three times on the leering skull until the tortured alien pukes up a stomach full of bilious blood and emerges from its lair.

Like a snake charmer, Metzen snatches the neck/body of the gaunt poet-warrior. It burbles in her grasp, clearly pleading for mercy. I would join in its intonations, but I suspect there is nothing akin to mercy left in this madwoman.

Metzen reaches slowly, almost gingerly into the right eye socket of the skull and withdraws two tiny objects, fragile, oval. A moment later she has dropped them into my bell jar, and they pass my eyes sinking to the bottom.

“It’s too bad you had to threaten to turn out the lights on me, Senior Agent. I really bear you no ill will. But I can’t afford to let you or anyone stop this project. The future of humanity could rely upon us and this is just the first of many, many drastic steps humanity will need to take to stop the spread of these monstrosities.

“We will find a cure together, you and I, Senior Agent. Maybe not today, maybe not for many, many years, but we will find it. Here on *Gerstein*.”

Outside, I suppose the Horsehead Nebula is glimmering in the light of distant stars as it always does. Inside, I wait for two tiny eggs to hatch.

Story Notes

(Gerstein)

Length: 4,400 words

Originally Appeared In: *The Hematophages: Splatterings*

Publisher: French Press Publishing

Original Publication Date: March 16, 2026

Connections to Other Work: Takes place in the Hematoverse, shortly after the events of *The Hematophages*.

Here are the main complaints I have received over the years about *The Hematophages*, along with a brief response to each:

1. Why are all the characters female?

Some version of this has been far and away the most common comment I've gotten on this universe.

When I started planning this novel, I looked to stories like *The Thing* for inspiration. A surprising number of old sci-fi movies featured all-male casts with no commentary. This was a holdover, I suppose, from war stories prior to female military integration, but still, people just wrote all-male casts without ever really questioning it.

I wondered, as a writing challenge, if I could get away with writing an all-female cast without anyone noticing. It was never meant to be social commentary or rage bait, just a quiet challenge to myself.

Then people began noticing. They began telling me how long it took them to notice. Some people never realized until practically the end. Some people got to the second or third chapter before going back to double check. I thought it would just be a subtle way to check sensibilities. And, if

challenged on it, I would say, “Would you have mentioned it to me if everyone in the crew were male?”

In-universe, the explanation is very simple. I’ve never thought male colonists to space made sense. If you’re going to the expense of sending someone to a new world with an intention of populating it, a man can’t have any children. So you can double the colony’s children by sending only women and a jar of sperm.

Presumably, as medical technology advances, semen could be synthesized and all babies could be kept female. And once that was the norm, why would you stop? This is a universe, after all, where cold, soulless corporations rule and the bottom line is everything. Why would they ever choose to let a baby of the less productive gender be born?

2. You can just *tell* a man wrote this.

I would have hoped that was obvious from author photo.

This is my glib response, but, honestly, I’m over it. Roughly half the time I get compliments on how well-written the female characters in *The Hematophages* are, and the other half I get the complaint that the women are cardboard cutouts.

Objectively, I think my female characters are fine. I dare venture to say that some of the outrage over me being a man is performative, because I’ve yet to see someone point out a particular point of contention. Is it the fact that some of the characters are thuggish soldiers? Well, in a universe of only women, some of them are bound to be thuggish soldiers. Some of them are also conniving executives, and others are nerdy scientists.

There is an ugly side to men writing women, obviously. I don’t think I’ve written any “she boobed along boobily” passages which seem to be all the rage to make fun of right now on social media. But neither will I entertain, on the very opposite end of the spectrum, that only a woman may write from a woman’s perspective, or any other iteration of that perfidious notion.

If artists do not have permission to attempt, however well or poorly, to inhabit minds outside our own personal circumstances, then we are

essentially told to abandon all empathy. I mean, what the fuck is the point of art if not to try to understand somebody else's perspective? I wish to attempt to put myself into the shoes of other types of people of all walks of life, so, sorry if it offends you, but I'm going to keep writing female characters. Tons and tons of female characters, in fact, so learn to deal with it.

3. There's too much sex. What's with all the sex? Ugh, sex.

This is one of the more perplexing complaints to me. There is precisely one sexy scene in *The Hematophages*. Two of the characters clearly intend to have sex. Then one of them is attacked by a space eel bursting out of the other's eye socket.

So, by my count that's not even one full sex scene. The main character is a bit lustful from time to time, but that's part of the human condition, yes? "Would you like to denude the earth of all the trees and all the living beings in order to satisfy your fantasy of rejoicing in the naked light?"

Oh, fuck, even that Bulgakov quote has the word "naked" in it. Maybe *Splatterings* is getting too sexy, too! I'd better go have a bowl of corn flakes.

4. The monsters "drive" people around like "cars?" Am I to believe there are cars in the distant future? Boy, I really hope somebody got fired for that blunder.

Unless you think people hop in their interstellar starships to pop around the corner to the bodega, there probably are.

Again, glib response first. I get that the mention of a "car," which seems kind of pedestrian and contemporary, in a story ostensibly set in the far-flung future sort of breaks the spell. I suppose I regret using that turn of phrase in that one instance, considering how many people have expressed their displeasure about it.

“Puppet like a marionette” I suppose would have been better, although I’m not one hundred percent sure why the idea of people still having Punch and Judy shows but not automobiles in the future makes any more sense, but there it is.

5. The thing about everyone fucking until they look like Brazilians is not how that works.

I don’t really understand this complaint. Brazil is a real-world example of a place where taboos on race-mixing collapsed in a multicultural society, and, as a result, some people have a unique appearance. I didn’t exactly write a doctoral thesis on the topic, but it is definitely a real thing that actually happens and not something I made up. See also: Mexico.

I didn’t even actually come up with this trope. Appropriately enough for a middle-aged white male, I abrogated it from Mexican author José Vasconcelos’s 1925 novella *La raza cósmica*. In fact, my characters even refer to themselves as members of “*la raza cósmica*” in the text, in honor of the fact that I decidedly did not make up the idea of everybody fucking until there’s just one color of pudding.

I don’t want to accuse my critics of racism, but unless the argument is just, “the construct of humanity that we call race will never fully go away” then I don’t understand this complaint. I think space colonists will absolutely not worry about what color their partners are. But, what the hell do I know? Elon Musk is the one planning to colonize Mars, so maybe Space Apartheid will be a thing after all.

6. Why didn’t the hematophages show up on any medical scanners?

This one keeps coming up and I guess I understand the complaint, but I also went back to re-read the novel and it seems, to my mind, to have been rather straightforwardly explained on the page.

When the power goes out aboard the *RV Borgwardt*, the crew is forced to use the “spoon test” to check one another for infestation. They literally scoop out an eyeball and peer into the suspect’s brain. So, at this point they clearly have no power available to access their medical equipment.

Later, there is a scene where an anti-espionage agent is interviewing a character who may be infested. At this point, knowledge of the existence of the hematophages is not widespread. During that scene there are several hints that the hematophages are controlling the character’s physiology in order to avoid machine detection and psychologically manipulating the spycatcher into letting them by.

It’s not so much that there is no technology which can detect a hematophage in the brain as that these particular hematophages in this particular situation managed to outwit the humans charged with finding them. Moriarty won and Holmes lost.

But people keep telling me it’s a plot hole, so...“Gerstein.”



“Gerstein” is the sole original piece in *Splatterings*. I mean, it’s pretty goddamned likely that, unless you’re my biggest fan, you haven’t read any of the other stories before, either. And you certainly haven’t read the story notes, because these are all original. So, there is a ton of original content in *Splatterings*. But, still, I felt guilty about not including an exclusive.

To be perfectly transparent, my original intent was to throw one of the short stories in my metaphorical trunk in here. By my count, I have one and a half of those.

Let me clarify. I have two completed short stories which *could* have fit the bill. The first one, “Deep Search,” is a take on space mermaids. I wrote it in 2023 specifically for an open submission call for unusual interpretations of the mermaid mythos. It was not accepted for that, nor has it been accepted subsequently.

As a matter of fact, “Deep Search” is on submission right now. There’s little honor among thieves or writers, but I do try to stick to my professional

ethics as much as possible. You're really not supposed to waste an editor's time by submitting a story, making them read it, and then having no intention of placing it with them because, say, you already published it in your own mini-collection.

So, "Deep Search" would have one hundred percent fit the bill as a previously unpublished Hematoverse story. In fact, if I hadn't just told you, there's no way you would have known I hadn't written it exclusively for this book. And it is an amazing fucking story. Both broadens and deepens the mythos. But I don't want to fuck over the editor who might be considering it this very second.

The other story, "Papermouth," follows the same conventions as my other Hematoverse stories (the title is a vessel/location, the tense is first-person present, etc.) However, I'm not sure it works. I'm not sure I even want to claim it as a Hematoverse story. Maybe it's better as an unrelated sci-fi/horror piece. Maybe it's better never seeing the light of day.

Nevertheless, I could have also very easily slotted "Papermouth" into this mini-collection, and I am on a fucking deadline and this thing needs to be done, like, tomorrow, or I'm not even sure I can get it printed in time for release.

But both of those options felt like cheating. I mean, trust me, there is absolutely a version of this manuscript on my hard drive right now with "Deep Search" jammed into this very slot. But for you, my friends, I decided a trip back to the Hematoverse deserved a fresh dip into the blood ocean.

"Gerstein" mostly started as an attempt to answer the medical scanner complaint. As I mentioned before, I don't really think the medical scanner complaint is deserving of an answer, but now you have one anyway. So, enjoy.

Of interest here, this story is a semi-pastiche of Poe's "Metzengerstein." I wanted a mad scientist as an antagonist and so I decided to go for a more gothic feel. I considered simply naming the antagonist Metzengerstein, but it seemed lengthy and on-the-nose, so I broke it down into the name of the antagonist ("Metzen") and the name of the facility ("Gerstein.") I also briefly considered calling the story "MedSat Gerstein" but that would've just been confusing.

I am by education a Germanist, and "stein" means "stone," so once I had the title it suggested to me the conceit of a castle in space. I could

pretend like there's a deeper meaning to the title by backward-engineering an explanation, but anything like that would be a lie. I did place the facility in the Horsehead Nebula as a nod to the horse imagery in Poe's original.

And with that we've reached the end of our visit to the Hematoverse and environs.

Afterword

So, there you have it! Three incredible stories you're unlikely to have read before, one I guarantee you've never read before, and a whole lot of behind-the-scenes insights you probably didn't read at all. A lot of bang for your buck, if you ask me.

I'd like to conclude by talking a little bit about the future of the Hematoverse.

The Hematophages (2017) was a surprise hit for me and *Skinwrapper* (2019) was very warmly received. Both were published in limited edition hardback as well as multiple languages (the only time I've accomplished that feat) and to this day routinely make me money every month. I have perhaps lost the thread in not following up on this unique and oddly beloved world in the last six years.

But the truth is I've been working on it this whole time. Look at the publication dates on the stories contained within this volume. Two in '23, one each in '25 and '26. Plus the unpublished but completed "Deep Search" (2022) and "Papermouth" (2024.) At least once or twice a year I revisit this world. You, the reader, just don't always see the results.

Which leads to my semi-secret shame. There is fully a third of a mainline direct sequel to *The Hematophages* on my hard drive called *The Flesh Machines* (originally *The Hematophages II: Genocidal Rage*) which I haven't touched since 2022. There is also a "sequel" of sorts to *Skinwrapper*, by which I mean a novella-length story expanding on the lore of the various factions in the Hematoverse, entitled *Voidface*, which has similarly lain untouched since 2023.

I want to remain current and I don't. I want to remain timeless and I can't. And I want to deliver every gory, goopy, surprisingly cerebral word to you, my fans.

But I want them to be perfect. And there's something daunting about writing either a sequel or a semi-sequel to the works which, in a lot of ways, define my career. I have a similar problem with revisiting The Welcome Mat of *Braineater Jones*. Can I capture that essence again? Can I recreate the work of an author I used to be, an author a decade or more my junior? Can I do right by my fans with a sequel? Or will these just be looked on as callous cash-grabs?

So. Enough wallowing. Here's the real purpose of *The Hematophages: Splatterings*. I want to know if I've still got it. And I want to know if you still give a shit. If this weird little abomination of a book gets anything like traction, then I'll take that as a green light to go full speed ahead with *The Flesh Machines* and *Voidface*.

I've been failing and failing and failing lately. I've lost huge sums of money writing and publishing every year since 2018. That year – the year after *The Hematophages* was published, and probably not coincidentally the year it was nominated for a Splatterpunk Award – was the last time I made any money in this business. I made five hundred dollars in 2017, then I made five thousand dollars in 2018, and if you thought I went on to make fifty thousand dollars in 2019 based on that trajectory, you would be mistaken.

I immediately began losing money every year since. Writing has become an expensive hobby for me. I used to dream that it might one day turn into a career, but that goal now seems perennially out of reach.

So let us make a covenant, you and I. I don't believe in much, I believe in nothing supernatural, but I have always felt that inasmuch as destiny may exist, it is my destiny to write something great. If I pulled out of the Hematoverse too soon, if I've been too tentative or too equivocating, if a short story every few years is not enough, signal me with a lamprey-shaped spotlight and I shall return.

Otherwise, perhaps this will be it.

God that's a bleak fucking ending. Well, at least no one can accuse me of not delivering another one!

Stephen Kozeniewski
Air Studio International Headquarters
January 17, 2026

Author's Note

Thank you for reading *The Hematophages: Splatterings*. Whether you liked it or not I hope you'll take a moment to leave a review on Amazon or your favorite book review site. Reviews are vitally important to me as an author both to help me market my book and to improve my writing in the future. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go out first and foremost to the editors who originally accepted these stories in their anthologies and websites.

Big thanks also to Nicholas Day for the cover, and to his business partner Don Noble, who has done me many solids in the past. I would also like to thank Kayleigh Dobbs for her invaluable assistance in marketing and promoting this book.

Finally I would be remiss if I didn't express my undying love and gratitude to my wife, Amy Grey. Thanks for everything, Boo-Boo.

About the Author



Stephen Kozeniewski (pronounced "causin' ooze key") is a Splatterpunk Award-winning author and two-time World Horror Grossout Contest champion. His published work has also been nominated for the Voice Arts and Indie Horror Book Awards, among other honors. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife and their two cats above a fanciful balloon studio.

**And Don't Miss the Nightmare That
Started It All...**



THE HEMATOPHAGES



STEPHEN KOZENIEWSKI

2018 Splatterpunk Award nominee

Includes the bonus novella prequel, *Skinwrapper*.

Doctoral student Paige Ambroziak is a “station bunny” – she’s never set foot off the deep space outpost where she grew up. But when she’s offered a small fortune to join a clandestine salvage mission, she jumps at the chance to leave the cutthroat world of academia behind.

Paige is convinced she’s been enlisted to find the legendary *Manifest Destiny*, a long-lost colonization vessel from an era before the corporations ruled Earth and its colonies. Whatever she’s looking for, though, rests in the blood-like seas of a planet-sized organism called a fleshworld.

Dangers abound for Paige and her shipmates. Flying outside charted space means competing corporations can shoot them on sight rather than respect their salvage rights. The area is also crawling with pirates like the ghoulish skinwrappers, known for murdering anyone they can’t extort.

But the greatest threat to Paige’s mission is the nauseating alien parasites which infest the fleshworld. These lamprey-like monstrosities are used to swimming freely in an ocean of blood, and will happily spill a new one from the veins of the outsiders who have tainted their home. In just a few short, bone-chilling hours Paige learns that there are no limits to the depravity and violence of the grotesque nightmares known as...

[The Hematophages](#).