



The Dig Unsettling

Five Slightly Disturbing Stories

BEN CROWDER

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by Ben Crowder

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AI WAS NOT USED IN MAKING THIS BOOK

TEXT SET IN LFA ALUMINIA

Preface

I wrote these little stories here and there during 2025 as an exercise, exploring an admittedly paltry subset of the paths that the initial phrase (“The most unsettling thing to come out of the dig was...”) could lead to.

Ben Crowder
January 2026

Story the First

The most unsettling thing to come out of the dig was a huddled cluster of small skeletons. Seven of them.

Marial found them at Ek Vertl in a long, winding anterior hallway that led to what we think was either a storage room for tools of witchery or (less interesting, but far more probable) a ceremonial chamber for the burial of a crèche council.

She found all seven bodies in various squatting positions on the stone floor under what must have been a large window. Nothing too out of the ordinary. I'd seen a dozen similar situations in digs up north. Even a couple on the outskirts of Ek Vertl, not too far off.

You might think: small skeletons, clearly children, that's what rattled me. No. Maybe if I were a better person, but no, that meant nothing to me. We all die. Soon, late, it's all the same destination, and once everyone who loved you is gone, does it matter if you were four or a hundred and forty?

No, the thing that made me swear off digs forevermore was this: Pezzun was dragging a heavy bucket of water along the ridge above the hallway, four or five feet up. He tripped. Should have been more careful, yes. The water sloshed down onto the skeletons. Marial was furious — there'd been some kind of delicate lacework on the skeletons' shoulders, dissolved almost immediately by the slosh. Irretrievable.

But that wasn't it either. Even now I still struggle to talk about it, clearly.

Within an hour, those bodies were...well, not just bone anymore. Honest. I know it sounds insane, but I saw what I saw. Muscles, veins, fat, skin, hair. Decomposition in rapid reverse. (Composition? Resurrection? Refleshing is what Marial ended up calling it.)

We kept our distance, of course — we're not crazy — and half expected the bodies to wake up and start moving around. Glad they didn't, since that would have complicated things even more, but relief aside, it was almost worse that they didn't. Like they'd just died, moments ago.

They're still there, as far as I know. We didn't dare move them, not after what happened, so we built a thick, solid cocoon of brick around them and sealed it up tight. Didn't tell anyone. Should have, I know, for science and

all that. But we didn't. Too creeped out, I guess. Some things are better left alone.

One thing I haven't told anyone: just before I set the last few bricks on the roof of our makeshift crypt, I shone my flashlight down inside it for a final look. There were only six bodies. Not seven.

There's something else I haven't told anyone, too. But it's going to stay that way. Sorry.

We moved onto the next dig — there were dozens in the queue in those days, and not enough time for any of them. As we drove away, we wondered aloud to each other why those skeletons started fleshing, how they died, all of that. Figured we'd never know.

But then yesterday I got a text from Marial. Says she found out. Says it's urgent.

I deleted the text.

Story the Second

Most unsettling thing to come out of the dig was Zalman's wife. One of my longstanding rules: don't wed creatures that crawl out of crevices. Zalman didn't have that rule. Look where he is now.

I'm being unfair. We didn't actually see her crawl anywhere. Maybe she was from one of the local villages and had a habit of skulking down in the ruins to avoid a violent husband. Maybe she'd gotten lost down there long enough she forgot how to talk. Maybe she fell and hurt her head one too many times and that's where she picked up her craving for live animal flesh, the bloodier the better. Maybe.

Or not. Down there, the rules are different. And down there, sometimes you see things that look human but... aren't.

I don't know what Zalman saw in her. Stringy, patchy, wispy hair, tangled and knotty even after brushing. Eyelids half closed all the time. Clicking her tongue

against her teeth non-stop. Breath that smelled like month-old meat left outside. Fingernails long and thin enough to scratch furrows into your arms.

Torrevega thinks she cast some kind of witchery on Zalman, some glamour, maybe, that made him see and smell and feel something different. To Zalman, she might have been the most beautiful woman in the world, the softest, always smelling of rose or lavender or cinnamon or something. We'll never know.

I tried to get him to leave her behind. Spent a whole hour explaining things to him. Not just the obvious reasons, too. We didn't have enough supplies for an extra body. (Was I glossing over Matsuki's sudden and unexplained absence? Yes.) We were trying to leave things as pristine as possible. (Patently false. Digging up all the cobalt was itself a violation of the ecosystem. That moment, by the way, was when I first really started entertaining doubts about the whole endeavor. Everything that happened afterwards leads back to that moment.) There were laws governing transportation of humans out of this part of the country. (Loosely true, but with loopholes large enough to drive a truck through. And she probably wasn't human.)

Despite my desperate attempts at persuasion, Zalman just sat there like he was drunk. Which—if

Torrevega's right — he effectively was. I think he fell asleep, too, but I didn't get close enough to check, in case it was contagious.

There was an old, haggard priest in Combaga, that little village on the north edge of the forest, the one with all the bat carcasses on the ground every autumn. Zalman convinced (read: paid) the priest to officiate. Till death do them part and all that. Sure got that right.

We found Zalman's bones the next morning, scattered all over the floor of his hut. Not much else of him left. Can't believe we didn't hear it while it was going on, with how close they cram these huts together. Torrevega stomped around the camp sobbing and yelling about vengeance, but that wasn't the day for it. I said a prayer of gratitude for that. I suspect that even if he'd found her, she might not have gone down as easy as he was thinking, and who knows, maybe then Zalman would have had a pal with him in the bowels of the forest, keeping a mournful, ghostly watch over the dig forevermore.

Story the Third

The most unsettling thing to come out of the dig was, for Abigail, the worst thing ever to happen to her in her unfortunately long life.

The seventh day of the dig, Williamson called up to her. She'd been there three days in her new not-quite-as-advertised role as auxiliary supervisor over ancient artifacts. Williamson had made up the role at Jovi's request, and while Abigail was grateful to have something, a real job would have been nicer.

So here she was in the dust and heat of an actual dig site, waiting for others to continue unearthing the ragged cluster of buildings that Williamson believed were of Ghojiri make. Ghojiri! It was clear to her that he was wrong, and that the joins at the corners indicated Hemblor influence. And *that* meant the buildings had to be fourth-century Lorcanta.

But Williamson — typical, typical Williamson — refused to concede to any idea that did not sprout out of

the dirty gray matter slumped in his skull. And now he was calling for her, so she carefully put away the potsherds she'd been cataloging (which she supposed did need to be done and therefore maybe she could concede that this was a real job after all) and down the hill she walked, bracing herself.

Williamson and Kendrick were kneeling next to a freestanding wall on the south edge of the site, surrounded by a handful of the students, all sleep-deprived and wild-eyed. "Tatterstone, come here, come give this a look," Williamson said, scratching at his patchy beard. "Tell me what you think."

Dubious, Abigail approached. Was this another of Kendrick's notoriously ill-planned pranks? One was more than enough for her, at least while the cut on her calf was still healing.

The wall was thick limestone and had what looked like a window or a nook set into it, forming a shelf upon which sat a small wooden chest, perhaps a foot long, painted black, with a horizontal red line belting it under the lid like it had been slit with a knife and was oozing blood.

"Ghojiri, as I said." Williamson had a huge, vapid grin on his face.

She grimaced, nodded — there was no question —

and grumbled something uncouth. Several students laughed, and one covered her mouth with her hand, clearly shocked that quiet, demure Abigail had a secretly salty tongue.

“You,” Williamson said, “can do the honors.” He waved a grubby hand at the artifact. His attempt at amends, letting her open the chest? Or, more likely, a gift of liability if something went wrong.

Something went wrong.

It happened fast. Abigail lifted the lid a crack, enough to shine a light inside and see what she was dealing with, and here she thought that the chest really ought to have been opened in a climate-controlled space lest its contents begin disintegrating, but Williamson liked being sporadically cavalier, and to her surprise she felt a bit rebellious herself, probably because of the embarrassingly public demise of her Lorcanta theory. So, knowing this might be the end of her short career (and it was, though not for the reasons she thought), she opened the chest all the way, procedure be hanged.

A swirl of dust somehow flew out of the chest right into her face. Later, she would recall the deathly stillness of the air around the wall, the utter lack of wind. No outside gust could have carried the dust.

But at the time, she merely coughed and handed the

lid to the nearest student. “Contents appear to be... empty. The chest is empty.”

How disappointing. While the Ghajiri chest itself was still a fascinating artifact they could learn from, Abigail had hoped to find — though it embarrassed her to admit it — treasure inside. If not gold or gems or other valuables, then inscribed clay tablets or carved fertility totems or a set of diviner bones, something teeming with historical value. Something newspaper-worthy, like the ship Professor Rivers had unearthed with its trove of ancient laws and histories engraved on brass sheets.

Treasureless, Abigail was about to hold her hands out for a return of the lid when a thick, sickly sweet stench filled her nostrils, rank and overbearing and all-consuming, like something massive had died centimeters from her nose.

She gagged. Revulsion filled her throat and sought escape. It succeeded. She stared down at the mess, stunned.

Yet the smell clung to her. It became her whole world. She found herself on her knees heaving, hoping it would pass, but if anything the smell only grew stronger.

“She pregnant?” Williamson said to someone.

“I was feeling nauseated this morning,” one of the female students behind her said. She couldn’t tell who it

was. “Nauseous? Noxious. Whatever it is.”

One of the male students grunted. “Probably those beans last night.”

“Or,” Kendrick said with an excited tone lifting his nasal whine, “it could be something catching. You hear about that new plague down in Sohor City? Started with feral possums rooting around in industrial waste, they think. Pretty brutal. Could’ve spread this far, who knows.”

“That’s a, a debunked conspiracy theory,” Abigail managed to get out, waving her hand frantically. “Also, absolutely not pregnant.” She wiped her mouth onto her wrist and made a mental note to wash it off as soon as she could get away. “Can’t you smell that? It’s awful.”

In the awkward silence that followed, she realized nobody else was reacting to the smell.

“If it wasn’t the possums — and I’ve seen a couple around here, might want to stay away from them — might’ve been the dust,” Kendrick said, relenting a smidge. “She should go sleep it off.” He had an infuriating habit of third-personing her.

Williamson nodded. “We’ll get this over to the arti-facts tent. Don’t worry about it.”

Abigail, who was now breathing as shallowly as she could and consequently felt faint, was happy to get away from the chest and the stench.

But it followed her up the hill.
It followed her back to her tent.
It followed her through her nap — if you could call it
that, she barely slept — and the rest of that day.
It followed her the next day. And the next. And the
next.

That haunting, horrible smell clung to Abigail for the
rest of her days, and maybe even a bit past that.

Oh, she went to doctor after doctor after doctor to try
to get rid of it, but nothing worked — though from the
attempted cures she did end up with daily headaches and
the taste of old blood in everything she ate. Not that she
had much interest in food anyway; everything tasted rot-
ten. She barely slept. Her turncoat boyfriend bailed after
a year.

Abigail never did find out why the smell wouldn't go
away, where it came from, who put it there, or how nar-
rowly she had avoided another curse, one far more dire
and even longer-lasting.

Story the Fourth

The most unsettling thing to come out of the dig, you say? Why are you asking? You a Stonemont lackey, trying to buy my silence? Because I can tell you now that that won't work.

Oh. Let me see it, yeah. Looks legit. I think I've read one of your articles, maybe. The one about the sheep? Yeah. It wasn't bad.

Most unsettling thing, then? That would be the goo, yep, no question there. Gray goo, like old, cold oatmeal. I flung some at McCobbins when he was walking away to get a new shovel and didn't think nothing of it, but then a couple hours later he swore he could feel wings on his back, wings that weren't there, wings that were itching like mad and wouldn't stop and he couldn't scratch them. We all thought he was lying. He's told more'n a few in his day, that's McCobbins for you.

But then I wiped my forehead. Didn't realize some of that there goo had gotten on my gloves. Sure enough,

wasn't long before I felt a horn grow out of my forehead. You can see it isn't there, right? But I feel it. I don't know what to say — unicorn man, that's me. It's why my neck's bent forwards, the weight of it — heavier than you'd think. It's why I wear these bangs long, to hide the scars. Looks bad, huh? Used to be worse, all that scratching. All for naught.

The worst, I think, was Olejala, who accidentally smeared some of the goo on his sandwich without realizing it. Ended up with phantom organs inside him, things you shouldn't be able to feel even if you have them. Like a stomachache in a stomach you're not supposed to have. Weird stuff.

Abernathy stepped on some and ended up with a pair of twiggy ghost legs, like a deer, and restless all the time, night and day. He lasted two months before he couldn't take it anymore. Olejala made it a year or two. Tough one, that. McCobbins and I, though, we're survivors. Oh? He did? When? I hadn't heard. That's too bad.

Story the Fifth

The most unsettling thing to come out of the dig, out of a whole nest of things bizarre and demented, wasn't strictly speaking part of the dig itself, but was rather drawn to it from who knows where. I speak of course of the gruntling, as you all know.

Much has been written of this obscure creature, most by myself, so I will here only brush the surface, for redundancy is waste, and waste is not to be tolerated.

Next slide, please. Behold the gruntling. A mammal, three feet tall, pale, so clammy that for a while we thought it surely must be experiencing cardiac distress, but no, this is its natural state. Hairless, tusked, horned, bipedal, with six prehensile toes on each foot. As that wag in *The Courier* put it, it looks a bit like a cross between a very unhealthy young child and a stygian boar. None of this, however, is the thing most unsettling about it.

No, that honor belongs to the gruntling's primary hobby. Using primitive implements carved of stone —

showcasing an intelligence above the animals — the gruntling is frequently found performing what for lack of a better word may be called surgery. It makes incisions. It sometimes removes organs. Other times it inserts new organs, or other objects, or rearranges what is already there. In one well-known case, the gruntling embedded a sac full of arachnids in the lining of a young woman's intestinal tract. And in a new case which many of you may not have heard of yet, the creature stitched the subject's gall bladder and spleen to the outside of the heart and painted the whole assemblage blue.

We do not know why it does these things. It does not eat what it removes; in fact, it appears to be vegetarian. Perhaps its actions are ritual. Perhaps curiosity. Or sadism. We do not know, for it will not — or cannot — tell us.

What I do know, though, is this. Seven of my colleagues lie dead or wounded because of the meddling of this creature. This cannot be tolerated. I do not recommend violence, for answering violence with its brother causes only greater harm. What I call for is restraint, disarmament, neutralization. Give it animals to operate upon. Learn what drives its behavior and see what we can alter. There may be more of them out there.

The floor is now open for questions, for about fifteen minutes before our next panel begins.