

The Undercroft



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The Undercroft

Contents

- 1 - **Editorial** - *Daniel Sell*
- 2 - **Between the Cracks** - *Simon Forster*
- 5 - **The Pit of Flesh: A Bestiary** - *Daniel Sell*
- 9 - **The Storkman** - *Matthew Adams*
- 11 - **Piteous Potions** - *Tony A. Thompson*
- 13 - **The Briar Witch** - *Matthew Adams*
- 15 - **That Which Slips Between** - *Luke Gearing*
- 19 - **The Snailing** - *Matthew Adams*
- 21 - **Blood** - *Simon Forster*

Illustrations

- Cover - *Cédric Plante*
- 4 - *Simon Forster*
- 5 - *Claytonian JP*
- 8,9,13,19 - *Matthew Adams*

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Layout, editing and design

Daniel Sell

Proof Reading

Daniel Martin
Andrew Shipman
Andrew Smith

Contact

Matthew Adams

www.rumblecityrumble.blogspot.com

Simon Forster

www.theskyfullofdust.co.uk

Luke Gearing

www.antlerrr.blogspot.com

Claytonian JP

www.killitwithfirerp.blogspot.com

Cédric Plante

www.chaudronchromatique.blogspot.com

Daniel Sell

kysaduras@live.co.uk

www.whatwouldconando.blogspot.com



Open Up and Let the Devil In

an editorial

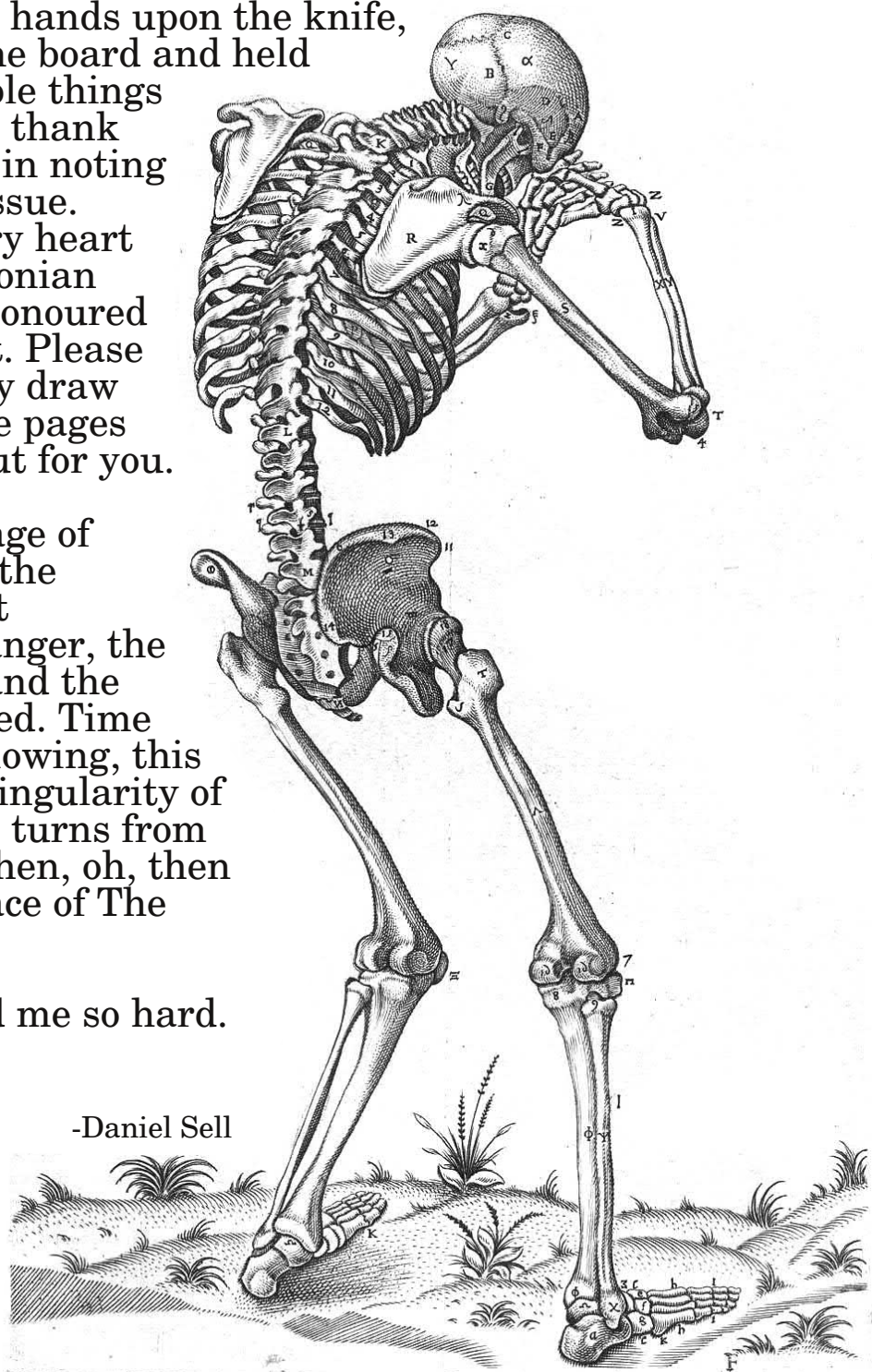
The Undercroft crawls into its second issue, slightly stretching out the legs. It's a tight fit but the number two suits it; the minimum multiple, the difficult second album. Forgive me for parading around for a while. Would you read me? I'd read me.

This season we see many hands upon the knife, many names pinned to the board and held accountable for the terrible things we are about to do. And I thank them. It can't be avoided in noting the powers driving this issue. From the cover to the very heart of it, we here at the Melsonian Arts Council have been honoured with a profusion of talent. Please take the time to laggardly draw your weary eye across the pages they so lovingly etched out for you.

Now in the veritable dotage of issue two we start to see the themes of The Undercroft solidify; the Weird is stranger, the Horror is more graphic, and the company ever more refined. Time and willing complicity allowing, this will continue towards a singularity of unpleasantness until one turns from these pages in disgust. Then, oh, then we shall know the true face of The Undercroft.

I'd read me hard. I'd read me so hard.

-Daniel Sell



Between the Cracks

by Simon Forster

Once there was a sorcerer-chemist who dared to summon *That Which Slips Between* (see page 15). He was foolish and ill-prepared and died as he finished drawing a circle with which to trap the creature.

The sorcerer's abode lies beneath what is now a pool, which acts as a barrier, preventing *That Which Slips Between* from escaping the dungeon below. Unfortunately, the bank of this pool of water is eroding and in 1d6 weeks time, it will collapse, enough to ruin the circle and remove the barrier.

The locals have heard the legend that a wizard once dwelt beneath the pool, but no one believes it; that slab of stone, just the foundation of a fountain long since gone. But legend has it that the wizard left a great treasure below the ground, and tomb robbers might well be drawn to such legends.

The Summoning Pillars

Five monolithic pillars are embedded in the rock, each carved with runes and sigils, arcane formulas, and complex patterns. Anyone attempting to read them must make a *Save vs Magic* or be befuddled for 2d6 rounds (as a *Confusion* spell). There is dust on the floor between them, where the ritual glyphs were etched before being consumed by the summoning of the creature. Any summoning attempted inside this ring of stones gains a +5 bonus to the caster's Domination roll, and there is a 1-in-6 chance that the potency of the ritual is increased: the summoned creature has **twice** the Hit Dice it was meant to have.

The Wizard, the Circle & the Stores

Lying on the floor, hand stretched out and still grasping a piece of chalk is the desiccated remains of the sorcerer, his body riddled with holes. His hand reaches into a chalk circle, around which *That Which Slips Between* moves along, following the curve; it will continue to do so until the circle is broken or washed away.

Against the wall are several boxes and barrels. The food, water and alcohol they once held have long since rotted away or gone sour, but there are also several (2d4) mundane items that an adventurer could salvage (roll randomly on an appropriate equipment list).

The wizard's corpse wears soiled robes of a pale blue, decorated with constellations and formulas. Aside from the piece of chalk he has nothing of interest on him.

The Stone Lectern

A heavy tome of thin silver pages and golden covers sits atop a lectern of stone. The book is untitled but contains the ritual for summoning *That Which Slips Between* as well as the arcane spells of *Instant Summons*, *Seven Gates*, *Summon* and *Unseen Servant*.

The Library-Laboratory

A modest laboratory and library reside here, valued at around 4,000 sp. There are jars and boxes of ingredients (enough to brew 1d6 potions of the referee's choosing), as well special inks for inscribing scrolls (enough for 2d4 scrolls). There are also three potions that are still viable, and three scrolls that were completed before the sorcerer's demise. There are also half-dozen incomplete scrolls that can be finished at half the normal cost (random spells, levels 1-4).

Potions

1. **Fisherman's Friend:** grants water breathing for 2d6 hours; also grows gills on the drinker, causing suffocation in air;
2. **Blindman's Bluff:** makes the drinker blind but any lie they tell is believed, no matter how outrageous. The effect lasts for 2d6 turns;
3. **Statues:** makes the drinker invulnerable to any and all attacks, magical or otherwise, for 2d6 hours, but only by making them into an obsidian statue.

Scrolls

1. *Contact Other Sphere;*
2. *Summon;*
3. *Trap the Soul.*

The Bedroom

The sorcerer's living quarters hold a plain bed, the sheets rumpled and soiled; a table with a charred and blackened top; a wizard-locked chest (cast at 15th level) that holds 345 sp, 34 gp, and 54 cp, as well as the sorcerer's spell book (a dozen random spells from levels 1-4, half-a-dozen of levels 5, 6 and 7; two of each of the others), and a magic ring; and two bookshelves, valued at 500 gp and mostly concerned with history and astrology.

The Magic Ring

A platinum ring wound with copper wire shaped like flowers, with a circle of tiny diamonds. Inscribed inside the rim are the words *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*.

When worn the wearer is not only rendered *invisible* (as per the spell, when visible it takes a full turn to recharge) but those within 10 feet completely forget that the wearer was there; this radius expands by another 10 feet for every turn the ring is worn. There is also a 1% chance that the memory loss is permanent, and that the wearer of the ring is forgotten; check each turn the ring is worn. Friends and family are allowed a *save vs magic device* to resist the memory wipe.

Hurðmere

A perfectly circular pool of water, with a slab of stone beneath the water; a door that leads to the abode of a long-dead sorcerer and alchemist. A rusting yet sturdy ring of iron is fixed to the centre of the slab; a rope and a few strong men or a mule could pull the slab free.

Opening the stone door will flood the cavern and caves below, stopping just at the top of the steps to the stone lectern, and at the closed doors of the library-laboratory and the bedroom. The chalk circle will also be mostly washed away, releasing *That Which Slips Between*.

The Library-Laboratory

The Summoning Pillars

The Bedroom

The Stone Lectern

The Wizard, the Circle & the Stores

The Pit of Flesh: A Bestiary

by Daniel Sell

Transplasmic Organic Bifurious Inductors

Or tobi for short. Created by the Wizard of the Silver Tower to absorb the dangerous plasmic outpourings of his more ambitious magical works, over time they were utilised as more general and convenient methods for disposing of waste. The old mage was known to put them to trimming the grass and eating table scraps as well as disposing of excess plasmic residue.

Because of its chimeric birth and the variations in disposal needs, the tobi are an immensely malleable species. Their form and function can be changed quite simply, thanks to the ingenuity of the Silver Tower's gene vats. With access to the right equipment even the most deficient farm boy could manage to produce a passable variation.

The most fundamental feature of a tobi is that it absorbs matter, physical and plasmic, and transforms it into slurry. Typically this thick soup will be drooled from its mouth in a steady flow unless specially designed to store it or instructed to relieve themselves somewhere specifically intended for it. The smell and viscosity of the drool will vary depending on various factors, though primarily influenced on its recent diet.

Highly receptive to plasmic interference, the tobi can be altered readily by a competent sorcerer with a firm grounding in Fundamental Transgressive Plasmology. Modifications include, but are not limited to: invisibility, form-mimicking, height reduction, teeth removal, hair transplantation, voice inclusion, blindness, liquefaction. The Silver Tower's gardens have been kept trim and tidy because of specially designed tobi. One whose lips can distend, pucker, are prehensile and exceedingly abrasive. They can daintily nibble off the tips of grass or strip the flesh from a burglars hand as though it were a fine, grilled chicken leg.



Some example tobi diets and their uses:

Refuse. The smell will be truly awful and the flow a steady stream. Unless it has been instructed to deposit it elsewhere, the area will be covered in the stuff (save vs. paralyse each round or slip up in the filth). It stinks but is actually a highly nutritious meal if you can stomach it.

Genetic run-off. Sometimes an experiment goes wrong and the aspiring vivimancer needs to dispose of a subject before it learns who its father is. These tobi will have particularly large mouths and an expandable gut full of caustic fluids. If the tobi receives more than 6 damage in one blow it will spray acid from the wound, dealing 1d6 damage. If it is currently dissolving anything it may also escape through the hole and cause further trouble.

Plasmic emanations. These tobi are usually strategically placed near areas of magical activity. Summonings, resurrections and things of the sort. Each tobi will give the caster a bonus of 1 to avoid any catastrophic failure (the application of this will need to be tailored to the circumstances). However, for each bonus used, roll 1d6. On a 1 a tobi explodes in a shower of iridescent fire and slime. This in itself might be rather catastrophic as it scatters protective circles and drenches scented candles.

Trimming the grass. Smells great.

Everything. Sometimes a tobi will escape or become lost and wander the wilderness. It will become a one man biological disaster, eating everything in its path. The slurry will contain barely digested animals and plants as the tobi doesn't take the time to dispose of it correctly, instead vomiting it up as they intake more.

Nothing. If a tobi has been abandoned or, more likely, its master has been killed in his own home by itinerant rascalions, then it is possible that it hasn't eaten anything in a long time. Because of their physiology they will not starve, instead living off ambient magical radiations. However their gut will still be geared for whatever purpose they held before and continue to produce the strong acidic juices previously used for breaking down matter. The flow is low, but any time the tobi rolls an even number for damage it will do an additional d3 damage in the form of acid flying out of its mouth as it flails about.

No. Encountered: d6

Move: 30ft

Alignment: Chaotic

Intelligence: Animal

Size: Medium

Climate: Wizard's tower

Hit Dice: 3

Armour Class: 12

Attacks: 2 Bites/1 Gore/1 Drool

Damage: 1d6/1d8/1d6

Special Attacks: If both bite attacks hit then it starts to eat you, shoving you deeper into its mouth. While grappled you will automatically take 1d6 drool damage per turn in addition to anything else that may be going on.

Special Defence: Dependent on the type of tobi, but any tobi that is killed will spray acid everywhere (save vs. breath) as the pressures inside are released, causing 1d6 damage in a 10ft radius.

The Visitor

One can tell if any given culture has come into contact with the Visitors simply by reading their folklore closely. This insidious creature's presence is bound to loom large in tales told around fireplaces and at bedsides, so affecting is its presence. Universally there will be a figure with a sad face who holds their hands in front of themselves like a feeble relative or apologetic servant. Only on closer inspection would one notice that there is no skin on that face, that the eyes are huge dark holes and the hands end in long, hollow claws that clink together like chimes in the wind. These glass-like claws are hollow and incredibly sharp. The Visitor inserts them into a victim's body to slowly draw out all liquid. The ominous sound of its claws has heralded the end of many lonely spinsters and widowers sitting before the fireplace on a cold winter night, unwilling to turn around and face the darkness. When winter passes and the family fulfil their obligations they will find only a desiccated corpse sitting in its favourite chair.

The lonely and the frail are easy prey for the Visitor but not its favourite. Nothing excites it more than the warmth of a family hearth, the patter of feet and daily conversation. It seeks it out, can smell it. Here it utilises a peculiar ability it has. Upon choosing a victim the Visitor will insert its claws in the spine and the organs, drinking only shallowly, and control the poor fellow like a puppet. Walking and talking, they will use them to attract others of its clan so that the Visitor may better arrange them.

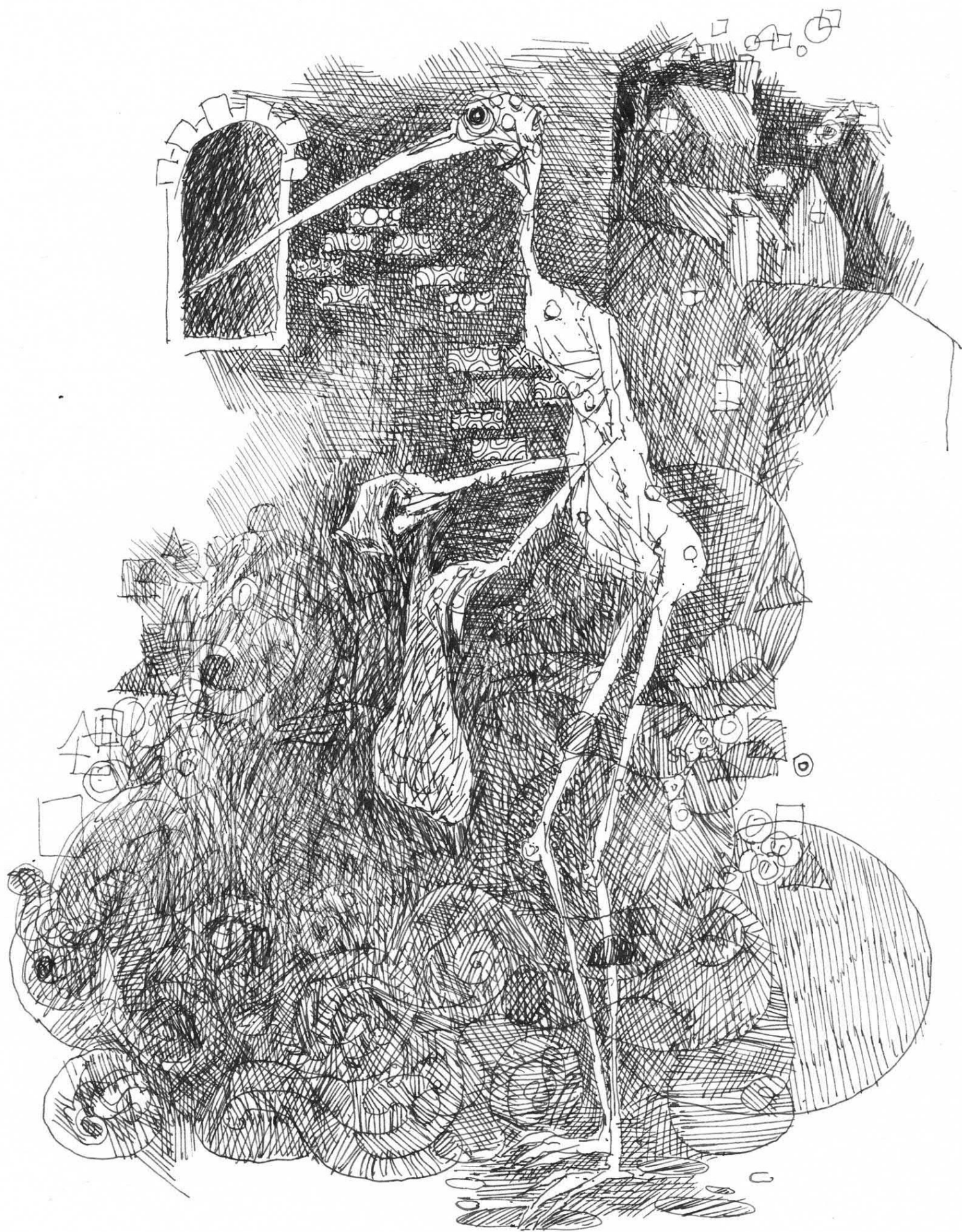
When they are together it will indulge in its most cherished activity, the tableau. It will take each member in turn, allowing them to host it, and position them in the poses of familial life. Once it has decided on the particular pose - rich in symbolism and expertly framed - it will quickly drain them dry, mummifying them on the spot, preserving this serene expression of family life.

The activities of the Visitor are often misconstrued as the actions of a particularly twisted serial killer. Those who remember the stories know better of course. They know that no one will find him. They know that he moves through the shadows and steals clothes from your cupboards. He can squeeze through your window and watch you at night. This will continue until someone brave or foolish enough trails him back to his lair, follows the halting tracks of the Visitor to the dilapidated husk of an old family home and burns it around its head. With luck it will flee flaming into the night, never to return. But the stories rarely end this way.

No. Encountered: 1
Move: 50ft
Alignment: Chaotic
Intelligence: Animal
Size: Medium
Climate:
Cold/Temperate
Hit Dice: 10
Armour Class: 12

Attacks: 2 Claws
Damage: 1d8
Special Attacks: If the Visitor successfully grapples an opponent it can control them until they save vs. paralyze. It may continue to fight with a single claw but may not control two people at once. It can drain d8 hit points per turn, absorbing them.
Special Defence: The creature is incredibly quiet and flexible. It will dress in the local attire, can fit through tiny spaces and is assumed to have a 6 in 6 stealth and surprise on a 5 in 6.





The Storkman

by Matthew Adams

No one knows why storkmen take one infant from one household and place it in another. There appears to be no malicious reason, it just does so. But a creature that kidnaps your child is not to be tolerated, whatever the reason.

A storkman walks the city at night, a dark mist gathered around it's legs that makes all those who come in contact with it drowsy.

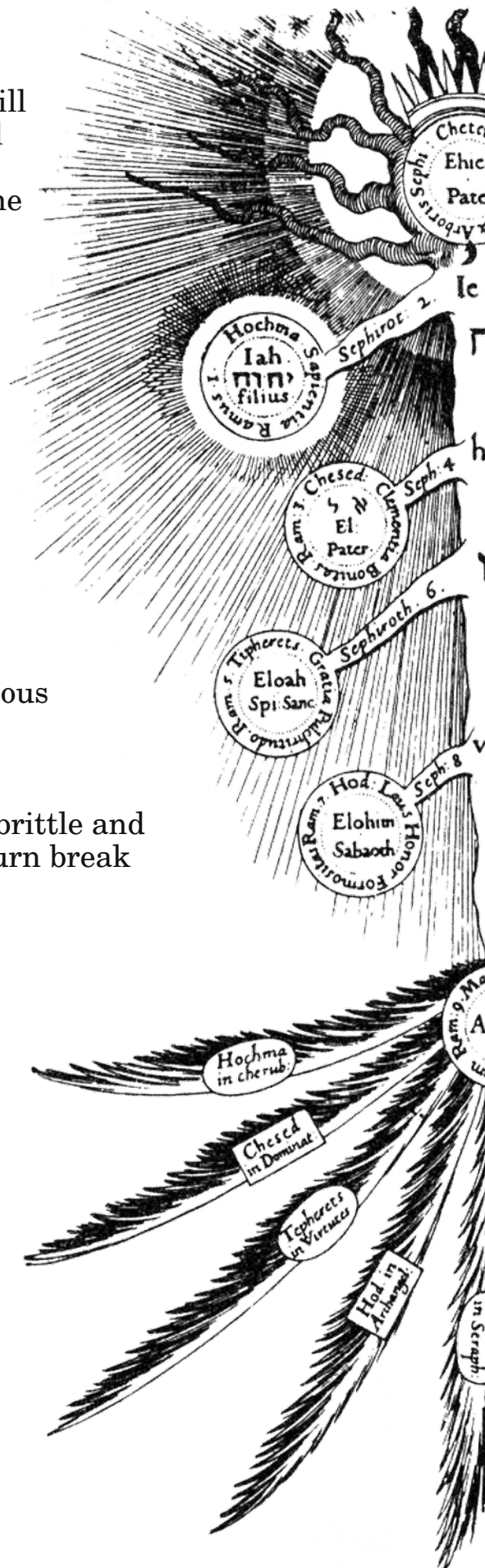
Storkmen will rather flee than fight, using their long limbs to climb to the roof tops. But if cornered will launch a flurry of kicks, and stab with their beak.

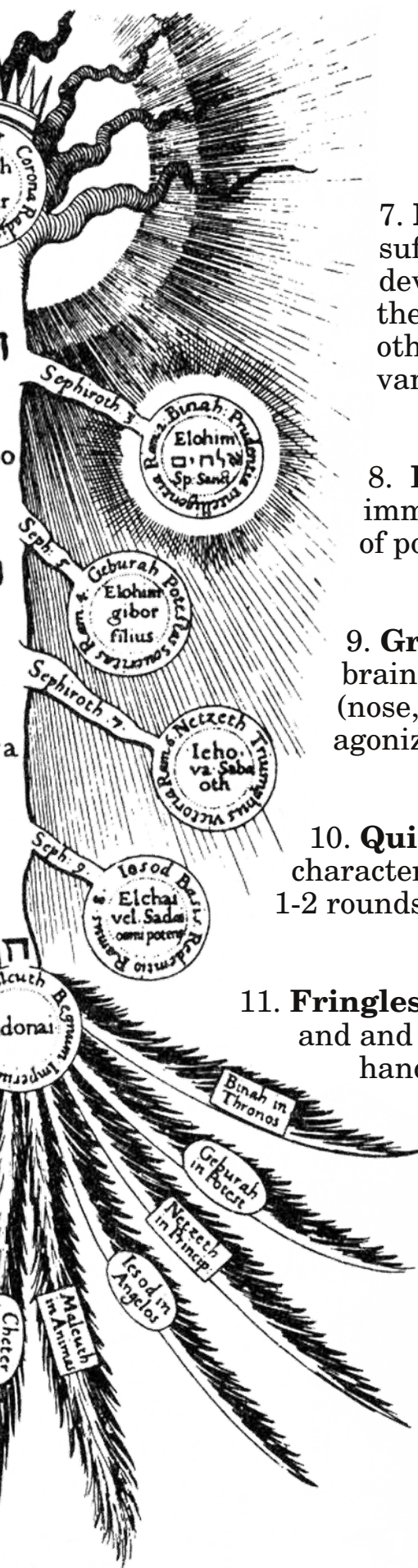
Once dead, a storkman's body will dissipate into the mist.

Piteous Potions

by Tony A. Thompson

1. **Holyfire-** causes the character's body temperature to rise several degrees so they will become ill and feverish for 1d6 days. This will cause the character to be unable to perform their daily activities and must rest for the time effected.
2. **Blindstar-** after consuming and then on the first clear night filled with stars, the character is blinded and will suffer delusional thoughts that the stars exploded and fell to the earth. This is a permanent effect and can only be remedied by a Remove Curse spell.
3. **Orcbreath-** causes character to expel a foul-smelling breath for 1d8 rounds and any creatures/characters within 20' become nauseous and will vomit.
4. **Crackler-** causes character's bones to become brittle and any slight bump, fall, hard twist etc. will in turn break that joint. The potion's effects last 1d6 days.
5. **Piggytoes-** all of the character's toes will become infected and will fall off within 1d4 days and tiny hooves will grow back in their place. A successful saving throw will result in infection only for 1d6 days.
6. **Middle of Nowhere-** after consuming the character will become severely disorientated and will not be able to determine where and what they are doing for 1d8 rounds.





7. **Bloodlick**- the first wound that the character suffers after ingesting this potion will cause them to develop a thirst for blood. They will begin to lick their own wounds and eventually crave the blood of others. The character will be accused of becoming a vampire and thus dealt with accordingly.

8. **Poorhouse**- within 1d6 days, the character will immediately sell all of his valuables and take a vow of poverty and live in seclusion.

9. **Graydeath**- within 1d6 rounds, the character's brain will begin to ooze from his orifices (nose,mouth,ears) and he will die a violent and agonizing death.

10. **Quickfire**- immediately after consuming the character will begin to burn from the inside and die within 1-2 rounds.

11. **Fringles**- the character's fingers will become disjointed and and feel "broken" to where they cannot use their hands for 1d20 hours.

12. **Eyemelt**- the character's eyes become glazed over causing blindness for 1d6 days.



The Briar Witch

by Matthew Adams

Briar witches haunt old ruins. Ruins with a profusion of briars are a sure sign of witch habitation.

While not actively hostile they do not like their privacy invaded and will cause briars to grow up to block or impede adventurers. If adventurers persist in invading their domain they will go on the attack.

For each word uttered within hearing distance of a witch, the person who uttered the word loses 1 health point, and the briar witch absorbs it.

A witch can also attack people with her scream. For each health point the witch spends on the scream, the adventurers lose that many points off their health.

Not only can a witch summon briars and scream, but they also have no trouble scaling the walls of their ruin in spider like fashion.

That Which Slips Between

by Luke Gearing

It moves towards you, Its gait leisurely. Each step It takes it moves too far towards you, the distance seeming to warp with every step. A nightmarish child-drawing of a human figure - a jumble of lines masquerading as a man, a stick figure given malignant life and purpose. The sheer otherness of it radiates like a poison, defying the dimension of width as it pursues.

It leaks in. Slides. Slips. Infiltrates. Perhaps the cracks in the floorboards, the panelling of your carriage, the gap between a window and a pane, a mirror and its frame. It will always find a way to enter once brought here. Invoked by a madman or someone driven beyond that, a ritual-pattern of perfect geometry and precision. Complex and arcane, it would burn itself into the mind of those who knew it with its alien and foreign lines. If it could be written and consequently read, it would boil away the magic from a mages mind, unless they were able to resist (save vs. magic). The effort of this would deplete their energies for the day.

The ritual-designs themselves are consumed in the act of summoning, obliterating them entirely as their nature calls out to That Which Slips Between. Any slight damage to the designs results in complete failure - no summoning. The arrangement is not so much a ritual as an invitation – once complete, the designs scream for It to enter our world. Those completing the designs are best advised to have an escape route ready, or have prepared a binding method.

It is a thing of two dimensions, of straight lines and of vectors. Only a completely solid barrier with no gaps could hold it at bay, such as a huge slab of unworked stone. The limbs of the Stick Man are so thin that no object offers resistance. It can use this to climb and cut through those objects it cannot simply slip through. This also applies to those it attacks – armour does nothing, and is in fact ruined by the limb. Each successful hit reduces the protection the armour provides by 1 point. It punctures perfect holes the size of your index finger, dealing 1d10 damage with a 10% chance of hitting something vital. This is done by chance. It does not care, seemingly striking at random. If something vital is hit, the GM should determine the effect appropriately. Injuries bleed profusely, and the material once occupying the wound is gone.

It does not hate you. It knows not hate. It does not think, for it cannot – it is not of this place. It moves randomly, attacking for no reason before moving off in a different direction. Characters observing It should be encouraged to try and make sense of It's actions. Roll a d20 on table 1 to determine It's actions randomly. When It Advances, roll on table 2.

If it has been loosed, rumours quickly spread of it. These rumours connect it to any of the things on table 3, perhaps several of these things. These rumours often contradict. People are unwilling to discover the validity of these rumours, and those that have tried have not been seen again. It makes no efforts to hide, leaving a trail of devastation.

It cannot be fought – weapons are cut around it. If not actively killing, it ignores those who attempt to strike it. Arrows are sliced in twain around it, though it is not an easy target to hit – treat as AC 19 for this purpose. Bullets are similarly cut, although the kinetic impact of them can impede it slightly. Magic has no effect on it – almost as if the magic cannot find a target. It is near impossible to spot without ample light, surprising 5 in 6 times when concealed in darkness. It does not usually consciously use this, but is merely an unhappy coincidence.

It can be bound. It loves/hates/loves/hates perfect circles. It will always stop to examine a perfect circle on any surface. If encircled by a perfect circle, it cannot leave. It will simply follow the curve endlessly, until something or someone ruins the circle. It will then kill the party responsible for the destruction of the circle, but will go further than usual – it will dice them into tiny cubes, slicing rather than simply piercing, going well beyond what is required to kill. It will then return to It's normal behaviour. The same logic applies backwards - It cannot enter a perfect circle, rendering those inside perfectly safe against it.

Statistics

AC: 19

HD: None (cannot be harmed)

Attacks: 1 attack, ignores armour, 1d10 piercing damage

Speed: Moves slightly faster than a galloping horse at maximum, but the length of It's stride never seems to change, only the distance covered does.

Size: Varies between sightings, but never smaller than a man and never taller than a church steeple.

Table 1

(Except where It specifically Advances, It will switch between Slipping Between and more conventional travel when moving. Advancing is always conventional travel.)

D20	Action
1	Advances. Kills anything that moves directly through It's path. Keeps going for 8 minutes 12 seconds.
2	Stays perfectly still for 6 minutes 37 seconds. Does not engage in combat.
3	Move rapidly to the nearest light source. Does not engage in combat. Moves with the light source for 10 minutes 59 seconds.
4	Advances slowly, almost at a crawl. Impales any living thing within 50 foot, and carries it for 7 minutes 7 seconds.
5	Remains still until a living thing moves within 150 foot, whereupon it will charge and kill them. If it is a group of living things, it will kill only one before remaining still for 3 minutes 6 seconds.
6	Advances until it encounters a body of water. Does not engage in combat. Waits at the shore for 2 minutes 4 seconds.
7	Moves in a perfect spiral, slowly converging on one point. The spiral's diameter is equal to 1d100 foot. Any living thing in the spiral is killed first. Once the spiral is complete, It waits for 2 minutes 18 seconds.
8	It waits until something moves within a 50 foot radius. It will then stalk this thing for 15 minutes 41 seconds.
9	It will Slip into the nearest available thin gap (thin being less than 5 mm). It will then exit from another similar gap within a 5 mile radius after 2 minutes 1 second.
10	It systematically hunts and kills any living thing with a total mass over 5 grams in a 200 foot radius. Each victim will be brought to the highest point in this area and vivisected, the various internal organs collected into piles. This activity continues for 12 minutes 18 seconds, or until there are no living creatures in the radius.
11	It will seek the lowest point in a 500 foot radius. It will then kill anything deemed to be within this depression before standing perfectly still for 6 minutes 34 seconds. If anything enters this depression, it will kill them, even if they leave the area.
12	It will attack each living creature in a 250 foot radius once. It will not do this in a logical order, seemingly randomly choosing new targets. Anything that leaves the radius is safe.
13	It will attempt to cut perfect circles into the nearest flat surface. These attempts will be made of thousands of tiny angles rather than being true circles. Any living thing that comes within 20 foot of It attempting this will be diced rather than simply killed. This activity continues until it is disturbed or for 4 days 19 hours 57 minutes 8 seconds.

D20	Action
14	It will arrange fresh corpses within a 1 mile radius into a complex geometric pattern 1d100 foot in radius. If there are not enough bodies, it will make them, straying 2 miles from the origin point to find the bodies. If it cannot gather sufficient materials within 12 hours 6 minutes 50 seconds, it will use vegetation to complete it. If this is not possible, it will carve the patterns into the ground.
15	It will seek the largest concentration of inhabitants within 5 miles. It will stand in the approximate centre of this village/town/city for 1 week 2 days 1 hour 3 seconds.
16	It will flee at high-speed away from any signs of living creatures for 18 hours 6 minutes 42 seconds. It will not Slip Between.
17	It will mimic the actions of the first living thing to pass within 50 foot of it for 31 minutes 19 seconds, travelling a hair's breadth away. It's actions happen simultaneously to those It mimics - there is no delay between the two.
18	It will seek the darkest place in a 1 mile radius, and kill anything entering the area. Those already present are safe. It will lurk here for 5 hours 2 minutes 4 seconds.
19	It will return to the place it originally entered the world. It will remain there for 1 minute 2 seconds.
20	It will hunt the players using any of the methods described above. It will lay in ambush. It will Slip Between. It will continue until successful or 3 days, 7 hours 7 minutes 7 seconds have passed. It will terrorize the players rather than directly assaulting them. It may act as before to trick them.

Table 2

D8	Direction
1	North
2	North East
3	East
4	South East
5	South
6	South West
7	West
8	North West

Table 3

D8	Rumours link It to...
1	A black Mastiff with yellow eyes, watching from afar...
2	A wandering man in grey, crowned in pale leathers...
3	A mad merchant and her horse, selling exotic wares...
4	A rat with the face and tongue of a man...
5	A fresh-risen standing stone on a hill...
6	A dead forest sporting new growth....
7	A carved tablet from the sea, written in dead tongues...
8	A crimson candle burning-backward...
9	A healer-of-lepers, travelling only at night...
10	An old star, now burning bright only at day...



The Snailing

by Matthew Adams

Snailings were once men who due to their miserly nature become possessed by a demon of greed. A small leathery nodule grows on their back, and as their possession continues it grows into a large leathery shell much like a human sized snail shell. The shell becomes storage for their hoardings, and can provide shelter when they start their nomadic existence. It also acts as leather armour.

Snailings tend to focus on a certain type of object which they obsessively collect. This could be the ribbons worn by young women, or the coins of lepers, or anything else. Some develop obsessions for multiple items. Whatever the obsession, Snailings are willing to do whatever is required to gain those objects, including murder.

Snailings produce slime that acts either as a lubricant, making it hard to grapple with them, and making the floor around them slippery, or as a glue, enabling them to scale walls.

Snailings are psychotic, patient, methodical hunters who will lay traps, carry on a guerrilla war, even attempt to lead victims into other creatures to obtain what they want.

Blood

by Simon Forster

Drip.

A drop of red falls to the floor, blossoming into a Rorschach blot of a dead body. It is a sharp contrast against the white tiles. I look up, following its presumed trajectory to the ceiling; but I can't see where it fell from. There's a rap at the door; it's my next client. What follows makes me forget about the droplet.

Drip, drip.

A couple of drops splash onto the tiles, the second drop enlarging the pattern made by the first; the second altering the shape so that it now looks like a starfish. I remember yesterday; again I look up and this time I notice a small, dark spot on the ceiling. Knocking, insistently, interrupting my thoughts. My next client awaits.

I spend the following hours staring at the spot on the ceiling, only half-focused on what is happening to me; not moving, lying still, passive.

Drip, drip, drip.

More drops, adding to the growing painting on the tiles (I've no time to clean it up), mutating the pattern of a dark starfish into a fresh, red flower. A matching stain has appeared on the ceiling, its flower-pattern subtly different. A hard knock at the door; another client. I ignore it. Instead I pull on a robe and grab a stool from the kitchen. Balancing on the stool I examine the ceiling stain: it is dark, almost black, glistening wetly; a small bulge lies in the centre, but I can see no holes. I touch it; my fingertip comes away wet and red.

Drip, drip; drip, drip, drip.

The flower has become a red skull; the stain on the ceiling a circle with spikes. I haven't cleaned any of it; I'm afraid to touch it. No one lives above me. The attic has been empty since the last tenant passed away. The only way up there is by a door in the hallway; but that has been sealed for years.

Drip.

Another drop; I watch it fall lazily through the air. It explodes against the red-painted tiles, obliterating one of the skull's eye-sockets. I grab the stool again and a broom; my heart pounds in anticipation of what I am about to do. A single, hard rap at the door; I jump, startled, fouling the air with words my clients love to hear. A rap-rap-rap at the door; I ignore it. My clients can go elsewhere. I'm no one special.

Drip.

There is a puddle of blood on the tiled floor; no pattern, just a puddle. The stain on the ceiling is huge now, the bulge clearly noticeable. I hit it with the broom and blood oozes out like a fresh wound squeezed beneath a bandage; the bulge grows; and I am now splattered with red and scarlet spots.

Drip, drip.

The drops now splash, the sound loud and unpleasant. The puddle ripples with each drop and the bulge twitches in sympathy. I sit as far from the puddle as I can. No one has knocked for a while. I wish they would.

Drip, splash.

The puddle, the stain, the bulge; all have grown. There is a smell in the air. The tiles have disappeared, the ceiling is dark and bulging. I am unable to move, obsessed with the dripping.

Drip, drip.

A knock at the door; I hesitate. A client, or someone else? It sounds again. Time passes.

Drip, splash.

I move quickly to the door, open it; but there is no one there now. I return to my vigil.

Drip.

Drip, drip.

A pitter-patter of red rain begins to fall. Each drop sends ripples that cause waves to lap up against the walls. The ceiling bulges heavily, threatening to burst. It covers the whole ceiling now, the dark stain reaching the walls.

Drip, drip, splash, drip.

There's no trace of the tiles now; the floor is wet and red. I sit on the stool, clutching the broom for safety. The air is thick with the smell of blood; a fine mist hangs over the pond, forced up from the constant rain. I shiver and pull my knees to my chest. There is a knock at the door; but now I can't answer it. I want to call out; but fear has stolen my voice. The knock comes again, rapid and loud; but I can't move without wading in the blood.

The only noise is the constant *drip-drip-drip*. It drowns out all other sound.

The ceiling flexes and something moves inside the bulge, bringing a downpour of blood. The blood splashes loudly into the pond spraying the walls, the furniture, my nightgown, my flesh. Hands press against the taut skin of the wet ceiling; hands that grasp and clutch. There is a bang at the door, someone knocking; the shock almost topples me from the stool. A voice, raised in anger,

disturbs the silence. I keep silent, I keep still. Another bang at the door; the voice louder, insistent. I ignore it, fixing my attention on the bulge that squirms above me.

The rain stops; just now droplets, as if there is only so much blood that can be spilled.

Drip.

I haven't slept.

Drip.

The dripping keeps me awake.

Drip.

The pond is now a lake. I sit on the stool, a pale island. The smell as heavy as my clients' musk. The bulge hangs low, an arm's length from my head. The ceiling is one dark stain, glistening. The hands still move across the bulge, but slowly, caressing. I can feel the blood on my body, where splashes caught me. It hasn't dried. I can feel it, against my skin.

Drip.

The blood has almost reached my feet.

Drip.

No one has knocked at the door. There have been no more voices raised in anger.

Drip.

Is this it? Is this what happens to sinners?

Drip.

I feel the blood move. I feel its longing. I feel its hunger. I feel its lust.

Drip, drip.

Drip.

With the sound of tearing flesh the bulge bursts. The blood gushes into the room, a flood of red. It reaches my feet, my knees; covers my chest, my neck; flows over my head and finds a way in; all I can hear is the beat of a fist against the door, the beat of a heart against my skin; all I smell is the heavy scent of sweat, musk, my blood; I taste bitter salt passing between my lips.

Drip.