# The Sirens Call

August 2018 issue #40



A Dark Fiction L Horror eZine

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork for Horror Fans!

Photography by
Nina D'Arcangela &
Image Inspired Prose
by Pen of the Damned

Featured Author
Lee A. Forman,
along with an excerpt
from his new book
Zero Perspective

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\*Photo by D'Arcangela family member

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### The Contest Mark Steinwachs

All my work crescendos to this moment, this chilly morning. I snap three photos, his remorse seeping through the lens. The color of his skin and cloak blends into the stone he's perched on. The wreath in his hand, one flower for each of his victims, matches too. His spidery fingers entice me through the lens, but even the most delicate fingers can pull a trigger. His fate sealed of his own volition, he spoke to none of us but followed every order we gave. I take one more photo. It's the one. Because of him, we will both be immortalized. After ten years, I will win Death Day. My picture alongside past winners. I turn and walk toward the idling police van. Behind me, four gunshots ring out in quick succession.

### The Fires that Burn Near Sapphire Lake | Cecilia Kennedy

Smoke from distant wildfires hangs in the air, even from inside the old Stagecoach Saloon and Pub, where I spot a good-looking Rick Springfield type at the bar and tell him, "Hey, Babe. I've got a blog." He says that's the hottest pick-up line he's ever heard and he knows hot because he's a smoke jumper in the region, parachuting into Eastern Washington wildfires and putting them out during the summer and fall months. I tell him I've named my blog 'The Sandwich Slut' and I write about sandwiches I like to make and eat. His jaw drops. Then, he orders me a beer. The place smells like fried potatoes and there's piss all over the bathroom floor, but nothing beats a Belgian ale and the grilled turkey pesto here. When the sandwich arrives, I press the pieces of the bread between my fingers, watching the thin layer of oil that rises to the surface, listening for that distinct crunch of the toasted crust. I let the cheese dangle from the sides and open my mouth slowly, allowing the cheese to drip first, before wrapping my lips around the bread.

Dale, the smoke jumper, just watches me. A smile curls the edges of his lips upward, as a lone breeze enters the window, carrying with it the faint smell of the surrounding smoke, which makes me cough and down my beer in one gulp.

"So . . . that smoke. Do you smell it? Shouldn't you be out there fighting it or something?"

"That's coming from Canada and it's pretty far away. They have smoke jumpers too. They'll let us know if they need us."

"Kind of a dangerous job, right? Do you all have a blog?"

"We have a website and a recipe book with thousands of ways to use Spam. Here's a tip: green Gatorade makes for a delicious glaze."

"Noted. But no blog?"

"No, but if you want to know more about smoke jumpers, there's an exhibit in Truller. I have some time off this weekend, if you want to see it."

\*\*\*

Well-worn two-lane roads, on the way to Truller, peek out over valleys of prairie desert-like land, surrounded by mountains in a distant haze. Large spaces of soft brown landscapes are dotted with pines, sagebrush, and brown, gold, and rust-colored grasses and flowers. Just five miles into the drive the scenery transitions into lush and leafy trees that will blaze with fiery red and gold in October. Dale's truck smells like pine and he promises to stop by the Sandwiche Haus for lunch after we see the exhibit.

Truller's exhibit hall, in the town square of buildings reminiscent of the Gold Rush era, is about the size of a Dollar Tree store, but it once served as the town hall in 1894. The smoke jumper exhibit consists of a few glass cases filled with parachutes, gear, and cans of food carried along on missions. Dale narrates as I daydream about a Reuben sandwich, thick with corned beef and Thousand Island dressing.

As with most museums, we exit through the gift shop, which sells burnt pieces of wood from trees destroyed in the wildfires of 1972. For some reason, I can't take my eyes off one of them, which shines with lacquer. As I turn it in the light, I see flecks of deep red, brown, and yellow. The entire impact of the exhibit suddenly crystalizes in my mind as I fully imagine the sheer devastation a wildfire creates. It occurs to me: what I hold in my hand is real—a real connection to all the people and creatures that suffered. I must have it.

"I remember this fire," Dale says. "I mean, I was just a kid, but I heard about it on the news all the time."

In a somber tone, Dale tells the story. In the dry mountains in the state park, just 40 miles north of Truller, some teens let off fireworks and caught the nearby brush on fire. However, by the time anyone could take action, the arid conditions were ripe for sparking the biggest wildfire the region had ever seen. Horses and other animals died from heavy smoke and retired couples, living in their dream homes, stayed too long, dying in each others' arms at the edge of swimming pools. The teens that started the fire never made it out alive because they stayed to watch—proud of what they'd done—wanting to see the world around them end. Their charred remains were found and some people say that their spirits still blow smoke and laughter down into the valley.

"You're really going to take that home with you?" Dale asks when I buy a piece of the burnt wood.

"I have to. I don't know why—I just have to."

Something in Dale's eyes tells me to be wary, but I drop the wood into my purse and remind him that my blog is seriously lacking a review from the Sandwiche Haus.

\*\*\*

The Sandwiche Haus is just a block down from the exhibit hall, but I feel overwhelmed and heavy—like I can't take another step. Pretending that nothing is wrong, I press on, but I feel incredibly warm. It's already 92 degrees outside, but the warmth I feel doesn't come from the air. It's radiating from my core and I begin to drip with sweat. My vision grows cloudy and darkness creeps before my eyes, which is a sure sign that I'm about to hit the ground, but I resist—pressing on until I cross the threshold into the restaurant. Instantly, I sit down and ask for water.

"Everything okay?" Dale asks.

"I'm fine. It's just hot."

But I know it's not the heat. It's the weight of the purse—of that thing—that object inside of it and for the first time in a sandwich place, I have no desire to eat. That thing inside my purse does not agree with me and I know I should not have it.

When the sandwich arrives, I barely pick at it. What's in my purse feels so incredibly heavy, and I know I must get rid of it, but I'm too embarrassed to tell Dale I think I made a mistake.

\*\*\*

Wispy curls of smoke cloud my dreams and I wake up choking and gasping for air, but when I finally open my eyes, there is no fire—no smoke. This has happened for the past three weeks, every night. Just today though, the walls have begun to burn with flashes of flames that instantly disappear. Each time, the flashes threaten to stay longer. So I climb the stairs to my office in my house, intending to get rid of that piece of wood, but I feel my heart stop inside my chest when I reach the second story landing.

I'm thrown back into the air and knocked to the floor with such force that I struggle to catch my breath. The weight of something presses down on my body and my throat. It feels like hands are choking me and stifling the breath I hold inside. The skin around my face expands and swells and I kick and struggle to keep myself upright, alert, and alive, but whatever force keeps me here is winning. Digging my heels into the floor beneath me, I try one last time to gain control. Without warning, the pressure subsides and I regain my strength.

When I'm able to stand, I look down the staircase and I can see the torsos of two teenage boys, with their arms draped over the banister, looking directly at me. They're transparent, but solidly shaped. I can even see the colors of their clothes—their red and black t-shirts—their penetrating eyes—and their mocking smiles with lips that curve upward and empty into a loud, cackling laugh.

I fight the urge to remain frozen. Instead, I will myself to run back to my office and get that damned piece of burned wood. It's resting on my writing desk, next to the computer, glimmering with

lacquer sheen—glowing in brown, red, and flecks of gold. Gripping it in my hand, I gather whatever courage I may still have and run for the stairs, wondering if I can get past the two spirits without being attacked. I stay close to the wall on the right of the staircase in order to avoid the ghastly images on the left, but the walls on the right keep erupting in flames and I can feel the intense burning heat each time. I have no choice but to run directly down the middle of the staircase amidst a torrent of fire and laughter. When I look back, the last thing I see is the skin on their faces bubble, bleed, and melt; flames flicker behind empty eye sockets.

In my car, I see my own face in the rear-view mirror. My neck is black and blue. I didn't think it was possible for something that's the consistency of air to be able to leave such a solid mark, but now I have proof that it can. In my car, I drive fast to the state park 40 miles outside of Truller—the place where the 1972 wildfires claimed so many lives—the place where this piece of wood must be returned.

The trailhead for the Point Mile Lake Path is just beyond the first parking lot near the forest. I take it about a mile and a half in on mostly flat terrain, just before it cuts into a steep climb. On a carpet of pine needles and ferns, beneath mossy trees and conifers, I drop the burned wood, letting it slip from my hands. It's best, I decide, to just run the rest of the way back down. When I reach my car, I look back, breathing in the cooler air.

\*\*\*

A flash of lightning strikes in the distance, just as I turn the key in the ignition. It's a flash that strikes right in the spot where I dropped the wood. Waiting and watching are all I can do, for about 20 minutes, before I start to see smoke and eventually, the glimmer of a flame.

Slamming the car into reverse, I hurry down the gravel road, stopping at the Sandwiche Haus in Truller. I have to call Dale.

"I'm at the Sandwiche Haus."

"Another Reuben for the blog?"

"No. I think I started a fire."

"At the Sandwiche Haus?"

"No. In the state park, where the 1972 fire burned. I started another one."

"On purpose?"

"I just . . . I . . . You know the souvenir I bought? That piece of wood from the fire?"

"Yeah, I wanted to tell you I thought it was creepy to buy something like that, but . . ."

"I've had nothing but bad luck, so I returned it to the place where I thought it belonged."

"And that started the fire?"

"Yeah-I think it did."

"Well, I'm probably going to get called in to put it out . . . It'll be a few days before I can talk to you again."

\*\*\*

Purple bruises fade, but guilt burns like acid in my heart and gut. The walls in my house remain intact, despite the flashes of fire, ignited by the piece of wood and the unremorseful spirits attached to it. I have no news from Dale yet, but the fire has spread and the Hot Shot Crews were called in. Several homes are threatened, animals have already died, and everyone is talking about the 1972 disaster—of the sting of death and whole families boiled alive in their juices. Smoke clouds the view of the mountains and it's not until the end of August that I see Dale. We meet at the Old Stagecoach Saloon. This time, I order a salad, with the dressing on the side.

"I'd give anything to see you eat a sandwich again," Dale says.

"Not in the mood."

"Do you know what really caused that fire? Lightning."

"The minute I carried that piece of wood in my purse, I knew I shouldn't have bought it."

"I have something for you."

Dale reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of burned wood—another souvenir from the Truller gift shop.

"Dale!"

"The best way to fight a fire is with fire. Sort of. We're going to undo the curse."

**\***\*\*

Undoing the curse involves a long drive with Dale over to Sapphire Lake, just below the state park. Glacier silt from the surrounding mountains pours into the fresh water and the light that refracts from the silt turns the water a magnificently alluring turquoise. The plan is to drop the piece of wood into the lake, to put out the fire that burns within, but the porous nature of the wood makes it so light that it won't sink.

"I believe my sandwich making skills will save the day," I tell Dale.

I dig into the muddy silt near the edge of the lake and thickly cover the piece of wood. When it is weighted down with the firm mud, Dale takes my hand in his and we toss it into the lake and watch it sink.

\*\*\*

On the edge of September, I return with Dale to Sapphire Lake. The wildfire is almost out and Dale's unit will disperse in a month or two. He says he'll search for off-season work in Montana, leaving me alone here to watch the trees above the place where I dropped the souvenir.

"You know I've got a blog, right?"

"I do."

"And a house that won't burn down?"

"Yen '

"And I know what to do with two slices of bread."

"You sure do."

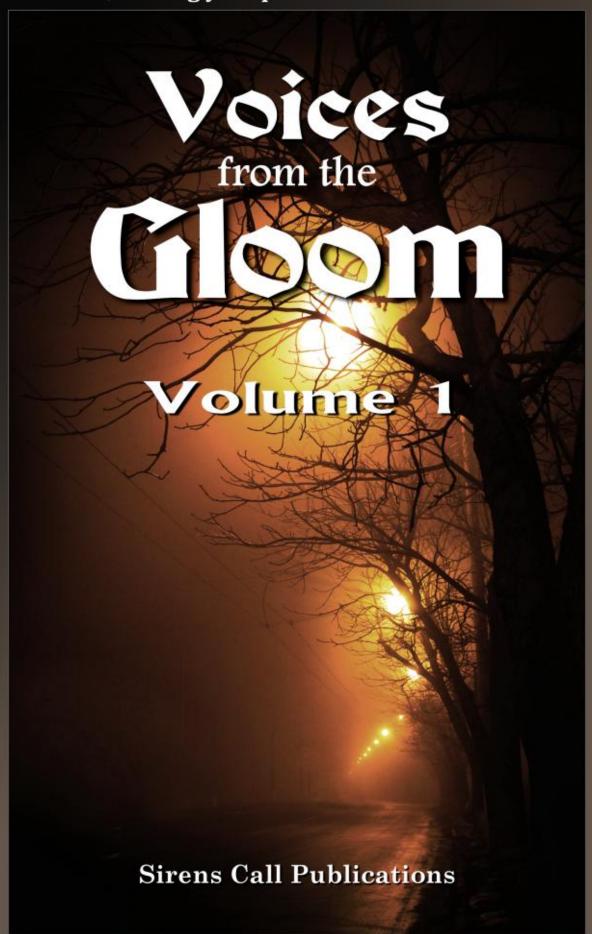
Smoke still hangs in the air, the valley echoes with laughter, and the smell of singed flesh and the sight of ashen remains aren't easy to forget. So, I point to the trees in the distance and I tell him, "In the fall, those trees won't throw sparks of red and gold color over the water where we stand—and I'll be damned if I'm watching empty landscapes alone." He says that's the hottest marriage proposal he's ever heard—and his answer is yes—right here, at the edge of a lake with forever-blue waters that hold the promise of absorbing all the fires that burn.

### **About the Author:**

Cecilia Kennedy earned a PhD in Spanish from Ohio State, taught for over 20 years in Ohio, and moved to the Greater Seattle area in 2016. Her works have appeared in Coffin Bell, Theme of Absence, Gathering Storm, and Down in the Dirt literary magazines/journals. Her "scariest" writing though, appears on her blog, "Fixin' Leaks and Leeks," which chronicles attempts at DIY projects.

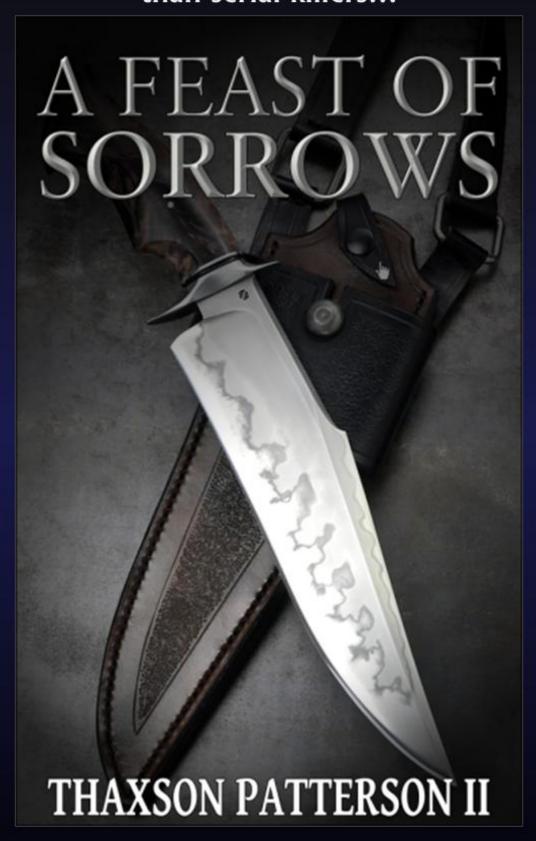
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### Come Fly with Me | R. J. Meldrum

It was the first week of September when I heard the news. A casual comment made by my mother during our weekly phone call.

"Oh, David, I forgot to mention. Lucinda Collins died last week. You knew her, didn't you?"

For a moment, my breath choked in my throat. Lucinda...dead. I hadn't thought of her for years.

Her name sparked a flood of memories in my mind.

\*\*\*

Collinswood. That's where I grew up. We learnt in school that the Collins family, the ones who lived in the big house on the hill, were the family who originally founded and named the town. It had been Joshua Collins, steel magnate, who established the steel mill on the bank on the Avon River in 1858, just in time for the outbreak of the civil war. The war made him rich. Rich enough to expand his mill, rich enough to build houses, schools and libraries for his workers. Rich enough to persuade the local authorities that he could name this new town in his own name. Collinswood.

By the time I was born, the Collin's no longer owned the steel mill. It had been sold to one of those huge corporations in the 1970s. Before that, the operation had been failing, as falling steel prices drove the plant towards bankruptcy. The prosperity of the town depended on the mill. My father worked there, so our family depended on it too. Just before the banks foreclosed, the corporation arrived, saving the town from disaster. The sale of the mill made the Collins even richer.

Lucinda was the younger of the two daughters of Arthur Collins, grandson of Joshua. She was about two years older than me. I didn't really know her; the Collins children didn't attend the local high school; instead they went to some posh boarding school in the city. We, the locals, only saw them during the summer break when they returned to town. We didn't know them, we didn't approach them. They were different.

If this was fiction, rather than real life, I would tell you I first met Lucinda by rescuing her from the town bully or by saving her from drowning in the local swimming hole. The truth is far more mundane. I met her for the first time when I was fifteen, at the end of August, just as we were about to return to class. I was wandering by myself, as I often did, in the hills above town, near to the Collins house. I wasn't a lonely kid, I had a pile of friends, but I was introverted, content with my own company.

She was standing on the hill, flying a kite. The warm summer wind held it aloft and with delicate flicks of her wrist, she made it dance across the blue sky.

I stood, transfixed. She eventually noticed me.

"So, David Williams, are you just going to stand there with your mouth open, collecting flies, or do you want to have a go?"

Embarrassed, I walked over. She handed me the cord that held the kite.

"You know my name."

"I know everyone. It's my father's town."

There wasn't much to say to that. She stared up at the sky.

"I love flying kites, it takes me away from my life. My family, my school. It gives me the freedom I seek."

I'd never heard anyone speak like that before.

"Summer is still here, but it's about to say farewell, once again. Fall is nearly here, you can feel it...the mornings are colder, the leaves are starting to change. This is the time of year when you can still see the light, but you know the darkness is coming. Change is on it's way."

I stood quietly, unable to respond. I was fifteen, a baby.

\*\*\*

I fell in love with her that day. During the years that followed, I always remembered her words. I started to notice the big changes in my life occurred just at the point when August yielded to September. The point in the year when the darkness began to subsume the light. I started my undergraduate studies in September, the same with my graduate work. I started my academic career in September. I got married at the beginning of September. I got divorced in September. I lost my dad in the same month. Everything big in my life happened at the beginning of September. Every time something happened, I thought of Lucinda.

And no, I didn't marry Lucinda. I wanted to, believe me, but it wasn't to be. After our first meeting, we only saw each other sporadically. As I grew older, our paths separated. She had her friends at the posh school, or at the country club. She didn't mix with the townies. My friends couldn't understand why I smiled and waved at her when I saw her. Why I would run over to say hi. Eventually, their mocking made me self-conscious, made me stop. Lucinda looked hurt when I ignored her. She didn't understand I had to make a choice. Hang with my buddies, who shared my background, or mix with the Collins, the snobs who were too stuck-up to speak to the locals. I was a kid; the choice was obvious.

I still loved her though. I ached to tell her, for my friends to accept her.

\*\*\*

I moved away when I was eighteen, off to the city to study at university. I was the first in my family. For a few years I lost sight of Lucinda; I rarely retuned home and our paths never crossed. New friends, a girlfriend and the pressure of studying made me focus on places and people not related to Collinswood. My mom kept me up-to-date with the gossip, so I was vaguely aware of what was happening. Lucinda finished high school but didn't go to university. Instead, she returned to the big house on the hill. The townsfolk, my mother included, expected her to marry well, produce a couple of babies, then spend the rest of her life moving between cocktail parties, lunches and spa days with her rich, spoiled friends. She didn't.

I was enrolled at grad school, and my visits home became even rarer than before. My mother mentioned Lucinda during one of our phone conversations. She was the talk of the town. Lucinda was becoming a recluse, hardly ever seen in public. The only time she was seen was when she flew her kite, on the hill where I first spoke to her. That news caused a thump in my chest. Eventually, my mother stopped mentioning her. The townsfolk had moved onto more interesting gossip. Lucinda became the eccentric lady who lived on the hill. There were other things to talk about. The town forgot about her. I forgot about her.

\*\*\*

It took my mother's phone call to bring all the memories flooding back.

"Yes, Mom, I knew her."

"She was only fifty-three."

That would be correct, she was two years older than me.

"They say it was cancer. Her parents died years ago, she lived in that big old house all by herself, locked away from the world."

"Did she still fly her kite?"

"She did, crazy lady. Everyone laughed at her. She should have known better, an adult playing with a kid's toy."

I smiled at the memory of the day I'd met her.

"When's the funeral?"

"Third of September. Are you thinking of coming?"

"I can get someone to teach my first week. Yes, I'd like to come home, pay my respects."

"Well, it's been so long since you came back. I suppose I'll have to make do with you deciding to come home for her, and not me."

Mum sounded pissed. I guess I could have chosen my words better.

"Mom, you know I love you. I know I don't come home as often as I should and I'm sorry, but Lucinda was a friend. I want to say goodbye to her."

"I'll see you soon, David. Love you."

\*\*\*

After the funeral, I climbed the hill. The Collins house lay empty. I stood staring at it, lost in a haze of memories and regret. I wished I'd done something about Lucinda. I wished I'd told her I loved her, ignored my friends. Perhaps she would have married me.

I saw a kite flying, just over the brow of the hill. I walked towards it.

It was her, standing as she had, all those years ago. I had a feeling she would be here.

"So, David Williams, you finally came back."

"I did. To say goodbye."

"I'm glad, thank you."

She took her eyes off the kite for a second to look at me.

"I know you loved me, I know you thought about marrying me, but you do know our families would never have agreed. We would never have been content. Can you imagine the family gettogethers? Your parents wanted you to marry some mousy, drab wee thing from your own social class and so you did. My parents wanted me to marry into money, like my sister did; to consolidate the Collins wealth and status. Instead, I flew my kite. It was a better life."

She glanced at the sky.

"The darkness is coming again; can you feel it? This is the last time I'll see it, but I won't miss it. I'm going to a place where there is no darkness."

She stared at me.

"I will miss you, David. Here, take my kite. Remember me."

She passed the cord over to me. For the first and last time, our fingers touched. Then, without another word, she simply faded away, leaving me alone on the hillside. I stood there for a moment, thinking about life, love, death and the passage of time. It took a moment for me to realize I now had another reason to remember this time of year.

### About the Author:

R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Smoking Pen Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

Facebook profile: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/richard.meldrum.79">https://www.facebook.com/richard.meldrum.79</a>
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### Penance | Roger Ley

He'd hung back, he was the last penitent of the day.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

"When was your last confession, my son?"

"Many years ago, father, thirty at least, not since I was fourteen."

"And what has brought you back to the bosom of the church now, my son?"

"I'm going to kill somebody and I wondered if I could get absolution for my sin?"

"I can't give you absolution for a sin you haven't committed, my son."

"No, I thought you'd say that, father. Still, worth a try."

"Why are you going to murder this person, my son?"

"Because he's been having an affair with my wife while I was serving in Afghanistan."

"And you know this for certain?"

"Oh yes, there are security cameras on the house. He's been parking at the back, right in front of one. Three times a week for the last six months. You've got to admire his enthusiasm." He chuckled.

"Do you know who owns this car, my son?"

"Oh yes, father, my brother's a traffic cop. He looked the number up for me, told me the owner's name and address."

"Perhaps the visits were purely innocent my son. Perhaps it was a matter of friendly support while you were away."

"Not according to my wife, father. Once I showed her the car on the computer screen, she broke down and told me all about it. Her loneliness, the visits from this friend. How he helped her, how the relationship developed, how he would give up everything so they could run away together. All the usual clichés that men tell women when they want to get them into bed."

"And when did she tell you all this, my son?"

"About half an hour ago. I expect you keep your phone switched off when you're doing confessions, father? Wouldn't want any interruptions, would you? Perhaps you'd like to say a few Hail Marys now."

The metallic rasp, as the penitent pulled back the slide of his automatic pistol, echoed around the empty church.

As did the shot that followed it.

### Horsemen | Roger Ley

The white ambulance pulled into the hotel car park. A middle-aged man wearing medical scrubs stepped out, a stethoscope hung jauntily around his neck. He walked up the steps and into the hotel. At the reception desk the manager looked up and smiled.

"Hello, Dr. White," he said, as he offered him the register. Dr. White filled in his name and address and wrote 'Epidemiologist' in the 'occupation' column.

"Your private dining room is ready Doctor; allow me to show you through. We've provided a TV as you requested, I hope you enjoy the Inauguration."

The Doctor sat and waited. A few minutes later a red Humvee arrived and a man in a military uniform stepped out and entered the hotel. He signed himself in and wrote 'General, US Army' in the

requisite column. The hotel manager wore an NRA lapel badge, the General pointed at it and winked, "Hope your dues are all paid up," he said.

The manager smiled, "This way, General," and showed him into the dining room. "Hey there Red," said the Doctor. They were obviously pleased to see each other and after a hug and a handshake, began talking of old times. The manager left them to their banter.

Soon a gray van arrived. The driver wore a lab coat and, he signed himself in as 'Professor Grey, Crop Scientist.' The manager showed him through to the dining room and returned to his desk, just as a hearse pulled into the car park. A tall, slender man in a black suit got out and placed a top hat on his head. It had a piece of black silk wrapped around it which trailed down his back. He walked up the steps, smiled thinly at the manager and wrote, 'Mr. Black, Undertaker' in the register. The manager showed him through to the dining room.

The four friends ate a hearty meal and watched the Presidential Inauguration. They proposed toasts with fine Californian wines and talked animatedly, joking about who had contributed the most to the election fund. They reached the brandy and cigars stage as the new President started his inaugural address. The four men grinned and nodded at each other as he made his promises for the future.

Finally, the speech ended, Doctor White stood up. "Let's hope that this is it," he said as he walked towards the exit. The other three stood up and pushed back their chairs. War, Famine and Death followed Pestilence out to the car park and on to their new jobs in Washington.

### Rivals | Roger Ley

It was their third date and Estella had invited Martin for a meal at her flat.

"So, what made you want a rat as a pet?" Martin asked as he peered into the cage, a perplexed expression on his face. The white rat stared back at him, its whiskers quivered as it sniffed and assessed him. "The company, I suppose," said Estella, "and the need to care for something, to feel needed."

"But a rat, I mean, they don't have a good press, infestations, black death, depopulation of Europe, all that sort of thing."

"But they're not all bad," she said, "they have some endearing traits and they're clean in their habits."

Martin looked doubtful.

Estella came over, opened the cage and reached inside. The white rat climbed onto her hand, crawled up her arm and then onto her shoulder, where it sat, whiskers quivering. Its red gimlet eyes stared at Martin unblinking.

She turned her head and smiled at it. "We've been together for two years, haven't we, Steve? Ever since you were a tiny little ball of fluff." The rat raised its head and looked at her for a moment then turned its gaze back to Martin.

Martin sipped his coffee and followed Estella to the sofa. They sat, and the rat crawled up onto the back and began quietly scratching and cleaning its fur, it seemed to lose interest in them.

Martin and Estella kissed, their hands roved over each other, they made love. It wasn't too bad for a first attempt. Although what with the wrestling with jumpers and tight jeans, it lacked the elegance and carefree passion of love scenes in the movies. Steve seemed unmoved.

They lay naked and slightly breathless in each other's arms, Estella fell asleep. Martin shuddered as tiny claws moved across his back, the rat climbed over their slick bodies towards a warm

spot where Estella's neck met her shoulder. It sniffed her skin, looked at her sleeping face, nuzzled her ear and licked her earlobe. It turned and stared at him for a few moments, then curled up and closed its eyes.

Martin dressed quietly and let himself out. As he was carefully closing the front door, he looked back at the rat and its mistress, sleeping peacefully, gently content with each other's company and felt a twinge of jealousy. He walked back to his car and looked up rat life expectancy on his phone. Three years potentially. He couldn't share Estella for a year, he wanted her all to himself.

The next day he ordered a sachet of rat poison from a supplier on eBay. It arrived two weeks later and he slipped it into his jacket pocket before he drove to Estella's house.

Martin stood in the kitchen watching Estella cook dinner, a glass of red in his hand. The rat's cage was open with the incumbent asleep in its nest of straw. Martin didn't approve of it resting on the kitchen worktop, but Estella said it was the only place she could find in her small flat. She'd tried keeping it on the floor but it hurt her back reaching down to it.

"I'll be back in a moment," she said as she walked out of the kitchen. "Keep an eye on the rice, don't let it stick." It took Martin only a few moments to take out the sachet, tear off a corner and tip a generous dose of the purple pellets into the rat's food dish. He slipped the sachet back into his pocket as Estella returned. She smiled happily at him, switched off the cooker, put her arms around and kissed him.

"Food can wait," she whispered, "I have other, more urgent appetites."

Martin placed his glass on the worktop and allowed himself to be led into the bedroom.

\*\*

### Extract from District Attorney's Office report:

'The victim complained of discomfort soon after eating a meal cooked by the accused and died shortly after arriving at the Laxfield General Hospital. The pathology report (see attached) indicates that the victim had ingested a quantity of a powerful rat poison of a type not available in this country, but easily obtainable from China. A sachet of this poison was found in the victim's left jacket pocket and the only fingerprints on it were those of the victim. Small traces of the poison were found in the cage of the accused's pet rat, and large quantities were found in the victim's part finished glass of wine. It is the opinion of the investigating officer that there is insufficient evidence for a realistic prospect of conviction and therefore no charges can be brought against the accused - PV Estella Mathews [2018] C.APP.R.274. The defence would probably argue that the victim's death was a bizarre case of suicide. The accused is currently on police bail and the DAO recommendation is that all charges against her are immediately dropped.'

### **About the Author:**

Roger Ley was born and educated in London and spent some of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before joining the nuclear industry and later pursuing a career in higher education. His stories and articles have appeared in about a dozen ezines this year. His two books are currently available on Amazon: 'A Horse in the Morning' is a collection of comic autobiographical stories. 'Chronoscape' is a science fiction novel about time and alternate realities.

WebSite: http://www.rogerley.co.uk



Moonlight Sacrifices A.F. Stewart

My fellow initiates—my sisters—smile at me, but I hear their whispers.

"The moon rising ceremony is tonight. They'll come for her."

They avoid looking at me, but I know the pity in their eyes. Mine reflected such emotions once. For the previous girl chosen in the sacrificial rites.

It is the risk, coming to the temple, the unspoken fear. The first night after they marked me, I wept myself into sleep. Then the Goddess came to me in my fitful dreams. She granted me strength, showed me the path. Tonight I walk it willingly.

After midnight I am escorted to the woodland dais by the priests. I am nervous, but I know my duty. As I kneel before the altar, I slip the knife from beneath my robes. For my duty is not to their God. I do the bidding of my Goddess.

They never see their deaths coming.

I look down on the last priest, bloodied knife raised. "The goddess is coming, defiler. She will no longer tolerate her daughters' blood spilled in the name of your Death God. She is coming and you will all die."

I bring down the knife and paint the moonlight red.

### The Nature of the Crime | Melissa R. Mendelson

The Town Hall meeting was at 1 p.m., located by the park and the ponds. Summer was ending, and fall was stirring. People still walked around the ponds. Children played in the park. It was a beautiful day, but I was the maniac rushing across the street, hoping for a quick parking spot. There were none, so my car was left by the park. And I ran in a frenzy to get to the meeting, only to find one seat left, and it was right in front of a table of six individuals that would determine their fate.

As the six heads glared at me bitterly, the glass door behind us creaked open. His heavy footsteps scraped against the fake wooden floor, which still creaked. His skin cracked. Little debris flickered to the floor. His limbs stretched outward, daring to scratch those that did not shift their seats away, and he was not alone. The saplings were with him.

"We must take the pledge first," one head snapped.

I knew that was a lie. Exactly at one o'clock, the pledge was taken. They would never wait especially if they had a long agenda, and it was 1:15 p.m. I had also taken a look at the agenda. The only pending business was theirs, and that was why they were here to plead their case. And I would plead with them.

"I beg you," he said in a deep, harsh voice, "to reconsider."

"We gave you the summer," the second head stated. "Summer is ending."

"Give us the fall too." He wrapped his arms around his children. "Let the winter take us."

"That's not how it works anymore." The third head carried no sympathy. "We have plans."

"Yes," he said. "To cover this world in cement, in stripping malls and with multiple homes built on large, gray foundations. Have you not taken everything from us?"

"Some of you are still here," the fourth head said, but there was no compassion in his voice.

"Some," he said. "Not many. You need us."

"Do we?" The fifth head smiled her plastic smile. "I think we've reached beyond you."

He glanced over his shoulder as did I. The faces of those seated around us flickered. Their minds stolen across the network. Their fingers eaten by digital. They were only present because they had to be, or maybe some shred of their former selves was still present. But the air conditioner had more life. It blared out a cold blast of air trying to wake them from their comatose state, failing miserably. Only I was warm, sweating nervously, as the six heads glanced at me with daggers.

"Please. Please, give us more time," he said. "For my children." He drew them closer to his trunk. "We once co-existed. What changed?"

"We did," the six head grinned. "I'm sorry, but I think that we are all in agreeance." He watched the other five heads bob to his words. "We can give you to September 1<sup>st</sup>, but the construction must continue after that."

"You never keep your words," he snapped. His limbs stretched outward, now scratching those nearby, but only a few blinked. "I could bring this whole place down."

"We would rebuild it," the first head said.

"Your minds can't be all made up," I said, standing on jelly legs. "Look outside the window. Look at the people walking around the ponds. The children in the park. What will that scenery look like without them?"

"The children won't care," the second head said. "When they are done swinging on the swings or sliding down the slide, they will run right back to the internet, and they will exist there."

"And those walking around the ponds? They don't even notice now," the third head said. "They're lost in their own worlds, briefly acknowledging those passing by them, looking at the waters and disgusted at the algae."

"Maybe, you should clean the damn ponds," I snapped. "Or is that next to go?" The heads did not reply. "You have to let them stay. This is where they belong. At least, here by the ponds and the park."

"We already have a small amount refuged there," the fourth head stated.

"They have until September 1st," the fifth head replied.

"Then, let's not prolong it," he roared. "It's torture. Let's get on with it."

"No," I yelled at him.

"It's too late." I heard the defeat in his voice. "Look at them," and his arm swept over those around us. "Now, look at them," and his limbs pointed at the six heads. "Can you tell me different?"

"No." The tears were hot across my cheeks. "I've seen the destruction done."

"We are the last on their list," he said, and his saplings cried. "Let us fall."

I fell back into my seat. I watched him exit with the children wrapped by his side. I wanted to scream at those tranced around us. *Wake up*, but the words would not exit my mouth. And the six heads bobbled in excitement at new developments and more cement. All I could do was close my eyes and feel the knots twist in my belly. Then, I heard the chainsaws outside, barely drowned out by the air conditioner, which didn't even bother to swallow up their screams.

### **About the Author:**

Melissa R. Mendelson is a published Horror and Science-Fiction Author. Her stories have appeared in Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press. Her stories were also recently featured on Tall Tale TV.

Web site: <a href="http://www.melissamendelson.com">http://www.melissamendelson.com</a>
Twitter: <a href="mailto:@MelissMendleson">@MelissMendleson</a>

### **Boots** | *Nidheesh Samant*

It was supposed to be a regular trek — a walk through the autumn forests, pitching tents at night and enjoying a campfire. It never turned out that way.

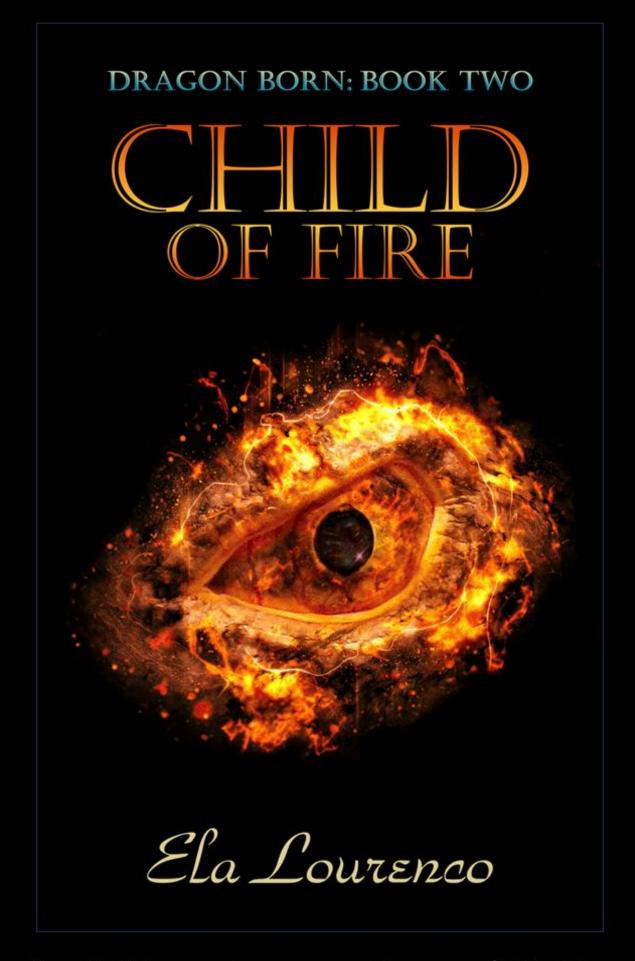
When they arrived in the woods, something happened. Something made the birds unwilling to rest in the greens. Something caused an eerie fog to settle in. And that something disappeared along with the trekkers. We know not what that something was.

All we found was a single pair of boots. No body, no other evidence. Just the boots. Something had caused the originally brown shoes to turn into an autumn red.

### **About the Author:**

Nidheesh Samant is a marketing professional from India, taking his first steps into the world of writing. He enjoys soup and dark stories, and loves their combination even more. His work has been published on redpaper in and in the anthology Phuket Tattoo.

Website: <a href="https://thedarknetizen.wordpress.com">https://thedarknetizen.wordpress.com</a></a>
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### Seasons | Mark Steinwachs

Shafts of golden light push passed branches of the ancient oak trees. Carpo gingerly walks barefoot upon the forest floor. Her fingers trail along the bark, the energy of the trees restoring her strength after another slumber. It's her time, the summer sun will give way to the fall harvest as it has for ages.

Damp earth is soft underfoot as her strides begin to lengthen. She stretches her neck, closed eyes cast skyward, warmth hitting her as she passes through a sunbeam. Her loose dress, moments ago matching the color of her auburn hair, slowly begins to change. Hues of green become tan then scrolling to yellow followed by orange. As the colors change faint outlines of all types of leaves begin to take shape, gradually becoming darker.

She opens her eyes, slipping amongst the many trees that surround her in the glade, searching for the one, the tree that carries the gift to start her season. Until she finds it she is vulnerable, and because of that so are the fragile ecosystems she is entwined with. She is the last of her season. Once powerful, the Autumns have been squeezed by Winter and Summer.

Her delicate fingers touch the bark of the ones from before. They greet her, continuing to give her strength. Each silent step brings her closer to the one. The forest floor begins to darken, storm clouds peeking through the branches, a low rolling thunder echoes through the forest. She stops moving, scanning the area. It has to be a coincidence, she thinks, no one knows I'm here.

Another long rumble of thunder fills the area, her name elongated within it; Carrrrpo.

She inhales and breathes out, getting frantic will make things worse. Her steps take her from tree to tree. She flinches as the first few drops hit the ground around her. Shadows have overtaken what was once sun. She closes her eyes, silently reaching out, searching for her...there it is!

Her eyes pop open and she sprints toward safety for another year.

Rain comes down harder, stinging her skin. A thunderclap rocks the glade, like the earth itself ripping open. The assault of air and water knocks Carpo off stride. Careening off a tree she rights herself in the now deluge of rain taking two more steps before stopping.

"Notos," she says.

A blue-gray skinned man stands in front of her. Dressed in a seaweed color bathing suit, his lithe muscular body and black, slicked back hair glistening.

"Hello, my sister," his voice is quiet but cuts through the rain. He snaps his fingers and the downpour stops.

Remnants of the storm drip around and from their skin. "Half-sister," Carpo says. "My real sister is dead. Don't try this, Notos. Go home, it's time for you to rest. You've done your job. We have to keep what's left of the balance. Mother is fragile."

"You've hid for long enough. Now it's time for you to join your beloved sister. I'll send you to her so you can watch together."

Carpo bellows and lunges toward Notos. He grabs her wrists the moment her hands connect with his chest. He twists with the attack and throws her against a tree. She slams into it, air forced from her lungs.

"Don't you dare speak of her," Carpo says, steadying herself against the tree. She knows she can't beat him but she can outrun him and now she has a clear shot to the one.

"She was my sister too. But life evolves and it's time for a change. We've been moving that way for a long time now."

"You half-blood bastard," she says. "You've been moving that way. You! You're going to kill everyone, including yourself. There needs to be four seasons. You're the beginning of the end if you do this."

"I'm the bridge to the next evolution of life. I'm a half-blood, the first of my kind. I'm Summer and Autumn. A blend of both."

"It's not possible. You can't keep balance. You're a deluded, horrible mistake."

Notos smiles and takes a step forward. "Ba Jai understood. She thanked me for having the conviction to fight the battle that needed to be fought. Before I took her final breath I promised her I would save you for last, her sister."

Carpo presses her palms to the tree, gaining every bit of energy she can from it. Her voice piercing, "I knew it. I always did. You're a loathsome, vile, twisted creature."

She pushes off and sprints past Notos dodging his attempt at grabbing her. She doesn't look back but hears him follow. A few more steps and she'll be there, she can almost feel his breath on the back of her neck. It's not enough time. She has to hold him off somehow.

She reaches out to the one. If she can touch it and keep running it might buy her enough time. Her hand stretches out making contact with the one. A burst of energy surges through her body, her dress erupts in bright oranges and reds. The air is crushed from her lungs as she is knocked off her feet, Notos slamming his body into hers. They roll on the forest floor, Carpo looking up as a leaf begins to drift down from the tree as her half-brother pummels her.

"You've lost," she says through bloodied teeth. "The first leaf has fallen."

"Not until it hits the ground," Notos slams his fist into her jaw twice then looks up. The leaf is almost to him, an amber beacon amongst a sea of green.

Carpo sighs and closes her eyes smiling, waiting for her body to restore itself once Notos is expelled from her land when her leaf touches the ground. "No one but an Autumn can stop the first leaf to fall once it's broken free."

She struggles to breathe, the weight of him on her. Carpo opens her eyes, Notos holds the leaf in his hand. The vibrant leaf against the color of his skin is hard for Carpo to process. "How?" Is all she manages to say.

"The blood of an Autumn still flows through me."

Notos stands and Carpo tries to roll over. A kick to the ribs keeps her in place. Her eyes are wide as his foot connects with her temple. The pain is excruciating but begins to lessen then lessen more, becoming a dull ache, then nothing.

Notos stands over the broken body of his sister. He places the leaf on her, watching orange become green again.

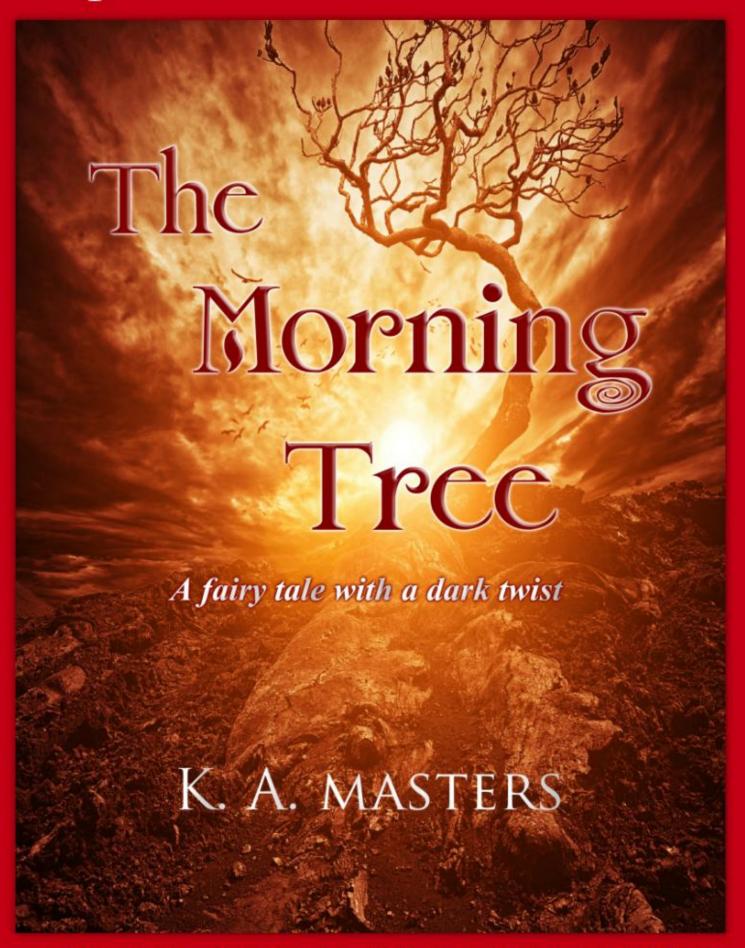
### **About the Author:**

Mark Steinwachs is a former roadie that has retired to shop life as General Manager of Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Years of traveling the road on tour buses, plus time in the United States Marine Corps, and as rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique set of experiences to draw on for his stories.

Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMarkSteinwachs">https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMarkSteinwachs</a>

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# Experience K.A. Masters' debut novel...



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### The Burning | Alyson Faye

The wind carried the echoes of night cries smothered, whispering along the reed-lined paths beneath a tired, late summer sun.

The villagers knew. . .

The waters' currents sluiced the rust stains from his flesh.
Rose gold touched his shoulders, the dawn crept forward, still hue-lit by evenings' torches.
Their orange glow creating sallow shadows, coating him.

The villagers gathered and gossiped . . .

Around the dying camp fires' embers, of 'the double deaths; mother and babe'. 'Of him stealthily stealing their breaths'. Surprising the dusky scented night — into mourning.

The villagers turned away. . .

Families gathered, congregated, united. Whilst on the wind, the susurration of the river carried his name, his crime, For he hoped to drown his deed, along with his misbegotten child.

The village elders convened. . .

There is power in a name.
Once spoken it can not be unsaid.
They inscribed his name on papyrus, then watched it burn.
The untold name, so anciently venerable now recently abused, his ancestors pronounced the verdict.

Burning followed by the coolness of-Water and Fire. Elemental forces. To cleanse the village of the monster and the blood pool of his making.

### **About the Author:**

Alyson lives in West Yorkshire in the UK with her family and gang of rescue animals. She teaches creative writing, blogs, and mentors. Her flash fiction is published widely on line on sites such as the Horror Tree, Horror Scribes, Ellipsis mag, zeroflash, Tubeflash and in print anthologies like 'Women in Horror Annual 2'. Her debut collection, 'Badlands', is out to buy on amazon. Her horror story 'Mr Dandy' in 'DeadCades' from Infernal Clock indie press is out in October.

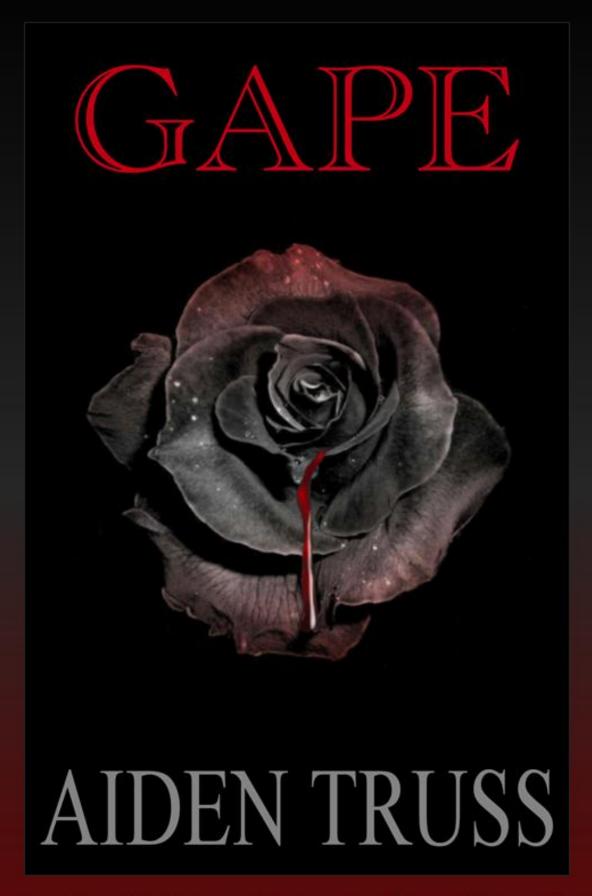
 ${\bf Blog:} \ \underline{{\bf www.alyson fayeword press. word press. com}$ 

Twitter: @AlysonFaye2

...Forced to survive the night alone in the desert with an aberration of nature...



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### The Last Day of Summer | Deb Whittam

I remember it so distinctly, for it all happened as summer entered its twilight, a point which he would remind me of each and every day. The warmth of the sun had been upon my back, the last of the flowers had been blooming and there was a sense of expectation in the air.

It was the reason I made that detour. It is the reason that I now wished I was dead. Once I was naive, once I was sure, once I was called Jordan.

Now I have no name, my name is a death sentence and he has decided that death would be too easy for me. I came across them purely by chance; he was a large, muscular man, his opponent a thin slip of a creature. Now in different circumstances I would have passed them by but I decided that the fey creature was of the faerie and I took it upon myself to intervene.

I set upon the man and my assault caught him off guard. We fell, we grappled upon that dusty road and as we did so the creature slipped away.

I was exalted at my success but the other cursed, his words terse and violent, and as I drew my eyes from his flame red countenance I caught sight of what my actions had freed. This was no creature of the faerie, this creature I didn't even recognize but as it turned, as if to acknowledge my assistance, my stomach contracted. Malice was etched into its macabre features.

"What have you done?" The other exclaimed and though I wanted to protest, I knew it was no use.

Later I would justify my actions to him but then I struggled to understand what had driven me to act, I was not the type inclined to spontaneity. Perhaps it was the creature's size, it was slight and delicate but to assume this meant it was fragile had been a mistake.

As the other rose to his feet the creature threw itself forward, its limbs were tentacles covered in miniscule suckers, and they appeared to stretch to an inconceivable length, flailing madly as it became airborne and then, as I was sure it would fall, it squealed and I winced at the piercing noise. The sound was emitted through a circular opening but I hesitated to call it a mouth, for when it hung suspended in the air, I realized that it didn't feast in any manner I was familiar with.

The tentacles had taken hold and at first, I struggled to conceive what they held to maintain a stationery position, but as the air grew thicker, as the colors lost their vibrancy, as the sunlight grew fainter, I made the connection. This creature was draining the sunlight; it was siphoning the bright glorious energy from the very plane of our existence through those tentacles. They gorged on the light, feasting on it through the slits that ran the length of its extended neck. While this was horrific to witness it was the realization that the creature produced a waste product, a thick treacle like substance oozed from its torso. It was an absolute nothingness, a darkness which was dank and impenetrable and as it spewed forth our world became gray, colorless, lifeless.

My companion shrieked even as this creature chortled its delight.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice hollow and emotionless and he turned, his features bleak.

"It is called a Light Garione." At my look of incomprehension, he added, "They feed on light. They suck the warmth, the vitality, the color and spew forth a darkness which eradicates everything."

His words explained its appearance, the overtly large eyes with pinprick pupils- it destroyed light, its world was darkness. The thin slit for a nose and the oval mouth—it didn't require the sense of smell or taste, it had discarded these in its evolution. It was a creature of speed, of tenacity, of unquenching hunger—it was a ravenous predator who left darkness in its wake.

"Can it be stopped?"

He laughed, "When it was weak, perhaps, but now it has fed ..."

His words trailed off and sickened, I watched as it leapt and disappeared into the distance.

### About the Author:

Deb Whittam is a graduated from Macquarie University Bachelor of Arts and is traversing the great continent of Australia in a caravan. She seeks to explore the many forms of reality in her writing and examine how perspectives can alter when life is viewed through an alternate lens. She has three books available for download at Smashwords.

Blog: <a href="http://debbiewhittam.wordpress.com">http://debbiewhittam.wordpress.com</a>

Twitter: @DebbieWhittam

### Bedtime | Eric S. Fomley

I downed a glass of cool water, took my evening pills, and packed Jake's lunch for his first day of school. I was dead-ass tired and it was time for me to hit the sack if there was any chance I was going to darken the door of the office at the butt-crack of dawn.

When I turned the kitchen corner, I nearly ran Jake over.

"Goodnight, son." I said, as I roughed up his sandy brown hair on the way by. He'd told me before he hated when I did that. Though, something about middle school made him hate just about anything I did.

I walked down the hall toward my bedroom. For some reason, Jake's door was open and I glanced in. I froze. What the hell? I thought I'd seen something on Jake's bed. I reached through the doorway and flicked on the light.

It was Jake. Asleep. In his bed.

A chill ran down my spine. My stomach twisted in sudden fear and my heart thundered in my chest. I slowly turned back toward the kitchen.

The other Jake stepped out, a toothy grin spanned his face. He clutched a long butcher's knife, slick with the sticky crimson sheen of blood. His face shifted and distorted, my son's face melted away.

The thing's sinister laughter drowned out my screams.

### **About the Author:**

Eric Fomley's work has appeared in Little Blue Marble, Tales to Terrify, and ArtPost Magazine.

Website: <u>ericfomley.com</u> Twitter: @<u>PrinceGrimdark</u>

<sup>&</sup>quot;Where is it going?" I asked, but I already knew the answer.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Bright lights ..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Big city." I finished and he turned towards me with a wry smile.

<sup>&</sup>quot;The dark days have just begun, boy."



Hush Nina D'Arcangela

Been so many years, I don't even remember the sun no more. I hear 'em muttering, let 'em talk. I'll die in this box no doubt. I even heard they sealed it with the name. Trying to shame me I s'ppose. But I have my trophy; I pick my teeth with it every day. Wearin' it down, but then it was so small to start with. Seems people dislike what I done, but that's only 'cause they don't understan' it. See, the sweet meat — it's like veal, you gotta eat it when it's supple, 'fore it grows and loses the flavor.

### The Man in the Hayfield | Alex Woolf

There's a man in the hayfield. I can see him through our kitchen window, watching me. He's very tall and thin, like a scarecrow, and his long cloak flaps in the breeze. I open the door and step out of the cottage. The sky is a decadent blue, the breeze warm, sweet and rotting at the edges, the smell of late summer. The field is dotted with perfect gold bales of hay casting their shadows across the brittle stalks. The man is standing near one of the bales, casting his own much longer, narrower shade. Strangely, it projects at a different angle to the others, as if he stands beneath another sun. I can't see his face from this distance, but I feel his stare. What does he want? Why does he stand there, so still?

"Hey gorgeous!" calls Ryan from the front door.

My heart no longer surges at the sound of his voice, but I feel a small pulse of pleasure as I turn to greet him. His bronze eyes, like lucky old pennies, smile back at me. The breeze plays with the lazy dark mess of his hair.

"What are you looking at?" Ryan asks.

"That man in the field."

"What man, honey?"

I twist back and point. "That one..." But the man is gone.

"Hey!" The word falls out of my shocked mouth.

Ryan closes his arms around mine and turns me to face him.

"I was missing you," he grins. "It's been at least ten minutes since we kissed."

There was a time when I'd have gladly killed to hear these words from the beautiful Ryan Hagan. Back then he could have knocked all fear out of me with a murmur of that Irish brogue. But now my unease remains, and it comes out as irritation.

"Ryan, there was a man, I'm telling you...!"

He cuts me off by placing his lips, soft as moth wings, on mine. No more sunshine at his touch, no tremble on my skin. I wish I could say I loved him, but if this summer has proved anything, it's that I don't. Not anymore.

I glance back over my shoulder at the field, empty but for the hay bales. What did I see out there?

\*\*\*

Next morning, I open the bedroom curtain and stare again at the field. "Is your man there?" Ryan asks sleepily from the bed.

"I must have imagined him," I reply.

"Come here, gorgeous," he demands.

I return to our bed and try to lose myself in Ryan's embraces and his late-night urban aroma, which all these weeks in the country has failed to extinguish. After a while he leans back and his eyes glitter as he appraises my body, like I'm a trophy to be won or fought over. His mouth hovers close to speech, as if he cannot locate the words to do honor to my glory. But these mannerisms, and that scent, which aroused me in the springtime of our love, feel stale now in late August.

"Let's spend the whole day in bed?" he murmurs, nuzzling my ear.

"I'd love to but I need to go into town to stock up."

I also need to look at some different faces, but I don't tell him that.

"Must you? We can survive another day on black coffee and cornflakes." His nuzzling has started to feel like a fluttering insect that needs to be squashed.

"I really think I should go."

"In that case, I'll come too."

I put on the requisite smile, and say "Of course!" with enthusiasm, but I feel a twinge of irritated disappointment. Not once in the eight weeks we've been here has he asked to join me on a supply run. I've come to treasure them as my 'alone times'.

After we've shopped, we stop at a café and sit at an outdoor table. A drowsy late-summer fly, slow and bloated with age, buzzes Ryan and I smash at it. Ryan wasn't interested in any of the stores we passed earlier – not even the bookies, or the amusement arcade. His eyes used to come alive at such places as if splashed with some dangerous chemical. He's changed, and maybe it's for the best. His dalliance with the goddess of fortune had bled him of serious amounts of moolah.

I watch the parents and children in the store across the street, choosing their colorful pencil cases and math sets for the autumn term. Ryan only has eyes for me. As does the waiter, when he arrives to take our order. He leaves after taking mine and I have to call him back. "What do you want?" I ask Ryan.

"Just you," he replies.

"Make that two coffees," I tell the waiter, who seems puzzled as he walks away.

I can feel Ryan's loving eyes upon me as I watch the people ambling across the plaza. The hazy light makes dazzling rainbows in the splashes of the fountain. Through the blur of spray I glimpse a figure, very tall and thin, on the far side of the square, watching me. A cloud-shadow darkens the square and a chill wind ruffles my shirt, harbinger of the coming season. "Let's go," I say.

"What about the coffee?"

I drop some coins on the table and pick up the bags of shopping. I can no longer see the tall man – a confluence, perhaps, of light and spray and my unsettled imagination. Still, I want to be gone. As we walk back to the car, Ryan talks to me – foolish stuff about the color of the sunlight on my skin and the scent of my hair. I wish he would stop.

\*\*\*

It's late afternoon and I'm in the garden clearing bindweed from the hedge, when the blue sky suddenly clatters with thunder. Like giant boulders dropped onto a hollow timber floor, it shakes up the air, me, everything, as if something huge from another world has hatched itself into ours. I look up and I know what – who – I'll see, though I'm still pierced by the sight of the man in the hayfield. This time, he's closer.

I stand slowly, and make a gloved salute to shield my eyes. He's utterly still, apart from his long cloak, which shivers like my legs. His face is hidden by a large, loose hood. He might be an upright corpse, but I know that in the depths of that cowl are living eyes, watching, waiting, and I can hear in the warning wind that rattles the latch on the gate, and in the dying fall of thunder: For Gods sake, wake up! Time is running out! For a long, unearthly moment we hold each other's stares across the agitated yards of field and hedgerow. Then I turn away and hasten inside the cottage.

The rains come that night, and the darkness flickers with distant filigrees of lightning. As I force closed the bedroom window the wet shadows lick at my face, eager ambassadors of the new season. Later, in the tumble of our lovemaking, I try and reach for Ryan, for the man I know I loved once, but we are two strangers going through love's motions. And the whining of the wind in the eaves is like the turning of a hinge in time.

The next morning, while Ryan sleeps, I descend the narrow stairwell with nerves like butterflies. In the kitchen I endeavor to move in regular ways, from refrigerator to cupboard to stove, preparing coffee,

trying to ignore the pressure on my insides, the perturbations of the light. I move to the draining board, reaching for a sharp knife to cut open a packet of bacon. Glancing up through the kitchen window I see a hawk plummeting between towers of cumulus. The blue has a deeper, more oppressive cast than yesterday, and the clouds with their dark underbellies brood over the sodden landscape.

The tall man is in the field. But he's no longer just standing there. He's moving now, heading slowly this way. In shock, I fall backwards and collide with a chair, making it screech against the tiles. I close my eyes, praying that when I open them again I'll be back in bed with Ryan, and there never was a man. But the throbbing behind my eyes tells me this isn't going to be a dream. When I force them open again, he's still coming this way, only faster, striding through pools of ankle-deep rainwater, sending a mist of glittering spray across the stubble. My guts tighten, and I drop the knife, which pings against the tiles. Despite the hood shrouding his face, he knows exactly where he's going, for there is a terrifying intent in his gait. He's coming for me. Briefly, as he passes through a sunbeam, he gleams like a thin dark blade. Now he's marching into the longer grass and the hedge, smashing through it as if it isn't there. He's out of the field.

It's all happening too fast. *Think! I can't let him in.* I reach down for the knife on the floor, but it skitters away from my fingers. I stretch for it under the table, grab the handle and look up. A choked cry flutters from my throat. He's in the garden. The dark hollow of his hood points at me like a gun muzzle through the kitchen window. He is a giant.

Holding the knife in front of me in both trembling hands, I skirt the table and back up against the counter. Outside, the man slides from view and, next thing, a fist starts pounding furiously at the door. I press my knuckles to my mouth, pushing back my panic. What now? Barricade the door? The pounding is a battering ram inside my skull, driving out coherent thought. I must call the police. My phone is on the counter. I fumble for it, switch it on. Wake up! Wake up damn you! I have to put down the knife to press out the numbers. The banging on the door is frenzied, a staccato torrent of rage. I squash the phone to my ear. Come on! Ringtone!

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the door starting to bulge and crack under the punishment, dark lines spidering through the white paintwork. I can't hear anything from the phone – the noise or my panic has deafened me. I put it down and move doorwards, knife held stiffly before me. I drag a chair over and try and secure the door by bracing it with the angled chair, its uppermost strut locked beneath the handle. The chair squeaks as the door starts to cave under the battering. Behind me, from the stairwell, comes a heavy yawn. Ryan emerges, red of eye and lank of hair, complexion distinctly gray. "Help me!" I scream at him. "Push the table over here." But he just goes and takes a seat by it.

"He's here then?" he mutters, taking a slurp from my coffee. "The man from the field?"

"Ryan, get up! We need to keep him out!"

"We can't keep him out."

I turn on him. "What?"

"Summer's over, honey," says Ryan tiredly. "A gambling man like me never likes to admit it, but I can't keep running forever. Accounts must at some point be settled." He cocks me a sad smile. His teeth, I notice, are yellow, his gums thinning. "It was fun though, wasn't it? We had a good time, while it lasted."

I shudder. "You mean this guy is a debt collector?"

"You might say that." He puts his hand to his head and pulls out a thick hank of his hair. His bare skull gleams like the moon.

Bang... Bang... Bang...

"What the fuck's happening to you, Ryan?" I move uncertainly towards him.

"I borrowed until there was no one left to turn to," Ryan explains. "Even the loan sharks turned me down. There was only this one guy left. He offered generous terms, until you default that is. Then the penalty is steep."

"You mean... death?"

"I made some unfortunate decisions at the roulette table," Ryan nods, "and he came last June to call in his debt. I told him I had no more assets." A fly lands on Ryan's face, and he scratches at it. I scream as the skin and flesh gets caught under his fingernails and comes away like a furl of damp wallpaper, revealing part of his cheekbone. "Whoops!" he says. "Sorry." Discomfited by my look of horror, he tries to pat it back into place, but it flops away again, dangling beneath his jawbone like the wattle of a turkey. There are several flies now, buzzing around his head.

The banging on the door is getting ever more insistent, but I hardly notice it as I stare in dread and revulsion at the man I once loved.

"He killed you then?" I can barely believe I'm saying this.

"I begged him, before he took my life, to give me one last summer with you." I can see Ryan's teeth moving inside the hole in his cheek as he speaks. "But this guy is ruthless." Ryan grins, and it's horrible. "After he killed me, he must have relented, because he revived my corpse. Have this summer with your girl, he said me. But at the end of it, there'll be a price for that, too."

"A price? What price?"

With an explosive creak, the chair holding the door flies backwards and the door crashes open. The tall man ducks beneath the lintel and enters the kitchen. Suddenly I find it hard to breathe, and everything dims as if he has sucked both light and air out of the room. His hood is tilted downwards, scanning the room, stopping at Ryan.

"Top of the morning to you, Mr. Nyx," says Ryan. "As you can see, you do not find me in the best of shape."

Mr. Nyx makes a hissing sound, which sounds like something very sharp slicing through dry grass. "Summer is over," is what I think he says.

"Indeed it is, Mr. Nyx. There's a definite chill in the air and I don't believe it's all emanating from you."

"I've come to take what is mine," hisses Mr. Nyx.

"You've already killed him!" I shout at the giant. "What more can he possibly give you?"

The muzzle of Nyx's hood swivels towards me, and a long thin spike emerges from the sleeve of his cloak. It's bronze, stained with blood, and it ends in an extremely sharp point, which he directs at my chest.

"No!" I grunt, feeling around once again for my knife.

"Don't fight it, honey," says Ryan. "Just think about all the pleasure we've had this past summer – all the love we've shared. It was worth it. Wasn't it?"

### **About the Author:**

Alex Woolf is the author of over 100 books, mostly for children and young adults. His fiction includes *Chronosphere*, a time-warping science fiction trilogy, *Aldo Moon*, about a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, *Ship of the Dead* about a zombie attack on a cruise ship, and *Soul Shadows*, a horror story about flesh-eating shadows, which was shortlisted for the 2014 RED Book Award.

Website: <u>alexwoolf.co.uk</u>
Twitter: @RealAlexWoolf

### SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS

# WHAT DWELLS BELOW



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, iTunes in Print and Digital Formats

### In the Pale Moonlight | Lydia Prime

"Gwen Castillo, eat your heart out." Hecate sneered as her coat of black fur morphed into a cloak of black velvet. She tossed up her hood, and quickly walked into her decrepit domain. The cathedral's appearance seemed to rival only that of the now fallen House of Usher. Hecate traipsed through the empty corridors, each step echoed in her wake. She strolled through the rubble without a care and toyed with the pendant dangling from her neck.

She came to an ordinary room – decaying, just as the rest of the place – and waved her hand. Instantly, the metal bed frame before her transformed into a dark alter. Bones, blood, and even flesh, had been used in its creation. Hecate stood beside it and ripped her trinket from her neck. She held it over her skull-made cauldron and it began to levitate from her palm. A small tip of a black, hollowed out horn – taken from the mighty ruler of the underworld himself, shook violently in mid-air. A transparent face flowed from it, terror and pain etched there for eternity. A tortured wail was heard, one last attempt at pleading for freedom, before being sucked into the skull beneath. Hecate placed her hand beneath the horn, and fastened it back to the red ribbon around her neck. "Seven down, two to go." She smiled as she spoke aloud to the spirits she knew were listening.

Hecate had made a deal with the King of Hell, simply steal the souls of nine exceptional do-gooders and she would be granted eternal youth, immortality, and not to mention a permanent human form. She had no idea, or even slightest worry, of what sinister plans awaited those souls. She was close to her goal and she could taste the power that awaited her. The sun rose once more and she returned to her feline form; the alter, back to an unimpressive metal bed frame – and once again, Hecate ventured out to find her next offering.

### Sowing Season | Lydia Prime

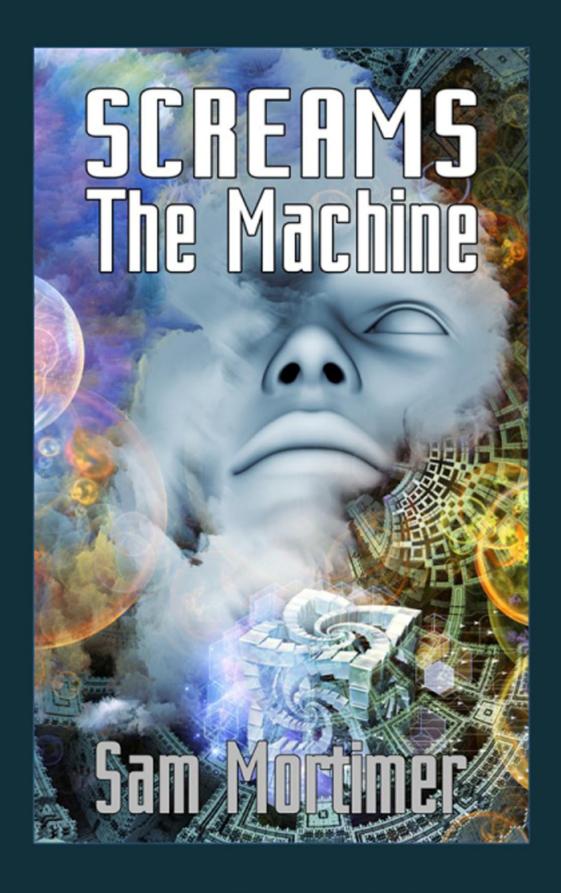
Xipe would be pleased; from blood sacrifice the harvest should be safe from seasonal plight. Three friends closely line up behind me, playing follow the leader into the field. They could never have known what I'd planned for their last night. After all this time, my needed action had become enjoyment; a fine pleasure to dismember those who'd come. My sickle, hidden by stalks of corn, caught them off guard by its reveal.

They screamed and cried—even bargained for life. Grinning while their wishes fell on deaf ears, I knew not one would leave this field breathing. Quick slashes scattered their precious pieces, now coated in metallic red. The corn glistened in the moonlight, the blood drenched crop dripped upon the ground. The roots drank ravenously, shattering the night's silence with a deafening suck. The harvest would be promised. My eyes twinkled while I examined the torn carcasses knowing Xipe's power was devotedly harnessed.

### **About the Author:**

Lydia is that friendly monster under your bed just waiting for you to stick your limbs out from beneath the covers. She tends to frequent the nightmares others dare not tread. When she's not trying to shred scraps of humanity from the unsuspecting, she writes stories and poems of the horror and dark fiction variety. She's often found in the box office (fishbowl) of Levity Live, and behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

Facebook: <u>www.facebook.com/Erin.Prime</u>
Instagram: <u>@helminthophobia</u>



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

#### Call of the Wild | Logan Fourie

There is a famous saying: 'Do unto others, as you would have done unto you.' Jake always thought that 'others' meant other people. But he recently learnt just how wrong he was...

The drive up to the cabin was long and uneventful. It was Jim's yearly trip up to the woods for some R&R and some last-minute hunting. Kaitlyn constantly voiced her dislike of this little 'hobby'. She said it was distasteful and disrespectful. He never could understand her hippie, tree-hugger attitude. She was borderline obsessive about treating all living things with respect and care. He had often asked why she was so obsessive, but she never answered. She would just say that she felt it was important, life and death important. Jim would just shake his head and chuckle.

The dirt road was a mess after the last rain of the season. If it were not for his 4x4 he would not have been able to navigate the road. The wheels often would spin in place trying to get purchase on the muddy pathway. The air smelt crisp and clean. Kaitlyn often said it smelt 'green'. Jim would chuckle at this and ask her what does 'green' smell like. Her reply was simply "Like green. Like Motherly Love. What more do you want?" Kaitlyn had a very weird way of speaking and referring to things. She often referred to nature as a living and breathing thing, often calling her Mother.

He skidded to a halt a few paces from the cabin. He gasped at the sight. The sun filtered through the trees casting an almost enchanting green hue over the roof and the front porch. It looked almost like a gemstone. It seemed to glow in an unearthly shimmer. He shook his head. Kaitlyn and her fanciful attitude was getting to him. There was a flutter of birds as he opened the door of the truck and jumped out. His booted feet gave way beneath him as he slipped on the oil-slick surface. He yelped as he impacted on the soft and muddy earth. The fluttering birds seem to be giggling mockingly as they flew past him. He glared with humiliated fire at the passing birds. He knew that they could not be laughing at him, so why did he feel so embarrassed? Why did he feel like the whole forest was looking at him and silently laughing out loud at his misfortune?

He picked himself up out of the mud puddle and tried to wipe off most of the sticky brown ick. After giving it up as a bad job he moved to the rear of the truck and began to unload his gear for the weekend. He slung his rifle bag over his shoulder and, with rucksack over the opposite shoulder, he walked carefully towards the front door of the cabin. He mounted the steps, hearing the ancient floor boards groan and whine with every step he made as he ascended. He unlocked the door and turned the round, brass knob. The door held fast. He pushed against it, but the door pushed back. He began to push and shove at it before shouldering the door. It gave way and swung inward with a sudden screech, making Jim stumble inside, spilling his rucksack and rifle off his back and tumbling to the floor followed in fumbling form. He swore as he rubbed his head and bruised ego. He lifted himself to his feet and grimaced at his recent misfortune. It was as if he was unwelcomed. In fact, he felt that the air hung heavy with judgement and disapproval.

He frowned at his own silliness, but something nagged at him. Was it really all that silly? He felt a sudden cold, as if somebody had suddenly put on the aircon and a wash of cold air flowed over him. He shivered and turned to the door. When had he closed it? He couldn't remember. He shrugged and hauled his luggage to the bedroom. He dumped his bag onto the bed and lay his rifle down carefully. He looked at the brown leather bag and smiled. "Tomorrow, old friend...tomorrow," he said to himself before leaving the room and headed for the small kitchen to prepare dinner for himself. While the food was slowly cooking he poured a glass of whisky and started a fire. He slumped into the large sofa and put his feet up. *This is the life. A roaring fire, a glass of whisky, not a soul for miles. The only thing that could have made this better is if Kaitlyn was here too.* He took a long drag from the golden elixir, placed it on the coffee table beside him and closed his eyes.

The cold midnight air smacked him in the face as he ran. Branches tore at his face and limbs. Sharp rocks and sticks dug into his feet and hands...hands? Dew-soaked leaves slapped his cheeks as he ran past. The full moon bathed the forest, and him, in its ethereal-white glow. He felt his lungs burn from exhaustion. He had to stop. He needed to stop. Just for a while. Just to catch his breath. He slumped against a lichen-laden tree stump. It smelt moldy and moist with rot and fungus. It teemed with all manners of crawling insects. He could hear them crawl and slither and worm their way through the rotten wood. Hear?

He started at the sound a breaking branch. Something was out there. Something was after him. Hunting him. He leapt over the stump and ran deeper into the unyielding darkness. The inky blackness wrapped around his over-exerted body like a black velvet cloak. The moon speared down its pale beams to push back the encroaching darkness. He ran. He ran as if the Hounds of Hell were after him. He glanced over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of his pursuer but all he was rewarded with was more inky blackness. He ran. He ran faster than his four legs could carry him. Four?

He finally stopped at a clean, babbling brook. The crystal-clear water mirrored the moon and reflected her beauty back up at her. He lowered his maw and lapped at the crystal cool water. The refreshing fluid soothed his sand-dry throat and the cold touch doused the fire in his lungs. He opened his eyes and growled at the beast staring back at him. A dark formidable wolf responded in kind. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and his back curve as he bared his teeth at the beast. The beast mimicked his movements as if it reflected him. But that could not be possible. He was not a beast. He was a man, not a...wolf.

He stared at the reflection in the silver-mirror of the water. He reached up with a paw to his muzzle and ran his claws through his thick matted black fur. His golden yellow eyes glowed in the darkness. How could this be possible? How did this happen? He must be dreaming. He lowered his head once more to the water and looked in awe at what he had become. His ears pricked as he heard a rustle of leaves and a flurry of night birds. He jolted around and faced the imposing wall of darkness. He growled and the hairs on his back stood on end as the darkness thinned and parted as if the black velvet curtain were pulled aside. Out stepped the figure that had been pursuing him. Following him. Hunting him. The figure stepped out into the pale milky witness of the moon. As the figure raised its gun to its face he followed it up. Up to the face of this dread hunter. Up into the face of... A shot rang through the darkened forest and echoed through the valley. The loud crack of thunder was followed by the lonely sound of silence. Crimson water stained the crystal color of the tranquil stream as smoke rose from the barrel of the rifle. He lay there bleeding out. He felt the fire of the bullet that had sliced through his fur, skin and flesh leaving a gaping hole in its wake. He knew he was dying and all he could think about was his litter back at his den that would go hungry that night. He thought about his mate and his pups who would never see him again.

With these thoughts racing through his mind, he was vaguely aware of the figure crouching down beside him. He cringed as he felt the hunter's hand run over his blood-caked fur. He winced as he felt a sharp jab as the razor-sharp blade sliced into his neck ending his life. But not before he saw the face of his murderer. The face of ...Jim...

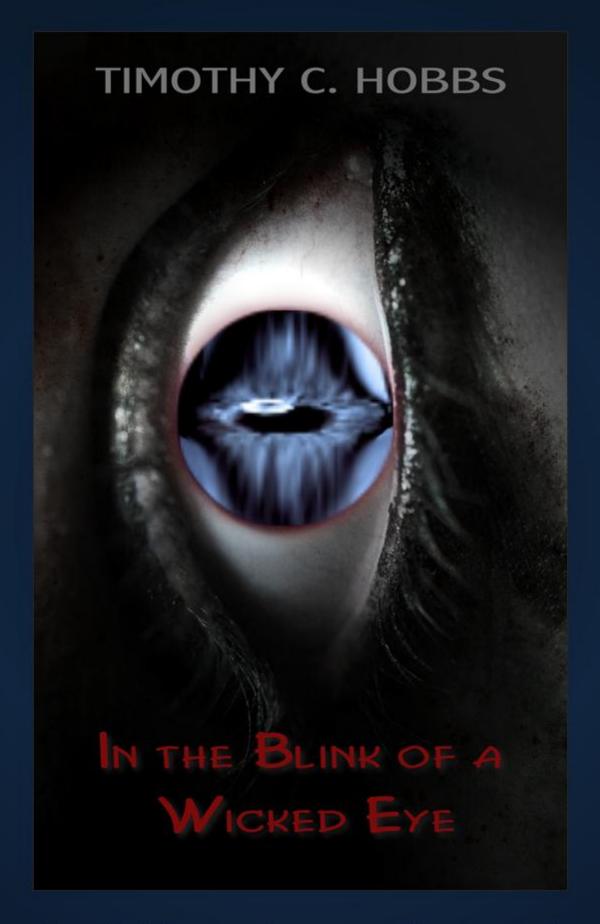
Jim screamed as he fell off the sofa and onto the hard-oak floor with a thud. The glass of whisky shattered beside him spilling the last remnants of golden elixir. He got up and felt his body and neck. No fur. No paws. No blood. He spun around the cabin in search for the hunter but all he found was the roaring fire that bathed him in a warm red glow and the smell of steak and beans cooking in the kitchen. A dream. It was all a dream. But it felt so real. He laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. But something nagged at the deep recesses of his mind. Some dark vestige of a hidden horror gnawed at him like a famished wolf chewing on a meatless bone. He shook his head and walked to the bedroom. That will teach him to drink before bed. Behind him, unnoticed by him, was a trail of muddy pawprints morphing into that of a man following him as he stepped into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. The moon washed its pale white witness through the window and the wind chuckled softly before flitting off to some unknown purpose.

#### **About the Author:**

Logan is a 38-year old guy from South Africa English teacher who has a passion for literature and poetry. His passion for reading and writing comes from his parents who encouraged him to read. He enjoys the more classical works, especially gothic and horror. His writing is inspired by Edgar Alan Poe, HP Lovercraft, John Carpenter and Clive Barker.

Blog: wonderingbard.blogspot.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/wonderingbardza



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

# Bone Coven | Sara Tantlinger

The skeletons are dancing on the beach celebrating the death of summer crashing like lightning bolts, skulls thunder against each other summoning the wicked months that are starting to scent the air—cold, metallic bursts of sin

Their cacophonous bone grinding nettles away seagulls and starfish, pearly dust plumes between femurs settling like snow against the sand, coalescing with sea foam as if bargaining instead of battling for seasonal dominance

Sternums and ribs break
as the last September storm rolls in
roiling the waves, and the skeletons
dance harder, a coven of bone
encircling the last pile of flesh on the beach
sacrificing summer meat to hungry autumn,
who has been waiting
who has been listening—
cold, metallic bursts of sin

# Rooted | Sara Tantlinger

The last rainstorm of summer leaves you crawling along an unaware warm caught beneath boots

crushing you, smearing guts along sidewalk graves, an abandoned leaf becomes a burial shroud

When I step on you, I clean your filth from my shoes on nearby blades of slumped wet grass

scattering entrails to sink deep into earth inching back down, rooting deep

like trying to plant a seedling for Hell.

# **About the Author:**

Sara Tantlinger resides outside of Pittsburgh on a hill in the woods. She is the author of Love For Slaughter, and her next collection, The Devil's Dreamland: Poetry Inspired by H.H. Holmes, will be released in Fall 2018. She is a member of the SFPA and an active member of the HWA. She embraces all things strange and can be found lurking in graveyards.

Website: <a href="https://saratantlinger.com">https://saratantlinger.com</a>
Twitter: <a href="mailto:@SaraJane524">@SaraJane524</a>

# Aphotic Daybreak | Sara Tantlinger

where did you go?

darkness calls me baby, but I don't remember his name darkness tells me to rise for wicked temptations beneath dead sunrises and drown all the colors away

is this humanity or love?

bleeding mornings captured me inside aphotic intentions where all those lips left a boneyard rattling in the ghost-cold haunt of my skeletally-frayed heart

did the sunset always come this soon, or did we kill that too? light was never allowed here (choking) within murdered skies of the dying blue

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Twitter: <a href="mailto:@SaraJane524">@SaraJane524</a>



Footprints Mercedes M. Yardly

She left bloody footprints in the snow.

First they were small droplets, like Snow White's mother who pricked her finger over her embroidery. Red French knots on linen. Red berries on white stone.

Then they became more. The unsettling slash of lips in a pale face, the slit of split skin, a wound that won't close.

Ribbons. Swaths. Coils of red. Each step lanced her frozen feet, the crusty ice slicing tender skin. But each step was freedom, closer toward her mother, and the broken chains clinking around her ankles sang, "Let's go home, let's go home, let's go home."

# The Bronze Horse's Ear | KA Masters

For four days the captured mermaid hung in Heroes' Square, dangling in a net hanging from the sword of a giant equestrian statue. As the fishermen put her on display, the townsfolk collected the silver blood that trickled from her wounds to use in miracle cures. Now she had ceased to bleed, but the fact that she produced no stench and that no carrion birds picked at her flesh were the only indications that she was still alive. The town's stray dogs would look up at her and whine sympathetically, but no one seemed to notice.

When Simon saw her, he wept. Like his master, he had been drawn by the commotion and had run to the Square for a chance to see a real mermaid. But as he looked upon the tattered mass of misery, he felt nauseous and overwhelmed. Kneeling by the pool of her blood, his tears mingled with hers.

"It's not fair," Simon muttered with the indignation that only a twelve-year-old can muster. "She's so pretty, and she's being treated so wretchedly."

"Well, young apprentice, life is rough." Alain countered. "Remember when our neighbor Jon was hanged a few months ago? Do you really think it's fair for him to die because he stole a few coins from the church alms' plate? And he's actually a person. That mermaid is not."

"But it's not fair..." the boy began, then stopped as he remembered he should not contradict his master.

"Think on your own lot in life. Was it fair that a bullet missed your father in battle, but illness carried him off a week later? Or that your sick mother had to sell you to my smithy so she could die in peace, knowing you'd be safe as my apprentice?"

"I just wish I could do something." Simon stared at the ground, pouting.

"What can you do, little one? If you try to rescue her, you'll be strung up as well! Besides, even if you get her down, where are you going to take her?"

"The sea is not far, I would take her to the docks."

"And the barracks are right by the harbor!" the blacksmith laughed. "What will you tell the Watch as you saunter past them weighed down with a half-dead mermaid?"

"There is a bridge along the road to the forest, I could..." the boy continued.

"Ah, now you're thinking, lad. But how will you slip her past the town gates? They're closed at night. And we have no permit from the King to leave the city."

"[..."

"See, lad? This isn't some fairytale, of knights rescuing damsels in distress. This situation is real—and there are real obstacles and real consequences for such foolishness. Feel bad for the pretty thing—ay, you may grieve for her in your heart—but you don't have the means to give her aught but your pity."

\*\*\*

That night Simon snuck outside, determined to free the mermaid. With a dagger blank in his hand, he skulked through the shadows and alleyways, hoping to avoid patrolling guards.

As he approached Heroes' Square, he heard screams tearing through the night behind him. Sounds of chaos erupted with flames and smoke somewhere in the city.

"You've broken curfew, lad," a voice spoke, causing him to jump. "And you've disobeyed my orders."

"I'm sorry, master," Simon began, recognizing Alain, "but I have to try."

"And how are you going to rescue her, little one?"

"I'm going to cut her down with this," Simon explained as he showed him the dull blade that he had pilfered from the workshop earlier that evening.

Alain looked at the height of the equestrian statue and its podium and said, "You might need a boost, lad."

"Will you help me, master?" Hope lit the boy's face.

"Aye," Alain said, "I suppose I should follow you to the end of this farce. Cut her down and I'll catch her." He watched as Simon scrambled up the bronze statue, using its adornments and reins as footholds to get to his goal.

Clutching the horse's head, the boy struggled to cut the mermaid's bonds.

"Oof," Simon cried out, his hand slipping.

"What's wrong?" Alain called, concerned.

"I broke the horse's ear off," Simon replied sheepishly, "and it scraped my hand."

"You alright?"

"It hurt," the boy admitted, "but its edge is jagged. It will be a better tool than the blade."

"You need to hurry. Any minute now, we'll be spotted," Alain said anxiously.

"All the king's guards will be busy tending the fire. We will have an easy task getting her to safety," Simon said, and with a final grunt, the rope snapped.

The mermaid tumbled into the blacksmith's arms and he shuffled her weight to get a better grip.

As he pulled the net off her form, Alain marveled at the wretched creature. Like holding a boll of wet cotton, she sagged against his chest limply. The mermaid made no sign of recognition of her rescue, but she gave a little gasp as they moved her limbs.

"See?" Simon said, awkwardly placing one of his mother's frocks over her form, covering her fins. "She can be our cousin Brigit. We can say that she had too much to drink, and we're seeing her home."

Alain gently placed her on the ground to help cover her in the dress. "Clever of you to think of clothes for the lass, Simon," the blacksmith smiled. "But why call her Brigit?"

"I always liked that name," the youth admitted sheepishly, then offered, "I can carry her."

"I think she's a bit too heavy for you, lad," Alain chuckled. "Now come."

As they wandered the streets, the blacksmith noted, "There are no soldiers, no guards."

"They're busy fighting the fire, master," the boy replied.

"Wait." He grew quiet, suspicious. "Simon, did you know there would be a fire? Did you start the fire?"

"No, master," his apprentice replied blankly, leaving Alain's mind in doubt.

"How will we get out of the city? Past the guards?" Alain prompted.

"The servants' gate," the youth pointed.

"There is a servants' gate?"

"Of course. Haven't you ever..." he stopped short. "Oh, master, of course you don't know of it! You're not a servant!"

"Then lead the way, little servant." Alain chuckled.

Through city walls, through forest paths they trekked towards clear running water. As they progressed, the blacksmith's heart softened with every step. Both child and adult alike whispered soothing words of encouragement to the ailing mermaid.

"Almost there," they smiled as they approached the bridge.

"The stream! We're here!"

"No," the blacksmith corrected the youth, "we should continue away from the road. Let's follow the river upstream. Look — there's a copse right there, out of view."

At the bend of the stream, they pulled the dress off and placed the mermaid gently in the water. She took in another gasp, her eyelids fluttered — but her form remained clenched, taut in distress.

"What now, lad?" the blacksmith asked sadly. "Now that we've rescued the damsel in distress?" "I'm not sure." said Simon "Do you think she'll be alright?"

Alain gave a sigh and answered, "No. She's been out of the water for so long, and she's lost a lot of blood. I think you did a good thing bringing her back to nature, but I think she won't be suffering for much longer."

"But there has to be some way we can help her!" the youth whimpered.

"We did, little lad. And we can stay for a while, and bury her when she passes. But it's her time."

"What about the elves deeper in the forest? They can heal her with their magic!" the youth said, desperate.

"You can try calling them, but they won't come. Not to a human's call."

The youth slid into the stream to cradle the mermaid's head in his lap.

"You did a brave thing, lad. But remember, life isn't fair."

He snuffled back a sob, and Alain leaned back against a nearby tree to give the boy some privacy.

Behind him a rustle of leaves stirred, and a tiny kobold appeared. Although dwarfed by the size of the humans, the scars upon its flesh and the wild look on its face made him look fiercely dangerous. It approached cautiously, never taking its eyes from Alain. The boy and his master froze as the kobold carefully knelt into the water beside the mermaid.

"What have you done to her?" it snapped.

"The lad was determined to rescue her. If you can help her, please do..." Alain spoke, determined to use deference to gain the kobold's trust.

"Can you save her?" the boy pleaded.

The kobold took the mermaid in his arms and rocked her gently. He spoke some words of comfort in their elfin tongue and she responded in turn.

Her eyes lifted to meet his, and a look of recognition hit them briefly. "Friend," she smiled, placing her hand in his and releasing the treasure she had clutched in her palm. She handed him a tiny pearl and with one last breath her form dissolved into the waves.

"No!" Simon breathed, and wept in loss; his master gently gathered him close, carefully out of the elemental's reach.

The kobold stood still for many moments, staring at the pearl in its hand. At last, whispering her name in sorrowful awe, "Little Silver," it kissed the pearl and tucked it into the pouch fixed to its belt. It then turned to the blacksmith, "The blood of this innocent mermaid will be on human hands."

"But I..."

"The whole forest will want vengeance for this. They will blame you. If you stay, you will be caught and killed."

"I..." Alain clutched the boy protectively.

"I smell Cold Iron on you, in your flesh. You are a metal worker?" He nodded. "I'm a blacksmith."

"I cannot touch you without harming myself," he said, revealing the wounds on his flesh where he had been burned by Cold Iron, "But those who entered the city to look for Little Silver aren't like me. They're immune. If they find you in this forest, they will kill you."

"The fire starters!" Alain squeezed his apprentice's shoulder, "So you weren't an arsonist after all!" Then he sobered and said, "They set the city on fire to find her?"

He nodded. "But too late, I fear. They will not be kind to you if you stay."

The youth pulled the bronze horse's ear out of his pocket for protection.

"That is the strangest weapon I have ever seen," the kobold shook his head, bewildered. "But it will not save you from them. You must go now. Go back to the city, where you will be safe from their wrath."

He spat upon his fingers and smeared the glowing substance on their brows, declaring, "This is my blessing. If they catch you, they will know that you have come in peace. If they ask, tell them that Furnace the kobold has Little Silver's remains. But you must never, ever enter this wood again. Do you understand?"

They nodded.

"Keep your weapons brandished until you are inside the city gates. Go."

The kobold disappeared into the trees as the humans looked on, stupefied. Finally, the sense of urgency pressed them forward and they hastened home.

"Well," Alain said sadly, "you've done a good thing, regardless of how it ended."

"I can't believe it was all for nothing," Simon declared.

"No, she died among friends. That's worth something."

"I suppose," the boy muttered under his breath.

"I'll bet in the confusion of the fire, we can slip back unnoticed," Alain said hopefully.

"You're not worried about the forge?"

"No, my tools won't be disturbed by a fire."

The youth grew quiet, then looked down at the piece of bronze in his hand and asked, "What do we do with the ear? Can it be reattached?"

"Of course," Alain replied, "but by returning it, we admit guilt in freeing the mermaid. We should leave it in the forest."

They approached the bridge, returning to the forest path. As Alain turned towards the city, Simon paused.

"Simon?" Alain prompted, turning to face him.

"In a minute," the boy offered. As quickly as he could, he crossed the footbridge and dropped the bronze horse's ear into the rushing stream. After a brief prayer, he returned dutifully to his master.

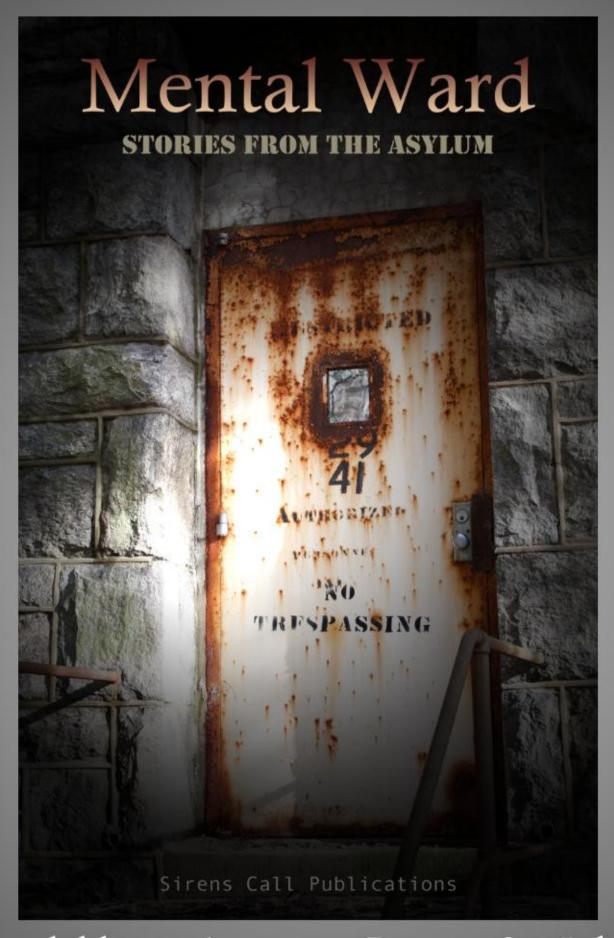
"Now it's with her," he said, "a memorial for the mermaid's remains."

Alain smiled sadly and the pair continued home.

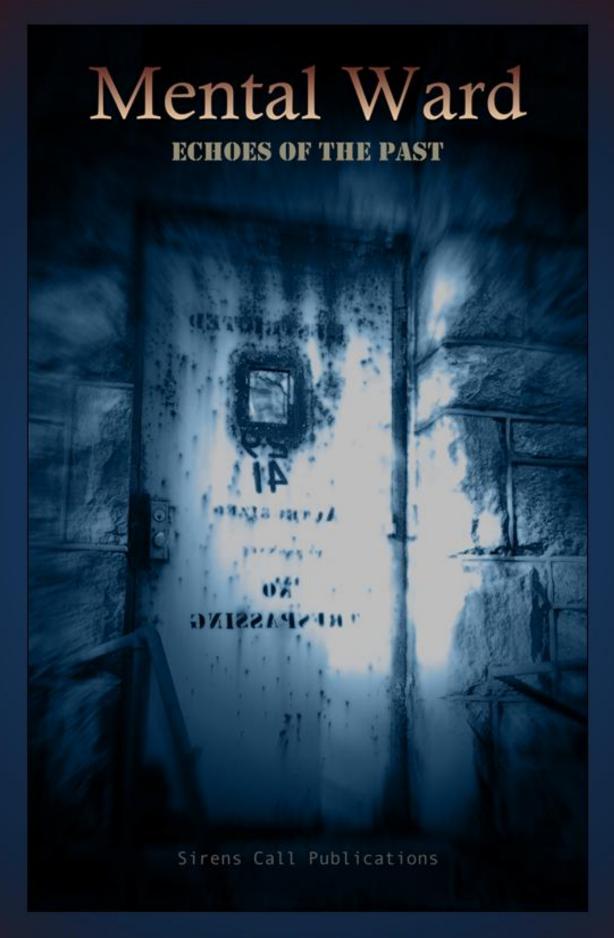
#### **About the Author:**

KA Masters is a fantasy writer who specializes in twisted fairy tales and zombie-infested historic fiction. She attributes her passion for Greco-Roman mythology and Germanic folklore to her alma mater, Dickinson College. Her debut novel, *The Morning Tree*, was recently published by Indie Gypsy. You can follow her latest publications on her Goodreads blog.

Blog: KA Masters



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# Eternal Night | Bryan Kelly

Like leaves from trees, summer fell fast and the cooling autumn breeze began to settle in through the night. Each day grew increasingly shorter as nightfall consumed our village with its inescapable darkness enveloping every corner. A few flickering fires scattered throughout our land were our only solace.

We, the good Gods fearing people of our village, always consider the darkness as a harbinger of evil; a dark omen that clouds us every year. We've prayed and prayed yet nothing seemed to stop the infernal pitch-black atmosphere we encountered at the end of every harvest season. The elders believed that thoughts kept secrets; there must be non-believers among us to anger the Gods so much so that they feel the need to teach us this lesson every year. Some went mad during the season of eternal night, others even took their own lives.

We've left offerings from our harvest each year for the Gods, but each year to no avail, this plague still dominated our village. The elders have vowed not to let this happen again. They'd concluded that since the nightfall brought so much chaos the Gods must thrive on the deaths that occur. Maybe, instead of honoring them with food that eventually rotted at the foot of the temple where they are said to reside, we could offer a blood sacrifice; they might accept our offering and grant us the light that we needed to keep us alive.

As the last few days with minimal light quickly passed by, we needed to act fast to save our home. The only problem was, who would we sacrifice? Better yet, who would the Gods deem worthy enough to grant us our prayers?

Together, we'd decided the only possible solution was to sacrifice the uncorrupted, the untainted, the innocent. We had but only one choice to make, and it was one of great difficulty. We had to sacrifice a child, not yet spoiled by the will of man and true only to the word of the Gods!

The youngest child was brought to the base of the temple, where all offerings had been placed for many years. This would be the first time blood was spilled on this holy ground. Though it was a cruel act, it was to be done with the intent of saving all. It was a necessary evil to save everyone.

The child, no more than nine, kneeled in front of the temple of the Gods to declare his sacrifice. As the elders of our village circled around him, chanting and holding hands, one of them quickly slid a dagger with his foot toward the child. The blade scraped across the stone making a low grinding noise as it came to a halt before him. He was to sacrifice himself for the lives of the people. As the elders continued to chant and pray, they started to feel a relief, as if their masterful plan had already worked.

The child, kneeling on the ground with his head held low began to slowly raise his arm, knife in hand. He opened his palm to let it sit flat, all the while looking down, hiding his face. One elder looked upon him in puzzlement as he saw the blade begin to spin in the boy's hand, seemingly all by itself, as the boy hadn't moved a muscle since lifting the shimmering switch. By this time all the elders had stopped praying and gazed upon the boy in awe.

How is this happening, they questioned, was this a sign from the Gods themselves, or something else? In absolute wonder, the elders looked on as the blade spun faster and faster in the child's hand. Suddenly the dagger began to elevate from his grasp until it hovered just above his head. The child looked up at the men, now all standing in front of him, their mouths gaped open in sheer astonishment, as if they were witnessing a miracle. The child slowly lifted his head to look at each man standing before him. His eyes, black as coal, his mouth dripping blood and the most sadistic smile you'd ever seen. With a snap of his fingers, the dagger flew forward, plunging itself into the gullet of the lead elder. His eyes widened as the knife slowly twisted in his stomach. The rest of the elder men scattered with hopes of saving their own skin.

"The rest of you are safe," the child proclaimed, "for now..." He walked over to the elder on the ground, still bleeding out. "Well, holy man, I suppose I will accept your sacrifice this year, but I will be back again and again, for my sacrifices."

In the early hours of what should have been the first dark day, the sun began to rise over the trees of the village. Confused, the villagers slowly left their homes to stare up at the skies. A wave of happiness washed over the people; unbeknownst to them, their happiness would be short lived, the sacrifice that was made for their precious light would only satiate for so long...

#### **About the Author:**

Bryan Kelly is old soul who has an affinity for the dark and mysterious. With interests such as drawing/painting, writing, and singing, Bryan tries to dabble in multiple artistic platforms. Step into his mind, but be weary, stay to long and you'll surly go mad.

Facebook: Bryan Kelly

# The Demon in the Night | Eric S. Fomley

The demon whispered evil dreams for the little girl, his crimson eyes burning in the moonlight as he leered at her with a fanged grin over the end of her mattress. He was eager to wake her, to see the fear plastered on her face. To hear her scream.

There was a sudden *crash* in the hall. A man's voice shouted in slurred speech, coming nearer with the sound of stumbling footsteps.

The demon slithered into the closet, leaving the door cracked to peer out at the girl.

Her eyes shot open. She gasped, grabbed her teddy bear, and pulled it tight to her chest.

The demon saw the girl's terrified face. He sensed her racing heart, saw the tears as she scrambled under her covers. It was everything *he* should have been to her. And more.

The little girl stayed hidden as the drunk man converged on her room. She wept louder and squeezed the covers tighter as the knob on the door turned.

The dream demon fled into the night, deep into the shadows of the city. His wicked heart pitied the girl. He vowed never to harass her dreams again. As wretched as he was, the demon was nothing compared to the fear she had for *him*.

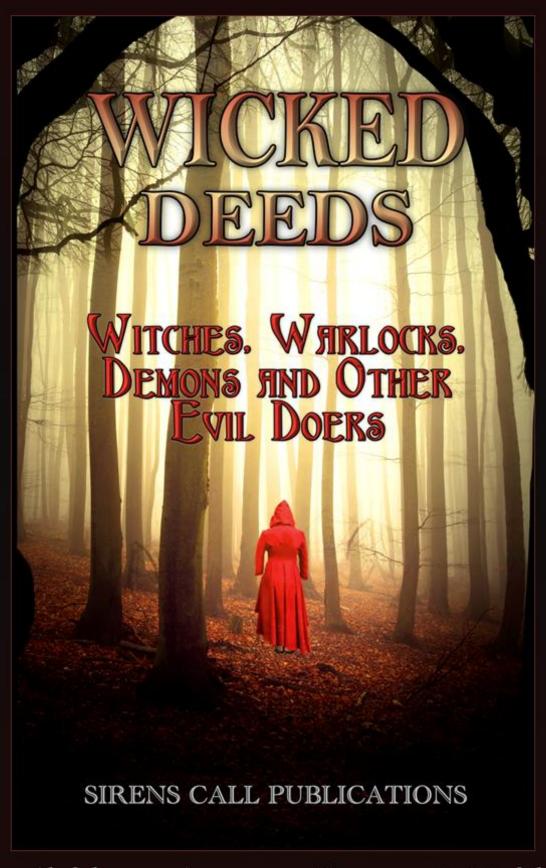
The next night, the demon returned again to the little girl's home. He went to the bedroom window, saw the man passed out in his bed, and began to whisper anew.

#### **About the Author:**

Eric S. Fomley is the editor of Martian Magazine and the Timeshift and Drabbledark anthologies. His work has appeared in a score of venues and can be tracked down via his website.

Website: <a href="https://ericfomley.com">https://ericfomley.com</a>
Twitter: <a href="mailto:@PrinceGrimdark">@PrinceGrimdark</a>

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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#### Dog Days of Summer's End | JW Grace

"Why do they always do that?' Harold Boyd said to no one in particular. He was looking into the yard as his dog Ranger, a shepherd-lab mix, bounded through a huge pile of leaves. A swirling cloud of red, gold and brown settled around the playful canine. He gave a few barks and a low growl as he dove into the pile again, snapping his jaws in a fearsome display. Petey, a much smaller beagle barely older than a puppy, watched with interest from a few yards away.

The dogs looked silly to Harold who sighed and grumbled to himself. "I guess I'll rake them up later on." His breath puffed in the crisp autumn air and he took another drink from his steaming cup of coffee before turning to walk back in the house.

Ranger looked up in time to see his human leave but he quickly turned back to his task, snapping at the leaves and diving into the pile with ferocious enthusiasm. Every attack sent more leaves flying into the air. They whirled around the dog and Petey whined softly as his friend and mentor was obscured by the multicolored cloud.

The large black and brown dog shot out from the other side of the pile where he skidded to a stop and looked back at the puppy. "Don't go near the pile," he growled in the speech common to all dogs. Humans were wonderful but they could only understand a small fraction of the canine language. They only saw expressions and mannerisms like tail-wagging and tongue-lolling. They heard only growls, barks and yips and their noses were practically useless. To other dogs, these things made up a full range of vocabulary, easily rivaling that of their two-legged friends.

Petey had been inching toward the fallen leaves when he stopped to look up at his mentor. "Why?" he asked with a soft whine while ducking his head to sniff at the ground. This was his first autumn. Summer had been a wonderfully fun time where he learned to walk, play, hunt and talk. Now everything smelled strange to him: crisp rain-drenched air, mud-covered ground, wet plants with an underlying scent of decay. But there wasn't anything that stank of danger that he could detect.

And yet Ranger, his protector and teacher, was still alert and ready to attack. His fur was standing out and low growls of warning rumbled in his chest. His eyes never left the pile of leaves as he spoke in a tense set of barks. "The things were in there. I don't think I got them all yet."

"What are they?" Petey whined. He sniffed again and yipped suddenly as a clear pseudopod slithered along the ground toward him. Ranger charged over and snatched the slimy strand in his jaws and shook it fiercely. Mucus coated his face and the front of his chest as he tore the tendril apart. Petey jumped backward as gobbets of slime splattered to the ground near him. He was hysterical as he yipped again, "What is that?"

Ranger shook his head to send a spray of sticky liquid around him. He coughed a few times at the foul taste before answering, "Slimy leaf snakes." Dogs were very literal in their names for things. Rain was known as 'sky-water' while puddles were 'ground-water'. Cats were called 'not-dogs' among other less respectful names.

Petey stared at the pile intently, ready for more danger. "Did the Two-legs put them in there? He made the pile this morning with the metal broom."

Ranger moved to the little dog and nudged him back from the leaves before answering. "No, the things usually crawl into there after the piles are made. One of our duties to the Two-legs is to scatter the piles and kill all the things. We don't know how they get in there. Some say that they form from mixing skywater and the dead-stink."

After taking a long slow sniff, Petey nodded at the big dog. "That's what they smell like." He stepped up to Ranger and sniffed some more at the dog's chest. "It's going away."

Ranger whuffed an affirmative before answering. "The smell fades quickly. I think that's why the Two-legs never notice. Their noses are terrible. I think it's because they are so far from the ground." He

seemed to relax and finally turned to walk back toward the house. The smaller dog fell into step behind him but there was a sudden yelp of pain and fear.

He whirled around the see a thick clear tentacle wrapped around Petey's lower half, just below his ribs. The puppy whined and cried loudly as he was dragged quickly back to the pile. Ranger dove forward to bite down on the thing holding his little friend, but instead of the usual gelatinous goo, his teeth met a tough rubbery substance. His eyes went wide at the unexpected sensation. Unable to get a grip he let out a whine as Petey was dragged into the leaf pile and disappeared.

Shaking his head and growling fiercely, Ranger dove into the leaves and thrashed around with frantic motions. The swirl of colors and smells disoriented him but he kept attacking and scattering the pile until something caught his eye: a large ragged hole in the ground. Even as he watched, the hole began to close up.

He leaped forward and dug at the soft earth, sending a wave of dirt behind him. When the hole was large enough, he pushed his muzzle into the space. A stench of death and decay assaulted his nose and he whimpered in spite of himself. "No!" he growled as he redoubled his efforts. He dug furiously at the hole to widen it until he could shove his head into the space.

There! Petey was just ahead in a small tunnel-like hole. There was very little light, but Ranger could smell the puppy and see the shifting of shadows. The ground heaved and flowed around him but he fought against the earth itself, pushing his head toward his young friend. Without warning, the dirt parted suddenly and he started to fall into a large open space. Ground rushed up toward him and he managed to get his paws underneath his body but the impact sent a searing pain through his left front shoulder.

There was another fearful whine ahead. Growling against the injury, he launched himself forward in an uneven gait. With every step, his shoulder flared with another flash of agony but he was determined to get to his friend. All along the path, clear slimy tendrils waved and lashed at him. He snapped his jaws at a few but he was moving too quickly for them to latch on. Ahead, the path widened into a large chamber and what he saw there made him stop in his tracks.

The massive cavern was filled with jagged spires of rock pointing up and down like the fangs of some giant beast. What drew his attention was the thing at the center of the chamber. It resembled a spider except that instead of legs, it had waving glistening tentacles. Its round bulbous body was somewhat transparent and there were strange organs floating inside the undulating mass. At the top of the body was a gaping maw filled with gleaming white teeth that were as long as the dog's legs.

Dangling above that mouth was Petey. The little dog was limp in the creature's grasp but he still whimpered softly. In seconds, he would plummet into that toothy abyss, so Ranger gathered his strength and lunged forward to attack.

Except he couldn't move.

He looked down to see dozens of smaller snake-like tendrils wrapped around all four of his legs along with his tail. With dawning horror he noticed that they were wriggling out of the ground. There was another frightened yelp and he looked up again to see Petey drop into the beast's mouth.

Even as he howled in anger and anguish, he noticed that the bottom of the creature was covered in hundreds of small tentacles that burrowed into the ground. The things holding him were part of this creature! Cold fury washed over him and he began tearing into his bindings with flashing teeth. One of his paws came free and he started to attack with raking claws. His shoulder still burned with agony but his anger was too strong to be held back by mere pain.

He heard a gurgling and sloshing and he looked back at the creature to see it undulating and trashing as a few ragged severed tentacles popped out from the ground with a slurping sound. "So it can feel pain," he growled to himself. Then he launched another round of attacks until he was completely free. He looked up at the creature which was now making a louder gibbering noise. He could see the little dog inside the creature's gullet and another wave of fury flashed over his eyes.

Three long strides brought him up the thing's side and though it towered over him, Ranger leaped at it to sink his teeth into its hide while raking with his front paws. It was much thicker and more solid than the tentacles but his teeth did manage to slash into the surface. Large ropey appendages lashed at him but they couldn't make solid contact with something so close.

Spurting clear slime started to pour from the slashes and rips but Ranger didn't stop. He dug fiercely at the creature's skin until he was able to plunge his face inside the jellied mass and latch his teeth into one of the organs. The taste that filled his mouth was the foulest thing that he had ever experienced but he bit down hard and wrenched his head back to pull the mass free of the torso. He kept biting and tearing and ripping until he heard a soft whimper.

The creature was still and in the middle of the ruined mass of goo was little Petey, struggling and thrashing to get loose. Ranger moved quickly to grab him by the scruff in his now-aching jaws and pulled the puppy free. Agony and exhaustion flooded through his body with each step and he collapsed at the edge of the chamber where he and the little dog lay in twitching panting heaps.

Petey's head snapped up suddenly. "Ranger! The cave... it's shaking!" The older dog lifted his head and tried to sniff the air but there was too much of the mucus clogging his nostrils. He looked around wearily but he could feel a low rumbling in the earth.

"It's going to collapse. We have to get out of here." He hobbled to his feet while Petey tried to tug at his collar to help. They rushed toward the tunnel as dirt and rocks began to rain down around them. The space ahead writhed and twisted like the inside of a snake but they moved forward as quickly as they could. In the rapidly closing space, there was less rock but mud sloshed around them and a few times, Ranger had to pull Petey from a soupy patch of earth.

They struggled for what seemed like hours before finally they burst free into brightness and fresh air. The dogs got a few feet from the scattered pile of leaves before they collapsed in total exhaustion. A gentle rain fell on them and the temperature was cool enough to make their breath puff in the air. They lay there for a long time as the rain washed them clean of all traces of slime.

The patio door opened and a voice called out, "Ranger! Petey! Come here boys. Get out of the rain and get some lunch!" The dogs raised their heads wearily before struggling to their paws and hobbling toward their Two-legs.

Harold noticed the large dog limping and leaned down to check on him. "What happened boy? Was that leaf pile too much for you?" Ranger growled softly in response, but the Two-legs laughed and ruffled his wet fur. "We'll keep an eye on that and if you're still limping later, it's gonna be a trip to the vet. Little Petey has to go too. Time for him to get the snip."

The small dog cocked his head at the words, not understanding the meaning behind them. Ranger turned a sad gaze on his friend. There was nothing he could do to save him from that battle. The three turned and wandered into the warmth and safety of the house. Ranger paused in the doorway to look back at the yard where the leaves lay still and lifeless. After a moment he whuffed under his breath and turned away as Harold closed the door.

Moments later a clear slithering shape ruffled the leaves and disappeared into darkness.

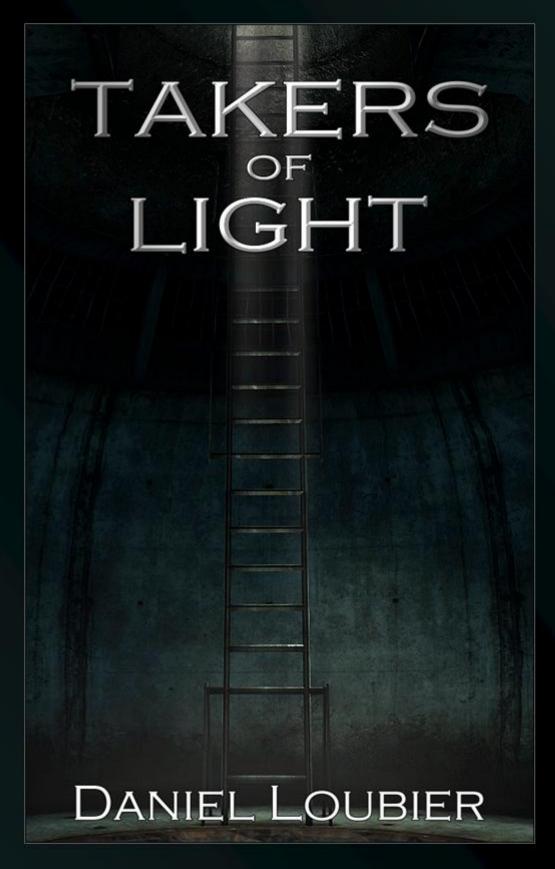
#### **About the Author:**

J.W. Grace started writing seriously in 2009 and self-published two novels in a genre he calls "Action-Horror". Based on his work and hobbies, he is a Geek and a Nerd, but he's also a Husband, a Father and a Musician. When he's not writing or spending time with family he's usually gaming.

Blog: <a href="mailto:jwgrace@blogspot.com">jwgrace@blogspot.com</a>
Twitter: @JWGracewriter

Driven underground by those of the light...

Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



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# The Vengeant Growth | Elizabeth H. Smith

Sleep disturbed by restless growth She rises from below.
Giving rule to concrete fields,
Planting seed in tainted ground;
Great power in ancient hands
Released with vengeant fury.

Gnawing vermin washed away
In a sea of newfound green.
Life brings death;
Death brings life.
As summer ends and fall begins,
The titan tree takes a stand,
Tall above machines.

Those that can't adapt, Retreat. Those who thrive, Shall have embraced The will of Her return.

Those who die
Rot
In artificial caves.
Unremembered,
Time will make them dust.

They'll be born anew, Aware of light, And follow without question. Servants forever Under Her direction.

#### **About the Author:**

Elizabeth H. Smith is a storyteller who writes while trying to keep her cat, Luna off the keyboard. The musical group, Rasputina is her muse. She was born in the state of New York and would never feel at home anywhere else.

Twitter: @bethsmithwrites



Whispers Scarlett R. Algee

It's midnight, and I can hear the corn talking.

It's not clear right away. But when I listen like Mama taught me, the voices come out, words in the whisper of silky tassels against my bedroom windows. Words like soon and feed us and hungry, beating in the rhythm of my heart.

I heard it first when I was four, when my dog Buddy disappeared into the fields one night and Mama, urged out to look for him by my tearful pleas, came back in the house after dark and said, "Buddy's gone, Katrina. He's gone to help feed the corn." I didn't understand how a dog could help, but Mama tucked me into bed beside her that night and the tall stalks thumped the windows, and in their rhythm I thought I heard thank you.

After that, others went away. Chickens. My bunny Nico, my fatherless little brother Billy. The corn grew, flourished, murmured. By then, I understood why.

Now I watch Mama lift my son William from his crib, one more fatherless boy, and I stand ready with the knife in my hand. We need another good harvest.

Hungry, the tassels mutter.

It's time to feed the corn.

# Beached | Jeff Durkin

Marsha Bowman lay on the beach, feeling the cold sand against the back of her neck. It was the end of summer and the salt air coming off the Atlantic Ocean carried the chill of the winter to come. The crashing waves were invisible in the darkness. The sound made her drowsy. She was tired, having spent the day swimming and drinking with her friends. They were back at the rental house. She would join them in a while. For the moment she wanted to be alone, letting the cool air lull her to the edge of sleep.

Lately, Marsha's life had become a growing pile of disappointments. Her job; downsized, outsourced, reclassified into oblivion. Her boyfriend of five years; sleeping with another woman, begging for forgiveness, doing it again. Her mother; divorced, alcoholic, alone, emotionally needy. Her father; gone, run off with his 20-something secretary, a cliché.

A collection of cliches, she thought, my whole stupid life.

She felt like she was floating in a weightless twilight between wakefulness and unconsciousness. She imagined that the ground was falling away from her, the tethers of her life cut as she floated up into a dark void. The sound of the ocean was now the air gliding past her as she drifted among black clouds, the world below fading in the darkness.

A sharp squeal cut through the rhythm of the waves, rousing Marsha from her half-sleep. Her eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough to make out the ocean, the black water and the white crest of the waves.

Maybe I should head back to the house.

The squeal cut through the rumble of the waves. It sounded like an animal.

That could be a dolphin, she thought. Not that I know what a dolphin sounds like.

There was another squeal, a grating whine that sent a tingle down her spine. The source was directly in front of her. She squinted. She could make out something on the water's edge, a pale shape with black water lapping over it.

Marsha stood. Although she couldn't be sure, it looked like a person.

Kind of late for a swim, she thought. Maybe someone needs help?

She made her way cautiously down the beach. She wanted to help, but she didn't want to startle an injured animal. She hesitated.

Maybe I should get the guys, she thought. Maybe I should just get the heck out of here. I don't want to get mauled by a sea lion.

The pale shape moved. It made a sound, but not the squeal. Instead, this was a deep moan, one that vibrated in Marsha's body and made the hair stand up on her neck. It was not an unpleasant feeling, but it was odd. She felt a mix of excitement and fear, an instinctual response to the unknown.

Just a little closer, Marsha thought.

She was now only a few yards away. The form lifted up. A head rose from the sand, face down. An arm reached out.

"Oh my god," Marsha said, as she realized the body lying in the surf was that of a woman.

She quickly covered the rest of the distance and knelt down in the wet sand.

"Are you okay?"

The woman raised her head, looking up at Marsha. Her white hair hung down in wet ropes that glowed in the moonless night. Her eyes reflected the minimal light like an animal's, glimmering from gold to green to dull red. Her thin lips pulled back briefly, a flash of white teeth. Marsha knew the woman was smiling, but the expression was disturbing. Marsha had the impression that it was being made by someone who had heard of a smile, but never seen one.

"Do you need help?"

The woman's voice was an unsettling drone. It had a wet undertone that made Marsha feel queasy.

"No. You called. I heard."

Okay, this is getting weird, Marsha thought. Maybe she's wasted or high. "I didn't say anything. Look, I need to get some help. I'll be back."

Marsha started to rise, the wet sand sucking at her knees.

"No mother...no father...no love, no hope...so sad...such a strong song...I could hear it in the black."

Marsha stood over the woman.

"How did you — ?"

The water receded. The smooth skin of her back was pale, like porcelain. The water continued to draw back, revealing more of the woman's body. The color of the skin changed, white turning to a light gray. The water pulled back, retreating into the great basin of the Atlantic. The woman had no legs, only a long and sinewy column of muscle and gray flesh, like the tail of an eel.

Marsha slowly sank back to her knees.

"What are you?"

The tail flipped lazily in the air. The woman's whole body seemed to glow with a dull, emerald light, like diffuse sunlight in the depths of the ocean.

"My god," Marsha whispered.

"Not god. Here to help. Heard the song of your heart. It is the same as mine."

Marsha felt sick. Her mind retreated at what it was seeing. It was every dark shape mankind had seen moving through primordial forests, red eyes glowing in the night. It was all the monsters in every closet and under every bed. This was something that shouldn't exist in the world. She wanted to curl into a ball, stop up her ears, pull out her eyes.

Marsha's voice came out as an agonized breath. "This can't be real."

The woman pulled herself up the wet sand, a little closer to Marsha. "Real. Yes, real. Here to help. You. Me."

Run, Marsha silently screamed. She couldn't move.

"Let me help," the woman reached out and touched Marsha's bare leg. The touch was ice, the caress of a thing old and inhuman. Marsha shivered, reacting to an ache that came from her bones.

"I can help. No more pain. The world of you. No more. I can help."

The words washed over her. The voice was horrible but enthralling. Marsha felt like she was watching a lion tearing the flesh from a gazelle, a thing raw and wet and scarlet. Her head spun, a feeling like sinking into the dark waters of the endless ocean.

Something broke inside of Marsha. The intrusion of something inhuman into her mundane life shattered it. "Please...I don't know what to do anymore," she said. She cried. The tears came out inexorably, pushed by a tide of disappointment and despair. She stared into the woman's eyes, saw herself reflected in two dark blue orbs.

"Your song is my song," the woman said, "we can sing for one another. Need something from you. Give you something from me."

This is insane, Marsha thought, I've really gone insane. Or I'm dreaming. I drank too much and I'm passed out on the beach, dreaming about a mermaid. It has to be a dream.

"I'm dreaming," Marsha muttered. She looked into the dull blue eyes. "Fine, help me."

The woman smiled. The smile was too wide, the teeth were sharp and triangular, row after row, reaching back to her throat. The dull eyes locked on Marsha's and rolled back. They were now dead white, the color of bone.

"My song, your song, your song, my song, my song, your song, your song, my song..." The words rolled from her mouth, like black waves from an endless sea. In the last moment before she lost consciousness, Marsha realized this was no dream.

\*\*\*

The water swirled around Marsha's nude body. Flaps of skin opened and closed along the side of her body, revealing pink gills. Her legs were gone, replaced by a long, gray tail.

Marsha. Is that who I still am?

She bobbed in the water, the tail undulating, keeping her in place against the pulling tide. To Marsha, it felt comfortable and familiar, as if the tail were something she had since birth, her missing legs a fading dream.

In the growing light of a red dawn, Marsha watched the woman walk up the beach on new legs. The woman didn't look back. She didn't look at the ocean. She didn't look at Marsha. Her eyes were fixed on a new life.

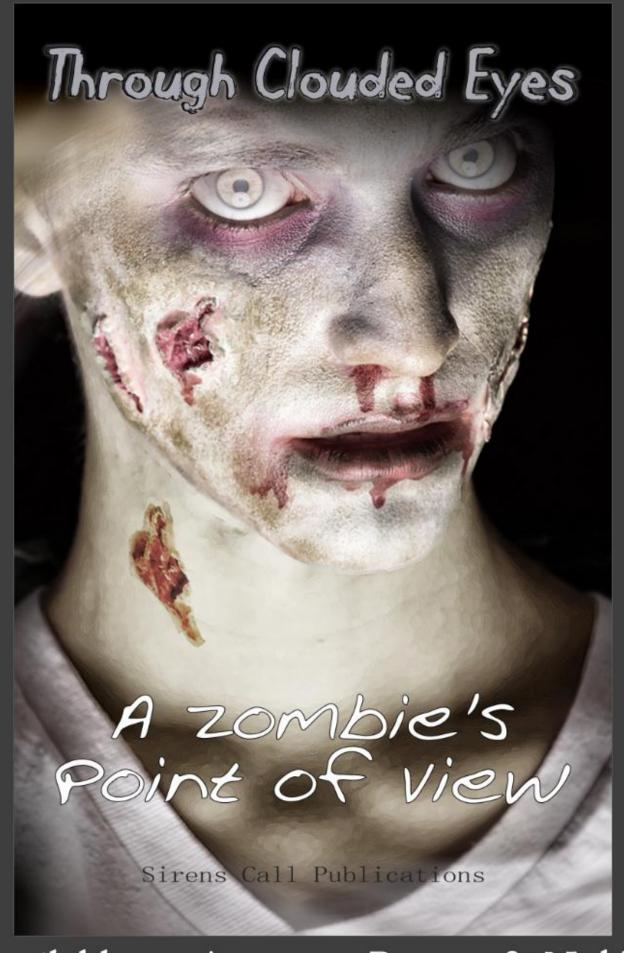
Marsha watched until the woman was gone. She turned with a flick of her tail. The timeless waters waited for her. Her old world was gone and a new one waited. She smiled, rows of teeth sparkling in the sun.

#### **About the Author:**

Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres and owns and operates a number of movie and pop culture blogs. He published his first novel, *The Age of the Jackal*, in 2015.

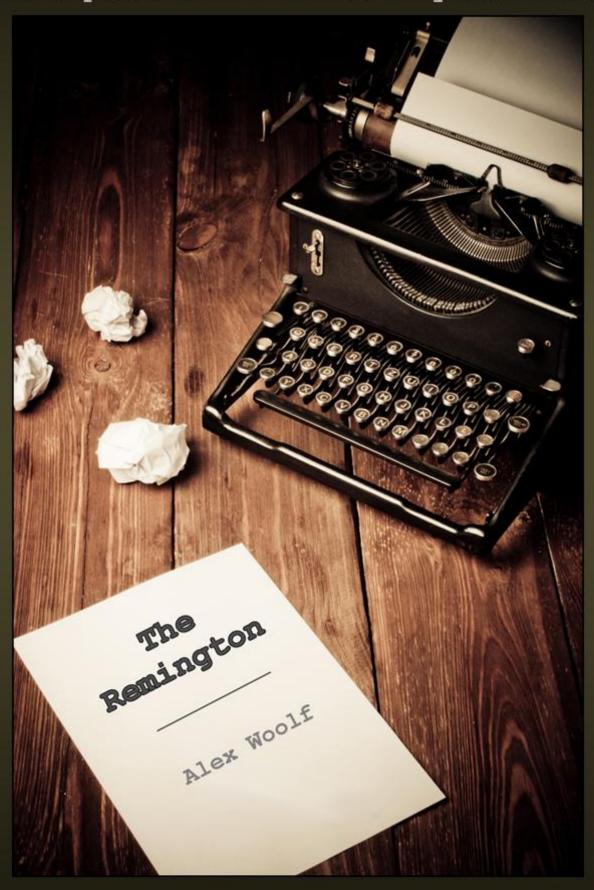
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# A Bride Never Waits | Meg Smith

Amanda stood in front of her mirror, in her new, smart, lavender suit. She felt more than a little pride — not only did it look great, it had been on sale. Just like her tan pumps. She smiled, and her green eyes flashed. Her hair was short, straight and cut around her ears, and reddish-blonde. She gave it a light spritz of hairspray.

It was time.

Amanda had met Richard just a few months before, when summer was in full sway and warm air floated in a dream-like haze.

Mutual friends had invited them to stay-over at a cabin they rented on York Beach. It was a fun time, with volleyballs, and time for walking on the shore.

That, they did, and stayed in touch.

"You could have the whole week, you know," her manager was saying. Amanda forced a smile. She admired many things about Mavis, but second-guessing her employees' decisions was not one of them.

"Well I promise, we will, probably in April."

"That's months away."

"We want to plan for a nice trip," Amanda said.

After a moment she said, "That's probably wise."

"I appreciated the presents, and the cake. It wasn't necessary."

"It's a special day," Mavis said. "Make it count."

Amanda felt anxious to leave. That office was never her favorite place to linger.

The cake. The presents. The fuss. Why had she ever let on to Joyce. Must have been a moment of weakness.

Just two days off. She was used to taking her time off in small increments like that. She had told Joyce, there is always so much, and her work was so specialized, she'd have to train someone, and this she didn't have time to do.

"Everyone's replaceable," Joyce had said, and then — "I mean, everyone deserves time off."

Well, here she was, the beginning of a day free of office chatter and stale cake. Richard, her groom, was waiting.

Amanda knew she was not gorgeous, and she didn't mind. Her precise look agreed with her. Her mother had said, "You have a pleasing look," which she always supposed was a nice way of saying her looks were average.

Amanda did not take offense. She and her mother were close. Her mother lived in a 55-plus apartment complex, Pine Shades. Her mother was welcoming, yet self-reliant.

For her part, Amanda had a small but comfortable two-bedroom apartment a few blocks away. She could walk to work, and often did.

As she stepped out of the building lobby and onto the sidewalk, a bus wheezed by. A woman pushed a stroller with purpose.

I like living here, she thought. She relished the organization of her life. She worked hard, had a small but interesting group of friends. Her mother was her best friend. They were after all, two single women, who understood each other.

Over the past few years, since losing her father, they had grown even closer.

Her mother had asked about Richard, and just her asking made Amanda smile. She took out her phone and showed a picture of them — a selfie, but forgiving angles — at the beach party.

"Well," her mother had said. "That's good." They both smiled conspiratorially.

\*\*\*

The air of early fall was inviting, even in the city. Amanda saw Richard pulling up to the curb. She liked this about him — his timing was impeccable. He seemed to sense out a parking space just as another vehicle was leaving it. And, he could parallel park with amazing precision.

He got out and approached her, the light of the world in his eyes. He had trim, brown hair, and like her, green eyes.

"We're gonna make pretty babies," he had said on one of their dinner dates, after they had agreed to be married. He was exact, yet unhurried. He didn't make demands of her. He didn't make demands, in general. He had a job as an engineer, and his life moved in logical cycles as hers did.

They kissed briskly, and holding hands, began their walk to City Hall.

"I'd go with you," her friend Marcie had said. Marcie was a technical writer, working and living at home, with a wriggly three-year-old, Theresa, on her lap.

"Oh, I couldn't ask that," Amanda said. "You have your hands full. There's a witness there, anyway. The greeter."

"The one with the bracelet charm to ward off the Evil Eye?"

"What?" Amanda blinked. Marcie said such esoteric things. Her fingertips felt cold.

"She got it taking care of a Greek lady," Marcie said. "It's a charm — all over the Mediterranean, they have it."

"Oh," Amanda breathed.

Marcie was a great friend, and her conversations always enlightening. But, it seemed to Amanda that Marcie's mind was forever wandering through a forest of paths, easily diverted to something interesting but irrelevant.

Thus went their conversation, just a few days before. Amanda had no issue with Marcie, but she simply saw no need.

Marcie had a beautiful wedding five years earlier, and there were folk singers and a buffet of foods from all over the world. It was at the elegant Country Ledge Inn.

Amanda had enjoyed it. But, today was about form, function, endings, and beginnings. A frilly gown and tins of couscous kept warm by a Bunsen burner were not in order.

She and Richard had agreed to a dinner at a nice Italian place; she let Richard pick it, and make the reservations.

\*\*\*

"What do people at work say?" she asked him as they walked.

"Not much," laughed Richard. "I work in a pod, remember?"

"Yeah, 'course. I have a lot of gossips where I am. I'm glad God invented earphones."

They made some more practical conversation as they walked. Amanda felt herself pulling a bit on his band.

"Hey, we've got plenty of time!" He laughed again, but sounded slightly uncomfortable.

"Mmm, I like to give myself a few extra minutes," she said.

City Hall was in sight. But they had one stop before that, as she had explained to Richard before. Dolly's Florist, where she would pick up her bouquet. And carry it herself. No flower girls with sweet, punch-covered hands. The front window of Dolly's was a bright array of fall-themed arrangements. The golds and reds were enticing.

A cheery door chime rang as they walked in.

Dolly herself stepped forward to greet them, while her young assistant, Tiffany, was busy on a phone, taking down the details of an order.

"Well, here comes the bride," Dolly said. Her white hair was almost halo-like, and she wore a red dress so festive it looked as if she was on her way herself to a gala event.

"This is Richard," Amanda said, for the first time, beaming.

"Well, aren't you lucky," Dolly said in her sweet, reassuring voice.

"I know it. The beach house. Right place, right time," Richard said. "Synchronicity."

Dolly gave a puzzled glance as if he'd said a word in a foreign language. Amanda shrugged her shoulders and said, "We're ready."

"I can see that," Dolly said twinkling. "Come on."

"Oh, I can wait out here," Richard said. "I'm already seeing the bride before the wedding, isn't that bad luck?"

"What's done is done," Amanda and Dolly said, almost at the same time. Amanda saw a flash of nervousness cross his face.

Well, of course he's nervous, she thought. A 33-year-old bachelor, about to leave that life forever.

Dolly escorted them through a door behind the cash register. Tiffany kept chatting, leaning over the counter, undisturbed.

"This is like something my mom would do," Richard was saying, as Dolly led them through a narrow corridor at the back of the building. In contrast to the front of the store, it was a tight and dull space, with wood paneling on the hallway walls from some sad, distant age.

"Mom always like to build suspense, especially before a big day," Richard said.

Neither Dolly nor Amanda answered him.

Dolly opened another door, and the inside was black. "Used to be part of an old theater," Dolly said.

"Ah," Richard offered. His hand, still holding Amanda's, felt warm and sure, but Amanda noticed his breath growing shallow.

At least a crimson light seemed to fill the space. To their left was a woman, who might have been a ringer for Amanda but she was a bit taller. The man whose arm she clutched was not like Richard. He was short, and great pools of sweat on his forehead gleamed in the light.

There were others. Comically, Amanda thought, this lot almost looks like clumsy middle-schoolers arriving at a dance. Like people who went just because their parents made them.

Each man, or woman, was in the grip of their escort.

They'd been told different stories to lead them here. After all, everyone going to City Hall to get married would have looked very odd to the city clerk.

They'd entered through different places. All going in through a florist shop — well, that would have just looked ridiculous.

The florist shop was one of many portals. A bank, a corner grocery, an insurance office.

Like arteries of the city, leading to its heart — its hungry heart.

Amanda never thought much about it, only the carrying out. Her last engagement had simply 'broken off'. She received no more than the token pity of a woman in her 30s still searching for the perfect partner.

Richard shifted and struggled for a bit, but as with the others, his movement grew stiff and slack. This was why no one seemed in a hurry to run or try to escape. In the chill, red mist, they could not. Once they inhaled, it made quick work of every sensor declaring fight, or flight.

They were all gathered, in a ragged horse shoe shape, around a table. They were numb in the haze they inhaled, yet everyone who had brought them there was fine.

Amanda had a moment of reservation that quickly subsided. Richard, on the long table, his shirt open to reveal skin that was pathetically white — not the fresh bronze of their beach house meeting. That almost made it necessary.

Dolly in her red dress, with its incongruous holiday flair, seldom offered explanations, because this point, there would be no need. But Dolly wasn't always predictable. "It takes a lot to keep a city running. It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a child to give back."

Dolly handed Amanda a stylus that gleamed slightly.

Richard's eyes pooled with useless terror. But even that was growing dull as his nerves betrayed his eyes, his brain.

No one screamed. No air moved through those frozen lungs. They could each only stand and watch, until it was their time.

\*\*\*

"You could advance," her mother was saying, as she and Amanda sat in the bright, cheery kitchen that was a duplicate of all the kitchens in all the apartments in Shady Glen.

"Well, I think it's time to have that talk," Amanda agreed, holding the pink china cup in her hand. "After yesterday, I think I've shown myself."

"Yes, you have," her mother said. "And I'm proud of you."

"Hey, you taught me," Amanda reminded her, patting her mother's arm, still firm. She could feel her mother's quiet strength through the power blue sweater.

"You know, at one time, I even thought you might have been upset at me," her mother said. "Why?"

"About your father, I mean."

"Oh." After a moment: "I guess by that, I knew. And I knew you were doing it for both of us. So we could remain. And have a place."

"That's why I was so proud of you," her mother said.

"You know, I was reading an article the other day, about the most interesting thing. Advances in testing for DNA. Could solve a lot of crimes."

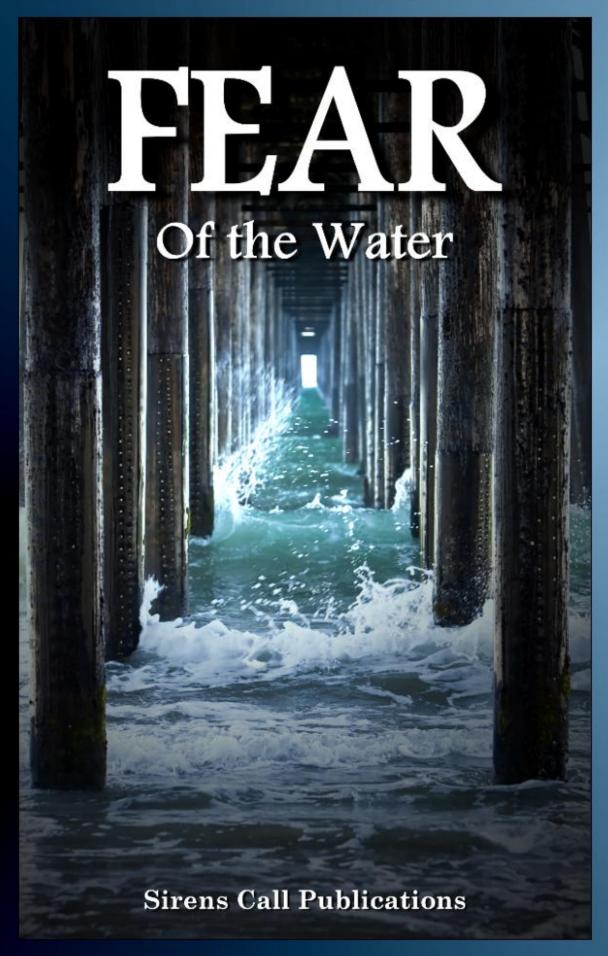
"Mom," Amanda leaned forward. "It's gonna be okay. First, you have to actually have DNA." Then they both laughed, in the close bond of a mother and daughter.

#### **About the Author:**

Meg Smith is a journalist, dancer, event producer and writer living in Lowell, Mass. Her short stories and poems have been published in or accepted to Bewildering Stories, The Blue Lady, Outer Darkness, Star\*Line and The Dwarf Stars anthology of the Science Fiction And Fantasy Poetry Association; Strange Horizons, The Horror Zine and many more. She served on the board of Lowell Celebrates Kerouac!, a festival in Lowell honoring Lowell-born author Jack Kerouac. She produces The Edgar Allan Poe Show, honoring Poe's presence in Lowell. She has published a second book of poetry, 'Dear Deepest Ghost,' available on Amazon.

Website: <a href="https://www.megsmithwriter.net">https://www.megsmithwriter.net</a>
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# The Starving Time | Kaddie Tucker

"Would ya just look at all that blood, Jen?" Steve pointed his knife at the big red blotch staining the snow near our boots. "Must be a big one." He grinned, the excitement dancing in his blue eyes lighting up his gaunt face.

Saliva pooled in my mouth. Meat...

How long had it been since we'd had anything but some wild greens dug from beneath the snow boiled with bones of previous kills? Weeks? Months?

No one kept count of the years anymore. What was the use? Since The Starving Time had come, settling over the world in a thick, white blanket, the passage of time had lost meaning. There was a brief period of warmth and melting—Mama called it summer—when a few hardy, fast-growing plants were harvested. Then snow covered the world once more.

But this year summer had not come to the land. Its time was growing to a close and the meager amount of plants grubbed from beneath the snow had been eaten.

When I was a kid I had heard talk of ice ages, and maybe at one time, had known what that meant. Now all I knew was The Starving Time.

Mama said we fared better than most since we already knew how to live off the land. She told us how most of the people who lived in cities had died out just a few years after The Starving Time had come. They had gotten all their food in places called stores, and didn't know how to hunt for it. "So much for civilization," Mama had said.

I had never seen a city or a store—no one ventured near the places of sickness—and didn't know what civilization was, but Mama knew about such things. Daddy too. The Starving Time had come when they were big kids. Oh, the stories they could tell, describing things so far-fetched I sometimes wondered if they made them up.

"You daydreaming again?" My brother elbowed me in the side. "Ain't no time for that now, gonna be dark before long. We gotta track down this critter and get back home."

My mind returned to the here and now, to the blood-soaked patch of snow and the smeared tracks leading deeper into the woods. "Looks like it took your bear trap with it," I said.

"Yeah, I see that. And something else—you see it?"

I studied the tracks, and a smile stretched my cracked lips. "There's two of them."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Some critters are funny, won't leave a hurt one behind. Bad for them, but good for us. We'll bag enough meat to feed us all for a couple of weeks at least."

"You mean we'll have enough meat so that Molly'll get a good helping."

Molly was pregnant with Steve's baby. He was worried about her, seeing as how there wasn't anything to her but belly. All of us were down to skin and bones, but being pregnant made starving even harder on a body. Meat or no meat, Molly would be lucky if she didn't lose the baby. But I didn't tell Steve that. He already knew.

He looked up at the slate-gray sky, tears filming his eyes. I gave him a quick hug. "Come on, let's go get Molly and that kid of yours some meat."

Following the trail of blood, we trudged through the snow. A light breeze ruffled the evergreens. Every so often, clumps of snow fell from drooping branches with a soft thump. Steve and I jumped at every sound.

Then off in the distance we heard it: the growling and snarling of fighting wolves. The bastards were after *our* kill!

Steve and I glanced at each other, then took off running as fast as the deep snow allowed. No following the blood trail now; we raced toward the sounds of an empty belly.

Steve saw them first. "To the right," he huffed. "There."

My eyes followed his outstretched arm. Five wolves surrounded a man and woman. One wolf had the woman by her arm and she was screaming. The man was flat on his back in the snow, Steve's bear trap biting into his ankle, and a wolf tearing into his throat.

"No!" I pulled the knife Daddy had given me when I turned a woman and started hunting, and plunged in among the pack. Steve was right beside me, swinging and slashing with his own blade.

We made a good team. We'd done this before, just the two of us against many. He was my right hand, I was his left. At all times, we knew where each other was and what each was doing. There were no wasted movements. Our minds meshed and we became one invincible fighter.

The battle lasted less than a minute. Five wolves lay dead upon the blood-soaked snow. And one man.

I turned to the woman. Cradling her injured arm, she leaned against a tree, sobbing hysterically. I stepped over one of the dead wolves, hunkered down, and put my arm around her shoulder. "There, there, it'll be all right," I said softly, using the same words Mama had used while drying my tears when I was a kid and had gotten hurt or had a nightmare. "Everything'll be just fine."

She relaxed against me. "John...he's ...he's dead, isn't he?" Her shaky voice was little more than a whisper.

I raised her bowed head and looked into her wet, green eyes. "I'm afraid so." Then I slashed her throat and shoved her away so her pumping blood wouldn't stain my coat. She landed on her side, the snow around her turning red.

Steve clapped me on the back. "Seven, Jen. Seven kills in one day. Mama and Daddy ain't gonna believe this."

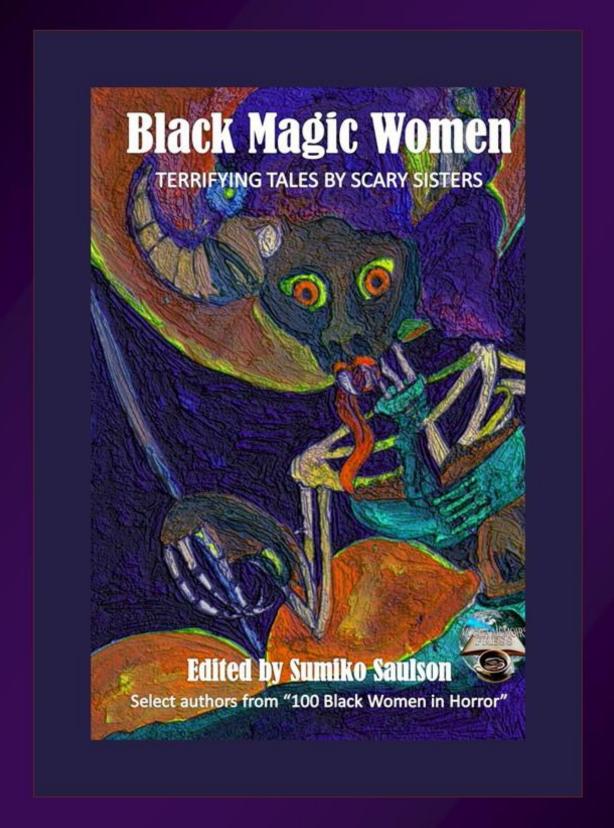
I looked at the seven carcasses surrounding us. And smiled. Maybe Steve and Molly's baby would make it after all.

#### **About the Author:**

Kaddie Tucker grew up in the backwoods of the Ozark Mountains without benefit of the internet and cell phones, a time and place that has heavily influenced her writing. To this day, when she puts pen to paper—or fingers to keyboard—nine times out of ten her mind veers south onto that familiar road. It goes home.

Website: http://www.kaddietucker.com

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#### The Green Horror | Mathias Jansson

It started in June
with the hottest summer ever
polar ice was melting
revealing a green horror
frozen in time
waiting to be awakened

An innocent moss started to spread first it created a green rug over stones and land on Greenland

In July it had reached the States Europe and Russia a thin green layer covered all buildings cars and streets

When autumn arrived it was too late to stop it it started to bloom and spread its spores with the wind all over the world making the planet green again

We tried to fight back but then it revealed its true horror protecting itself with a thick cloud of poison gas an acid that burnt the skin and suffocated all living beings when the winter arrived it was all over for man and beast.

#### **About the Author:**

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines such as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

Website: <a href="http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/">http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/</a>



# Nothing Lives Jon Olson

Reflections in windows tease and haunt, showing what was, and what is no longer. Do not look at the glass! Damn, too late. Reflected before me is a tree. Its trunk, branches, and leaves, all on display. I want it to be real. I roam these empty streets. Searching, hoping, and praying to find someone; something; anything. People, animals, and plants are all gone. Concrete, steel and glass remain. I call out and listen, but only my echo replies. This city is dead; nothing lives. The sky is grey; no sun or clouds. Life has abandoned this place; abandoned me.

### Ashes | Scarlett R. Algee

I open my eyes.

The floor is icy; that's the first thing I notice. The flagstones are freezing, a leaching cold, and I can feel the warmth of my body seeping into the granite underneath me, though the temperature of the surface itself doesn't seem to change.

The quiet encroaches on my mind. My breath rasps in my ears, seconded only by the thud of my heartbeat. I'd performed the summoning ritual perfectly. Whatever I'd called out of the void should still be bound here, waiting my command, breathing, gibbering, something *audible*. Silence is never a good sign.

I try to push myself up. Can I? The stone under my back is a gravity well pulling at my skin, but I strain, getting my shoulders off the floor. The air smells of ash and smoke from burning flesh, my stomach twists. Pressure rises in my throat. I drop back, turn my head to the side, and open my jaw to let out the flow. I spit when I'm empty and sit up fully at last, weak but moving. A final trickle slides from my lips down my shirtfront.

I spare the liquid staining my shirt a glance. It's black. I keep my eyes on the blotch for a second before I finally look down at my forearms, at the markings there. The glyphs should have faded before I was awake; they've always faded before when I've tinkered in the void, but now they cover my skin in neat perfect rows, as if they've been painted on. I rub my left thumb over my right forearm, but the marks don't smear. I'm not imagining them, and the realization makes my gut wrench again. This is new. A message? A warning? I can't read them this time. The knot tightens, rises toward my throat.

I stand unsteadily, wishing I had someone to prop me up. Nothing happens, yet the thought alone should have been enough to bring the creature I'd called forth to my side. I take a few tottery steps out of the quartered and rune-inscribed glyph I'd long ago etched into the basement floor. I turn back to see the smeared summoning circle, the scattered ash and salt, for the first time.

It isn't just broken; it's empty. I don't know what I've pulled from the void—I never know until I see it—but it's gone. It's loose.

I limp up the basement steps, lay my hand on the knob. It rattles in my grasp, the door bowing outward. On the other side, something growls.

### Bone Deep | Scarlett R. Algee

For the first time in weeks, I'm alone in the house. Gran's out talking over the garden wall with one of the neighbors; Mam's hanging out the wash. Me, I'm sitting on my bed with our best kitchen knife, running the edge over the hard points sticking out beneath my fingernails. It should hurt, but it doesn't; the skin parts just a bit, bloodlessly, and there's the grating sound of metal scraping bone.

I press harder.

\*\*\*

It started six weeks ago last Sunday, the day after I turned fifteen. When I went to bed that night, it was insidious, a little niggling almost-itch behind my kneecaps and in my wrists. But my knees swelled under my skirt when I trudged dutifully to school the next morning, and writing notes in my lectures just made fire blaze down my right hand in waves. The next day, it was both hands. Within a week, I was sneaking aspirin from the kitchen cabinet in handfuls, stuffing them in my skirt pockets, biting down on the bitter discs so I wouldn't sob from the searing ache twisting me inside out. I did that at home, at night, into my pillow.

It took Mam a full ten days to notice: "Ellie, you've shot up like a poplar."

She didn't smile. She grimaced instead, and backed me up against the edge of the half-wall between the kitchen and dining room, plopping the family Bible against the top of my head and marking the paint with a pencil before fetching the measuring tape. "Five feet and eight," she pronounced, wide-eyed, when she pulled the tape away. "Are you taller than me?" Mam demanded, and crowded so close my nose touched between her

eyes. "Jesus, you're taller than me. And since the first of the month, too." She turned to look over her shoulder at Gran. "Is this normal?"

Gran shrugged, mouth tight around her cigarette. "Some girls get their height early, all at once. I did." She stood five foot four in bare feet.

It was Gran who sat at my bedside that night, patting my aching hands and balancing ice packs on my oversized knees. "Growing pains," she said, though her gaze narrowed as she eyed the length of my legs. "Best to get it out of the way now. Don't worry, it'll be over soon."

But in the night I woke screaming, my nightgown spotted with blood. My ribs had expanded and grown sharp-edged, tearing my skin from the inside. Mam yanked the fabric up and stared at me while Gran sponged me off with stinging alcohol, and this time there wasn't puzzlement in my mother's eyes. There was fear.

The doctor they took me to the next morning glanced at my knees and hands and ribs, took some measurements and jotted notes, muttered to himself and gave Mam a prescription for something with codeine in it. He never said a word directly to me. Growth spurt, he called it, and mumbled something about long bones and inflammation of the growth plates. It would pass, he said. That was the end of it.

That afternoon the pain in my knees came back, jabbing and twisting, so bad I could almost see my shins bowing inward. So I begged Mam for one of the pills, but she only said, "Not yet. Let's see how you are after school tomorrow."

I woke up next morning with my mouth throbbing. My cheekbones strained the contours of my face; I could see fissures forming in the skin. My teeth had become longer; my lips stretched when I formed a bite. Mam measured me again. I was another three inches taller. Gran looked up at me and whispered, "Swear to God, her bones are growing out of her."

I could barely get out of bed that day, despite hanging over it. There was no school. There was no school ever again.

The next week kept me changing, growing. My neck stretched with crackling noises. My jaw and elbows locked and loosened at odd times. Going through the doorways in the house meant bending nearly double, sleeping on my bed took folding myself in half, and the biggest shoes Mam could buy only fit on my feet a few hours. Gran crossed herself and swore and fed me aspirin, codeine, whiskey. None of it touched the pain. I lay on the floor and howled till the neighbors' dogs barked.

This morning, Mam needed a stepladder to measure me, and her tape wouldn't reach in one stretch. Six feet. Seven inches. I watched tears roll down her face as I tried to steady my too-long, agonized legs, and felt the ceiling against the top of my head.

\*\*\*

Now I sit on the end of my bed, legs mostly on the floor, and I draw the knife over my fingertips again. They split entirely, and it's relief enough to make my eyes water. Tentatively I press the knife point into my thigh, where the outline of my femur is broad and plain, and push in. My skin rips with a noise like tearing tape, and there's no pain, no blood, only a release of pressure that makes me stuff my bulging knuckles into my toowide mouth. Only a great glistening white expanse beneath the stretched crepe of my skin.

Gran was right. My bones are growing out of me. I take a few breaths and stick the knife in again. If they want to escape, I'm setting them free.

### **About the Author:**

Scarlett R. Algee's fiction has been published by Body Parts Magazine, Pen of the Damned, and The Wicked Library. Her short story "Dark Music," written for the podcast The Lift, was a 2016 Parsec Awards finalist, and she was contributing editor of the bestselling sci-fi anthologies Explorations: War and Explorations: Colony. She lives in rural Tennessee with a beagle and an uncertain number of cats.

Blog: <u>scarlettralgee.wordpress.com</u> Twitter: @scarlettralgee



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### In Fall She Fell | Katherine Brown

Dead

Dead and dying

The landscape is barren All the leaves have fallen

A soft carpet they make under the moonlight For you who can feel no more, how unfair

**Smiling** 

Smiling and laughing

Threatening me you thought to get your way

But the highest price I made you pay
No cold will you need fear this night
But I shiver from the chill that fills the air

**Sweating** 

Sweating and gasping

I awake from a fitful sleep

My thoughts swim back from somewhere dark

and deep

A dream, only a dream, I softly sigh

Until a blood-red leaf drifts from my hair

### Monstrosity | Katherine Brown

Darkness drapes heavily

Providing the monster invisibility

Silent screams

Deadly dreams

The monster with fury seethes

With great effort it stills and breathes A loud and chaotic kill wouldn't matter

Better for the victim to suffer long after

The monster stalks its prey

Cunningly learning habits day by day

In the background does he lurk For opportunities eagerly alert

Plotting out paths to destroy the enemy

With no regard to casualties

Bickering the monster loves to see

A great distraction that can be

The best place the monster finds to hide

Is in a pack of tangled lies

When at last the monster grows quite large

It doesn't hesitate to charge

Right from my mouth the monster leaps

Great, bleeding wounds it heaps

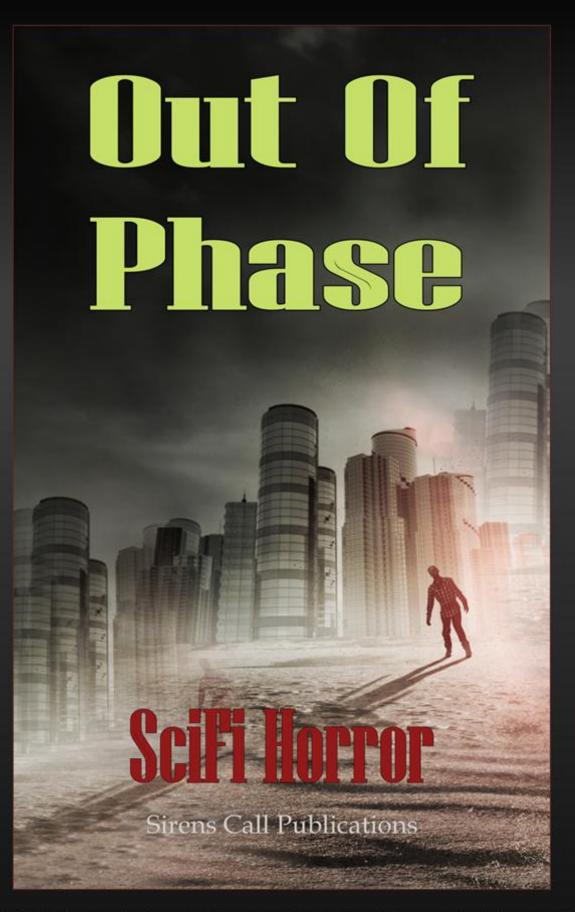
Onto enemy, passersby, and loved ones equally

Thus does the monster inside of me

### **About the Author:**

Katherine Brown lives with her husband and step-daughter in Texas. A passion for books from the time she started reading led Katherine to dream of writing books and opening up a brand-new world for others as well. As a teen, Katherine discovered a new joy in composing poetry. Publishing her first two children's books in 2017, Katherine hopes to continue writing long into her future.

Website: <u>www.katherinebrownbooks.com</u> Facebook: Katherine Brown - Author



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, KOBO, AND ITUNES

### Look What the Cat Dragged In | Vivian Kasley

The storm was supposed to hit around midnight. We piled all our pillows into the living room with blankets and sheets. We turned the air down to a freezing temp to keep the house cool longer when the electricity went out, notice I said when, not if. This was supposed to be a bad one, his name was Hank. A Cat 3, which is pretty darn bad. Most of the windows were boarded up, except the little one in the bathroom. With it being two days before fall we thought we would make it through the summer without a storm, but I guess not.

My brother and I were kind of excited for the storm. We had all our coloring books out and some of our toys. We had plenty of water and tons of non-perishable food. Mama bought a lot of snacks too. We sat and ate chips as Mama watched the weatherman get whipped by the wind and rain that was already coming into south Florida. We were up toward Orlando, and it was still hours away. Mama rocked back and forth as she watched and shook her head in worry.

"Did you ever find Purr Bug? She's not come in yet. We gotta get her in. Joshua please go and look for Purr Bug in the garage. Lucy, go call for her out front again, Mama asked us.

"Ok Mama", we said.

Purr Bug was nowhere we looked and she normally came running when called, but sometimes if she had a lizard or something she took her time. We told Mama we didn't find her and she said we would probably have to keep checking until the storm came. She told us not to worry since cats had good instincts, but she looked like she didn't believe what she said.

Mama made us the last of the food from the freezer for dinner. We had chicken nuggets, broccoli, corn, tater tots, peas, mini corn dogs, and pork chops. It was a feast! For dessert we had ice cream, popsicles, and frozen fruit. My brother and I ate until we felt sick. After dessert, Joshua and I looked for Purr Bug outside, but we still didn't find her. Mama told us to take our baths so she could fill the tub with water when we finished. Once in our night clothes, we watched movies on Netflix until Mama said it was late and we should unplug the TV.

Even though Mama left the hall light on, it was dark as could be in the house. She had two good flashlights and a battery operated radio sitting on the coffee table. We could hear some wind and rain as we huddled up together with our pillows and blankets and waited for Hank. It didn't take long for my brother and I to fall asleep as Mama sang us a song and ran her dish soap scented fingers through our hair.

We awoke with a jolt as the wind cried like a banshee against our house. It shook the roof and walls and rattled our windows. Mama held us close as we cried and she said it would all be ok. Joshua buried his head under the pillows and covered himself with the blanket. I was scared, but I stayed awake with Mama. We heard all kinds of stuff hitting the house. Eventually I feel asleep again; the assault outside wasn't enough to keep my little eyes open.

When we awoke again it was dark and silent. My brother called out to Mama, and she said she was right here. She turned on a flashlight. Our shadows were creepy against the ceiling and walls as we sat up and looked around. Mama's shadow was the largest and it loomed over us like a giant looking down at its food. We asked if it was over, but she said no, we were inside the eye.

My brother made a whiny noise and then asked, "Inside an eye? Hurricanes have eyeballs, Mama?"

"Yes, they have what is called an eye. It's called that because it's round. When in the eye all is calm and peaceful, but then, as the storm moves the eye wall hits. It's the worst part of the storm, but we'll get through it."

She rubbed my brother's back, but he looked at her like he didn't believe her. I was scared, but I kept quiet. Mama was about to turn on the radio when we all heard several loud guttural meows. Joshua got up and ran towards the front door. Mama caught up with him and grabbed the back of his pajama bottoms.

"Purr Bug! Mama, Purr Bug is out there!" Joshua shouted.

"Joshua, you can't just go open the door! Lucy, come sit with your brother while I check", Mama said.

I got up from our warm pillow and blanket refuge, grabbed my brother's hand, and led him back with me. He had to go to the bathroom of course, so I grabbed a flashlight and took him. I turned around while he peed and then made him do the same while I went. We heard Mama open the front door and then shriek. We called out to her and I ran with the flashlight. Mama's flashlight was cracked open on the floor. She slammed the front door shut and grabbed my flashlight from me.

"The dang soaking wet cat ran in through the door and had something in her mouth. She almost knocked me over. It scared me half to death," Mama said.

"What was it, Mama?" I asked.

"I really don't know," she said.

We followed Mama as she crept through the house looking for Purr Bug. We heard her make little chirp noises; she usually made those when she had a lizard or mouse. The noise was coming from the kitchen. Mama shone the light, which illuminated Purr Bug under the table batting the unknown thing around. We couldn't see very well, but it looked like a giant mutant insect of some kind. I got an eerie feeling. My brother was in awe.

"What is that? A hairless flying squirrel? A Godzilla grasshopper?" Joshua asked.

"I have no idea, but stay back. It looks dead, but we don't know for sure," Mama whispered.

We stayed back gladly and shone the light for Mama as she tiptoed toward Purr Bug.

"Damn it, Purr Bug! You just had to go and drag something in right now? Of all times, now?" Mama said in a harsh whisper.

Purr Bug stopped batting the thing around and meowed proudly at Mama as she peered under the table.

"Bring the light closer," Mama said.

Purr Bug skittered toward Joshua and I, bumping her damp head against our legs purring and chirping. Under the table, the thing's body glistened in the light. Despite the cat's battering, it seemed to be intact. Mama shook her head and kept saying huh and what the heck. Joshua's eyes were as wide as they could get. The light bounced around wildly as my hand trembled.

"Hold still, Lucy!" she said.

I tried, but I was truly scared. I had no idea what the thing under the table was. The body was grayish blueish. It had what appeared to be muscular arms and legs. Its hands had three long, thin, pointy clawed fingers and the feet, two sharp talons that were curled under. It had wings, but the worst part was its face. It was a long oval, the mouth like a thin tube a mosquito uses to suck blood. It had large black eyes that stared back at us unblinking.

"Mama, is it dead?" I asked.

"Hush, now!" she said.

"But Mama, what is that thing?"

"I don't know, Lucy. Give me the light, then take Joshua and go back to the living room."

Joshua and I stood glued to the floor. We were afraid, but also fascinated. I held the light out to Mama, but just when I did the thing made a noise. A shrill ear-piercing noise that filled the entire house. Purr Bug ran toward it, but the creature slid out from under the table like it had a motor and

then buzzed up toward the ceiling. We all screamed. Purr Bug growled and jumped up onto the counter. Mama took the light from me and then told me and Joshua to run into the bathroom and shut the door.

We cried and said we didn't want to leave her, but she screamed at us until we relented. We were running out of the kitchen when Mama started running right behind us. The light was going up and down as we ran, the screeching thing close behind. Mama pushed us into the bathroom and slammed the door.

"Lock it!" she yelled.

We cried out in the dark as we heard Mama wailing in pain. Purr Bug joined in, hissing and growling. We screamed for our mother until our throats were raw. Then all of a sudden the walls of the house began to come to life again. The bathroom window rattled and the banshee came back with a vengeance. It was like she was howling on top of a train. The noise almost drowned out the commotion outside.

I pulled open the bathroom closet and stuffed my brother inside. I couldn't fit alongside him, but I grabbed a towel and put it over my head. I huddled against the door. We heard stuff hitting the roof and the bathroom window; a hundred giant knuckles knocking on our house. We no longer heard Mama or Purr Bug over the roaring wind. I told Joshua to stay in the closet, because I had to go help Mama. He screamed and cried, but I told him to be brave and wait for me.

I opened the door to complete blackness. I slunk along the wall, feeling my way down the hallway. As I reached the end, I peered around and saw the flashlight on the floor in the living room. I got on my belly and army crawled over to it. I picked it up and went to find Mama. The sound outside mixed with the horror inside was enough to make my tummy hurt, but I knew I had to do something. I muted the light under my pajama top and wandered through the house looking for Mama.

Purr Bug ran past me and I froze. I waited, holding my breath, and then slowly took the light out from under my top. I pointed it around the kitchen until I saw Mama running towards me. She grabbed my hand and took the light.

"Where's your brother?" she shouted.

"In the bathroom closet. Mama, are you ok?" I could smell blood.

"Lucy, why did you come out? I told you to stay in the bathroom!" she scolded.

She pulled me into a run and we headed back to the bathroom. I tripped over some pillows in the living room as we ran and as Mama pulled me up I felt something hit my head. I cried out. Mama shone the light and I could see the thing looming above us. It dove at me again. Its clawed fingers and talon feet came toward my face. It got my cheek before Mama knocked it hard with the flashlight. The thing screeched angrily and came at us again. Mama pushed me in front of her and we ran down the hall toward the bathroom.

Before we could reach the door I heard Mama cry out and drop the flashlight. I turned to see the thing attached to her, its long thin tube inserted into her neck. She was trying to pull it off. Purr Bug attacked, but the thing kicked with its sharp talons. Mama fell to the ground and lay on her side. Tears blinded my eyes as I shouted. Mama pointed for me to go into the bathroom and then her eyes closed.

"Mama! Mama! Please!" I cried.

I ran to her and pulled at the thing, ignoring its sharp talons as they sliced into me. I picked up the flashlight and smashed it into its head as hard as I could. It pulled its tube from Mama's neck, slick with her blood, and came for me. I swung at it with all my might, but I missed. I aimed the light up and saw it suspended in mid-air above me. It reached out with its ugly fingers, its long tube mouth pulsating and dripping with Mama's blood.

My hands were slippery with blood, but I gripped the flashlight and crouched low to the ground curling up beside Mama. The storm howled above us and dropped rocks onto the roof and then my ears popped. The thing hovered, but before it could come back for more, part of the roof disappeared and sucked it out. I could hear its screech even among the roar of the wind. Cold rain hit my skin like needles and soaked into my pajamas. I grabbed Mama's hand and squeezed. Rain hit her face and she opened her eyes. She saw the opening above us and jumped up.

She grabbed me and we ran into the bathroom. Joshua tumbled out of the closet as soon as he saw us. Luckily, the roof was still intact above us. Mama did her best to clean up my wounds, even though the water was out. We sat with towels around us and rode out the rest of the storm. Believe it or not, my brother and I fell asleep among the linen-scented towels with Mama's arm around each of us. When we awoke, light was trying to peek through the bathroom window. Mama grabbed hairspray from under the bathroom sink and poked her head out the door. Purr Bug sat there and chirped at us.

"You stupid damn cat!" Mama said.

The roof was still mostly there except for the bit that was ripped off. Mama said our roof was old and needed to be repaired anyway. She was able to contact our aunt Jenny and we were going to be staying there for a while. We packed up some of our stuff and left. Mama said she was glad she filled the gas tank before the storm as she pulled out of the driveway.

It was still quite windy out, but the rain was only a slight drizzle. The mostly deserted roads were covered with debris, but we were able to get around it. Luckily, our aunt didn't live far. Along the way she told my brother that he would stay behind when she and I went to a doctor. Joshua held Purr Bug in his lap and nodded. When my brother tried to ask about the thing, my mother told him to hush and not to bring it up.

We got to Aunt Jenny's and she looked us up and down. Mama and I still had dried blood all over us. I had bandages on my hands and arms. Mama's curly hair was matted to one side of her head, she had some huge red bumps on her neck, and our eyes were both puffy. We stood in silence as she let out a huge gasp.

"What the hell happened to you guys last night? You look like something the cat dragged in!" she said.

We looked at each other and said nothing. Aunt Jenny helped us with our bags and Joshua put Purr Bug in the house. Aunt Jenny made us sandwiches and we sat and looked at her windswept back yard through her sun room porch. Mama told Aunt Jenny an animal got in the house during the storm and we needed to get to the doctor. She nodded, concerned, puzzled, but took Mama at her word. Purr Bug chirped at the birds through the glass with our aunt's cat, Pickles. My aunt chuckled and pet their heads.

"I don't let my cat outside, Ms. Bug, don't be giving him ideas. It's too dangerous out there right now for you anyway," Aunt Jenny said. Purr Bug head butted the glass door.

"She's an inside cat now, too," Mama said, and we finished our sandwiches without another word.

### **About the Author:**

Vivian Kasley is a horror nut who lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for many years until she decided to leave her job to write and travel. She has published work with Dark Moon Digest, Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, and with Sirens Call Publications. She continues to write and hopes to fill more hearts with terror.

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/vivian.kasley



Etched Christopher A. Liccardi

Etched in eternity, the family posed in the backyard pretending nothing was wrong. With such a handsome family, what could be wrong? Their faces belied a truth that smelled like rotting meat on a sun-beaten highway; all but one face.

The little girl sat 'injun' style they called it in school. All thoughts of political correctness sixty-years away.

"Wasn't there another child, sir?" The photographer asked.

The little girl replied, choking back a smirk, "He didn't make it."

"Oh." The photographer shuffled awkwardly for a moment. Death was uncommon for this city dweller.

The sitting took an hour and everyone was as still as statues the entire time, except the girl. She squirmed and fidgeted like she'd sat on an ant hill. Afterward, she got up and walked over to the man with the fancy camera and tugged on his pant leg. The little girl smiled up at him, sinister and dark; he was instantly terrified.

"Wanna stay for dinner?" The little girl asked, forcing a sweetness that was a pure lie on her lips.

Before the man could reply, father had driven a stake through his left eye. The little girl cheered and began to giggle.

### The Cage-Keeper's Burden | Angela Amman

The animals slept most of the summer.

The builders of the zoo never expected it to become an attraction, the small preserve tucked between bigger cities, surrounded by an ornate fence and a gate with a padlock they rarely used. Visitors generally stopped on their way to other places, paying the nominal entry fee to stretch their legs and let their kids run out pent-up road trip energy.

Placards in front of the cages looked like children's drawings: monkeys with oversized tails and tigers with stripes colored outside the lines. The single concession area offered soggy french fries and vanilla soft serve. The chocolate hadn't been refilled in nearly a decade.

Kids loved the zoo, sometimes more than the expensive, impeccable conservation ones with expansive habitats and animals that hid between trees and giant rocks. Here, the animals stayed on display, even while they slept away the summer days, dreaming of their next meal and perhaps the chance to hunt freely rather than gnawing the bloody meat tossed at their noses.

The keeper of the cages — for the zoo didn't have anyone knowledgeable enough to be called a docent — would wander along with the visitors. He urged the children to stop banging on the bars. They ignored him and banged anyway, their parents murmuring agreement with the cage-keeper but unwilling to take a firm stance against the behavior. They knew they needed to save their energy for their extended car trips, when the kids would fight over who should eat the last of the stale donut holes and who should get to plug in their device with the only charger anyone could find among the detritus.

"Why won't he move around, Daddy?" One little boy pulled on his father's hand, interrupting scrolling through sports scores and political gossip. His other chubby fist bumped against the iron rails, trying to rile the tiger from slumber.

"Don't pound on the bars," the old man mumbled. He wore a striped shirt like a referee, his nametag smudged into oblivion by age or neglect.

Both the boy and his father ignored the man. Though he taught his children to respect authority, the father felt his shoulders tense in defiance. How could a four-year-old's fist annoy anyone or anything but his own parents and the baby sister sleeping inside the expensive stroller at their side?

"I wanna wake him up," the boy insisted. He pounded again, but the only thing that moved was the flurry of rust shaking from the bars.

His mother tried to stifle a yawn but gave in to the gaping search for oxygen, wishing for another gallon of coffee or perhaps one of the little pills she'd taken to concentrate in college.

"I think he's down for the count, buddy," she said. "It's pretty hot out here."

"He's from India," the boy said. "India's hot."

The father's attention shifted from his phone. He allowed himself a moment of pride that the boy had any idea where the tiger might be from. "He's pretty big, bud. I'd say that's a Siberian Tiger, and those guys live in colder climates like Russia or northern China."

All three looked to the informational plaque near the cage for confirmation, but the rudimentary drawing did little to explain the tiger's origins, eating habits, or temperature preferences. He, if in fact it was a he, snoozed on, oblivious to the discussion at the front of his cage and soon the family piled into their car and drove on, safely buckled into car seats and surrounded by steel.

During the summer, the tiger slept.

But summer stretched closer to fall, and the zoo's daily visitors increased as families frantically held onto the last days of summer break. Tension brewed in cars as kids worried about who would be in their classes, mothers mentally calculated the cost of school supplies, and fathers calculated how long they could drive before needing relief from the obscenely large coffees they'd consumed zipping across state lines.

The zoo waited patiently for the convergence of seasons, the one told not by the calendar but by

the heavy sweater a harried mother wrapped around her body as she pushed a stroller over cracked concrete paths. The cage-keeper smiled. The sweater meant the animals would awaken.

He glanced once toward the parking lot near the entrance. Only a few cars sat in the graveled spaces. Only a few families wandered the zoo's paths, but it would have to do. The weather had turned, and custom must be held.

The cage-keeper moved quickly for the first time in a year. His striped shirt billowed around him as he skittered between cages, bony fingers twisting an iron key into locks older than his father, perhaps older than his grandfather. His family had kept the zoo's cages locked — and unlocked — for many generations. He worked even more quickly as the animals began to stir. Iron scraped against concrete as sinewy muscles pushed against unlocked bars. The padlock on the ornate front gate was the last key he turned, locking it tight, and then his bony fingers pulled the hearing aids from his ears.

In the summer, the animals slept. In the autumn, they ate, but that didn't mean the cage-keeper had to hear the screams.

### **About the Author:**

Angela Amman's writing explores how women and children interact with the nebulous world around them. Her short stories and essays have been featured in collections and anthologies, like GARDEN BOULEVARD, METAPHYSICAL GRAVITY and ECHOES IN DARKNESS. She lives in Metro Detroit with her husband and two children. When she should be sleeping, she works on her novel and rearranges her favorite playlists.

Personal blog: <a href="http://www.angelaamman.com">http://www.angelaamman.com</a>
Twitter: <a href="mailto:@AngelaAmman">@AngelaAmman</a>

### Turnabout | John H. Dromey

"Life was much simpler a few generations ago," Arnold said.

Picnicking indoors to avoid the deadly rays of a climate-changed late-summer sun, he munched on a scrumptious drumstick harvested from a variety of genetically-engineered chicken which sprouted legs like a porcupine grows quills.

"How do you know?" Sally asked.

With his free hand—his other two were in use wielding a napkin and reaching for another drumstick—Arnold drew a book out of his pocket. "My servo-bot vocalized Why Things Changed."

"Why did they?"

"First, an ill-informed, complacent citizenry tolerated an 'anything goes' attitude among scientists, and then everything went."

#### **About the Author:**

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries especially—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Crimson Streets, Mystery Weekly Magazine*, some previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, and elsewhere, as well as in numerous anthologies, including *Timeshift: Tales of Time* (Shacklebound Books, 2018).



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes, and Kobo

### Wonderland | Laura Glover

Summer approaches Heat fading away
His smile light As autumn arrives

Allowing the darkness Exploring his wonderland To escape the night Which no one survives

Past intentions consumed It's addicting allure
All fears dwindle away Engulfs the soul
His obsessive desire Of all that desire
Marks his prey To take this stroll

A prisoner of anguish

Immune to the void

That lay in the heart

To all he's destroyed

Arrogance and pride

Mark a malevolent trail

Where his beasts reside

Sly as they assail

Down his rabbit hole

He lures her with grace
Intoxication controlling

A path to an unknown place

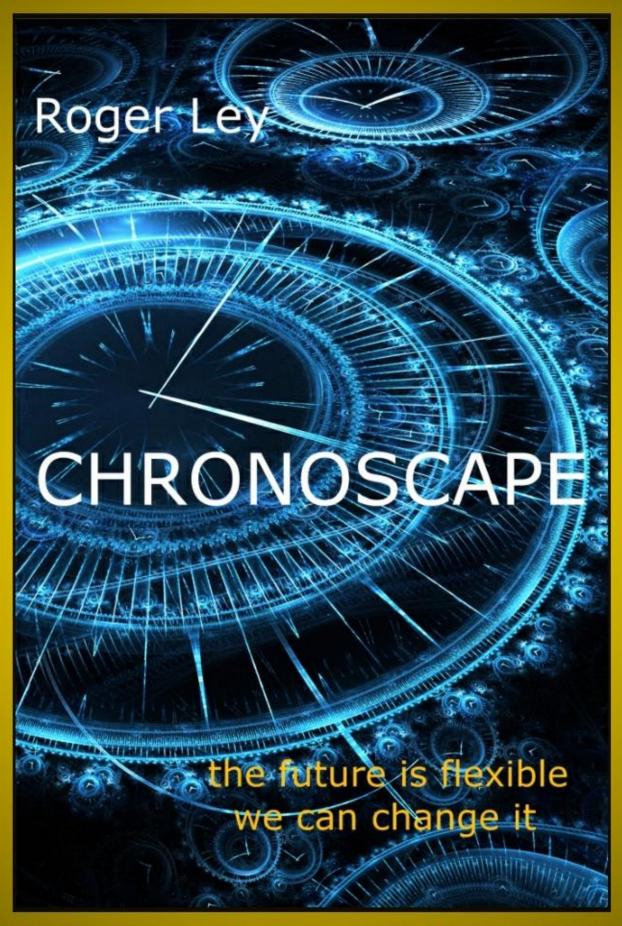
Golden leaves start to fall
Vivid skies turn dim
The harvest moon rises
As this fairytale turns grim

### **About the Author:**

Laura Glover's musical background gives her poetry a natural flow. Years of playing piano have taught her focus and determination. While spending most of her time chasing her young son she still finds the time to write. Raised on the beaches of Florida she loves the sun and her husband often remarks she's like a plant because without it she would wither and die.

Facebook: <u>Laura Glover</u> Twitter: @lg3780

# To change the future, change the past.



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### **Pressing Matters** | *Roger Ley*

"Oui monsieur, how can I help?" asked the short, middle-aged woman, drying her hands on her apron as she answered her front door.

"Yes, this is the farm of Henri Bertauld. Unfortunately, my husband is away at the moment, visiting a sick relative, you understand. Ah, the wine, certainly monsieur, it's been very popular, the wonderful summer last year, plenty of sugar in the grapes, the bouquet is marvellous."

"A tasting? Nothing could be simpler, follow me, monsieur." She led him along the path to the winery next door, a converted barn attached to the old stone farmhouse.

The visitor seemed impressed by the array of modern stainless-steel pipework and equipment, which was dominated by the massive hydraulic wine press. It was at odds with the traditional appearance of the exterior of the building.

Madam eyed the visitor. His dress and accent hinted at Paris and his arrogant manner confirmed it. He looked as if he might be worth a few cases so she pulled the cork on a fresh bottle and poured two half glasses, it would be bad manners to let him drink alone.

"A votre sante, monsieur." They raised their glasses and looked each other in the eye for a moment. The visitor, of course, had to make a big show of holding the glass to the light, swirling the wine around, sniffing it, sipping it. He inflatied his cheeks and moved it around his mouth as if it were mouthwash. At least he didn't spit it into a bucket. She took a small sip from her own glass and watched his reaction.

His expression passed from concentration to surprise, then pleasure, followed by something bordering on ecstasy.

Easy money, she thought to herself.

"So, six cases, monsieur, certainment, let me help you carry them to your car."

The transaction complete, she waved him off from the doorway of the winery, then moved back inside, out of the heat. She sighed, took another sip of wine, then fumbled in the pocket of her apron for her tobacco and papers, rolled a cigarette, and sat down to enjoy the break from her housework.

Looking towards the wine press she thought about that bastard husband of hers, Henri Bertauld. She remembered his nickname for her, 'the toad'. She remembered the years of insults and verbal abuse, his penny pinching and, latterly when he was in his cups, the beatings she had suffered at his hand. Hers was a patient people, she had the desert in her heritage. She knew that in the end, her moment would come, and it did, with the last batch of grapes that season.

\*\*\*

There had been a blockage in the outlet from the press, a foreign object hidden in the grapes. Bertauld had raised the piston and reached over the open press, holding a steel rod, poking and prodding in an attempt to clear it. He had leaned too far, the drunken fool, and over balanced. He'd fallen into the grapes and lay struggling on the surface, vainly trying to get his feet under him. It had taken only a moment for her to see her opportunity, make her decision, and press the start button.

She could still hear his roar of anger, followed by his threats and finally his pathetic pleadings and promises, as the motor whirred and the steel piston slowly but inexorably moved downwards, and pressed him into the grapes. His spluttering didn't last long. She remembered thinking it was lucky that the wine they made was red. Anyway, it was all over in a minute or two.

It had taken two quiet days for her to decide on her next move. She'd sell the farm and disappear, go back to her family in Algeria. He would be someone else's problem. She'd leave him

where he was, the pulp would ferment and preserve the body. The new owner would not discover it until he got around to emptying the press, maybe next spring, maybe later than that.

\*\*\*

She stood and walked back to the house, dropping her cigarette end on the path and pausing to crush it underfoot. She looked across the fields of vines. It had been another good summer. This year's wine ought to be even better than last, she thought, chuckling to herself. It would have more body this year.

#### About the Author:

Roger Ley was born and educated in London and spent some of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before joining the nuclear industry and later pursuing a career in higher education. His stories and articles have appeared in more than a dozen ezines this year. He has two books available on Amazon.

Website: <u>rogerleywrites.blogspot.com</u>

Twitter: @RogerLey1

### The Well | Claire Loader

There was a legend about the well at the back of the garden, one of anger and of violence, of a baby crying and a baby suddenly silent. We stayed away from there as kids, afraid of the horror that might befall us, not knowing it was coming for us anyway, a childhood that would turn us into monsters.

"Do that one more time and you know where I'll put you, you lecherous pieces of shit."

We never asked if it was her that did it. It was easier to find sleep when the tale stayed simply that. And yet always those dark stones loomed. A threat, a weapon to scare us into submission. Our nightmares filled with the slow drip of water on rock, of tiny bones rising to meet us.

It was quiet on the night we finally ventured down to it, but for the struggling heap we dragged, ready to add our bit to the story. I doubt many people ever set out to plunge their enemy forty feet to a sodden grave, let alone their mother. In many ways though she was far worse than your usual foe, she deserved what she was getting.

She was heavy as we struggled with her, as she bumped over branch and rock, the flies still hanging thick in the late leaves of summer. Her movements became more frantic as we neared the hole, as if she sensed the drop, as if she alone could hear the baby still crying as it fell. I wondered, when we dropped her in, if I too could suddenly hear it, or if it was that we came full circle in death – my mother squealing like a child as she took her final decent.

### **About the Author:**

Claire Loader was born in New Zealand and spent several years in China before moving to County Galway, Ireland, where she now lives with her family. A photographer and writer, her work has appeared in various publications, including Massacre Magazine, Tales From the Forest and Pendora.

Website: http://www.allthefallingstones.com

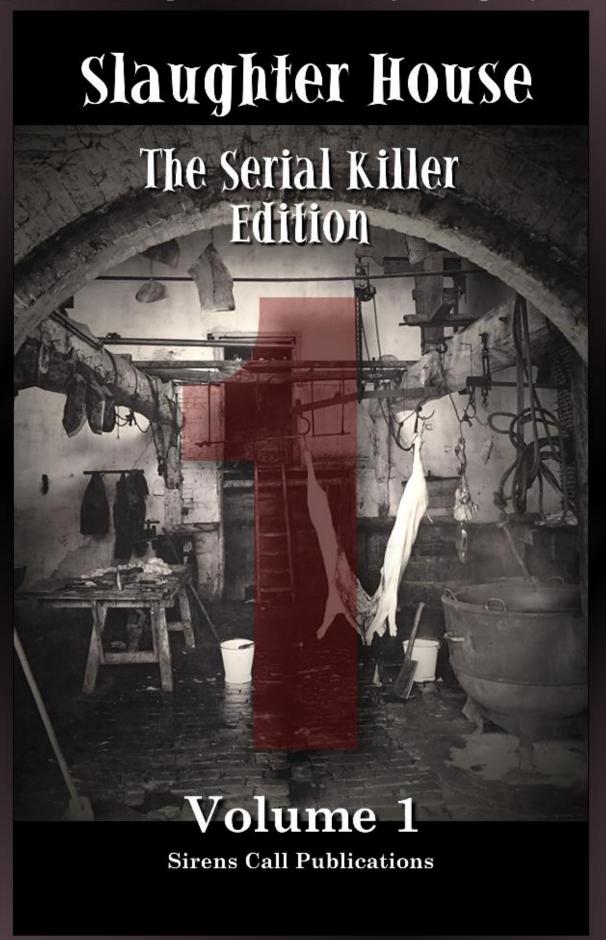
Twitter: @msloader



### The Patient Guise Lee A. Forman

Alone, it waited. Silent, still, it swallowed patience one lingering moment after another. With each passerby its senses hummed with anticipation—a growing hunger still unsated. Each gave a curious look, but none were tempted. Uncertainty lingered along the paths of its ancient mind as it questioned how well it understood its prey. The form it chose proved effective in the past. Eager younglings once rushed into its deceptive grasp. They'd pedal away from their elders and satisfy its appetite. But the scarcity of its preferred fare imposed a decision—its old hunting ground had to be abandoned. With a tired squeak, its wheels turned in search of a fresh source to nourish its everlasting appetite.

What drives someone to become a Serial Killer? Eleven authors spin tales of atrocity telling us just that.



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### There's a Hole in the Bottom | Brian Psiropoulos

Another squall turned the bark almost onto its side, as another 20 footer rolled up against, then underneath her. The *Dancer* righted herself, and shot down into the next valley, protected for a moment from the sting of the wind until plowing up and over the next wave.

We shouldn't have been out this far.

Braced against the rigging, I looked up again to the night sky, contrary, wondering anew how it could be cloudless, calmed in the light of a thousand stars, while we were beaten and blown in this briny hell. 'Twas no hurricane, unless it formed around us, its eye following us southwesterly. I saw him then, in the crow's nest. That strange mariner we picked up at last port, with skin like white coral, eyes of roiling turquoise. Claimed he was an apprenticing sail-witch, and we needed one after the death of Herlily. So far he had been a disappointment, unable yet to call up the great winds, or if I'm honest, do much of anythin'. He certainly wasn't any help with these waves. Rather, he was doing what he always was, staring out to sea through McGrady's glass, his mouth fixed. Else consultin' that tattered map that he would nather share nor show. I didn't know what the hell he expected to find out there, or what it was going to cost us when he did.

Another wave turned us almost over, and I screamed as Riordan went over. There was naught to be done, we were all holding on for dear as it was, the *Dancer* turned so flat, masts almost touching sea. I gasped as I noticed the mariner in nest belt the glass and turn his eyes to water. He muttered something, inaudible in the storm, and Riordan popped back to the surface like a rum cork. Calmly, Semosh (for such was the odd-er's name) grabbed his arm just as the ship started to right, and the clumsy sailor was swung around and up, up into the nest with him. *I'll be damned*, I thought, just as the spray filled my mouth and eyes.

The next morning the sea was calm again. That's how it was out there, so far south and west that the world stopped and all was water and firmament, stretching to horizon, extending it somehow, as if the width of the world was doubled and then trebled. We'd been out for weeks, at the edge of the charts, and still we had found nothing. Hell, only McGrady and that strange mariner knew what we were looking for, anyway. Sinjun had the highsun meal ready, and we ate. Some ocean fish we had never seen and pickled cabbage. It's not that bad if you can wash it down with enough rum. Semosh was sitting alone, as always, eating without interest, and staring at the sea. I watched Riordan, still shook up from last night, go over to him. He was thanking him probably, promising to do the same for the new fish if given the chance. But Semosh spoke only a short phrase or two, never even looking at him, and after a time the man he saved shrugged and went to sit by Johnson instead.

My blood running hot, I approached our new fish. We had spoken perhaps two words 'fore then, but I wasn't going to let him cut Riordan that way, not after what happened.

"Sailor Semosh."

"First Mate." His eyes turned away from the sea and met mine, all wary like. I could see those fins on his forearms spread and retract every time he bent his elbows to eat. It was unnerving.

"As 'mate, I want to thank you for saving Riordan last night. He's a damn fool, true, but we only have so many fools on the *Dancer*, and we can't afford to lose nary a one, not out in this mess." I smiled, hoping to build an understandin' with 'im. The men, as a rule, liked me, still do, the few that're left. It's easier that way, and I wanted the new fish to feel at home on the *Dancer* and with me. But he just looked at me, as if I'd called him a son o' the devil, or said that his mother was a whore 'nough to have bed the kraken. "That is, we're happy to have ye on board now; our last witch, Herlily, got skewered by soggies. Shame that, as he was not half bad for an old coot, seadog son of a..."

"First mate, I would rather eat alone." His eyes again turned out to gaze at the sea

"Now look here..." I was furious: "I don't care if you are some seacalf windcall—"

He rose to his feet then, and his hand went to the handle of his cutlass. "I am *not* a seacalf." All conversation on deck stopped, and the men looked up from their food at us. His eyes ran over them, and his next statement was for us all. "Nor am I a merfolk, or a changeling, or a seasprite, or whatever it is you uncultured, superstitious dogs think of when you are dreaming or buggering your bunkmate. Do not ask. Do not

speculate. You will see soon enough." At that last, he smiled slightly, I think, If that mouth with too many teeth could be said to smile. And then again to me: "And I prefer to eat alone."

I should have had him whipped for slighting me in front of the crew. I would have been within my rights. But McGrady liked this one for some reason, had made some kind of arrangement with him. Women captains, I swear, never trust 'em.

\*\*\*

It's this war. No good jobs for the like o' us. All the ports are just crawlin' with frigates, everyone all in a fuss, wondering if every ship is papered or whether its hold is filled to the boards with bombs, or some monstrosity fresh from Xanthril. So we take what we can, and dump one of every four cargoes when we can't avoid inspection. Ya can't make a decent profit, anymore, and its worse when the *Dancer* is pressed into service: five times by three different countries since I'd been mate, for some job or the other. It's like the damned kings own the sea itself and everything on it. But will they pay a decent portage to move their guns or their spies or their 'empty barrels' and unmarked boxes? Never. I tried to tell McGrady that we should just do like the rest, take a Letter of Marque from someone, anyone, and stop freelancing. At least then we'd have *one* of 'em on our side, and not the whole world and all the Gods against us. But she wouldn't listen, and she's the captain and we can all just piss off the side for all the good it does.

\*\*\*

We reached the spire at next light. It just crested the waves: old, black rock that had pierced the heart of the sea for ages, it seemed, and would still for ages more.

It's funny, and it an't as I haven't made mistakes, or walk all tall and say that I know better'n most. But I've kept my head to the ground, and did as I said, and worked harder than the chained so's I could have every scrap. It's not much, but I've been able to send some home, too, so Maria and the twins could have all the things I didn't. So don't say I haven't sacrificed.

But I'll be damned if there's not only so much a man could take. I don't stick my cock or my cutlass where they don't belong, never did, but the *one time* I try to warn her, to tell her to turn the ship around and sail home, she wouldn't. The three of us had a corner to ourselves on the quarterdeck, and I spoke all quiet, so's the rest of the crew couldn't hear. "I amn't scared for meself, Gods know. But these boys, they didn't sign up for this, and they all've parents 'n worse, *kids* that miss 'em..."

She looked at me evenly, then, that pearl skinned mariner staring at me over her shoulder. "They'll do their duty, and they'll be happy enough once they're carting up treasures unknown in these times."

"Beggin' yer pardon, Cap'n, I don't mean to say nuthin' against ye. She's yer ship. But how do you know there's anythin' left down there? What with the soggies and the seacalves, serpents and everythin' else, why would any treasure be left down there, saying that there was even any in the first—"

"Are you calling me a liar?" he spoke then, with an edge like death.

"No, I'm not, I'm just..."

"Desmond," she said, taking my arm. "Desmond, you're a good first mate, and the men respect you. *I* respect you. But as you keep telling me, we won't survive this war unless we find some new source of ...revenue." She unfurled that smile, then, the one that caught the breath of every sailor and held him fast. "If Semosh is correct, there is gold enough down there to see us all up into the highrises of the Fair City. And if not... Well, if not then we throw our new sail-witch overboard."

"How dare you—" he started to say.

"Oh stop it, Semosh, it's not like you can't swim back to wherever it is you come from." The cap'n was a snide one, at times.

He seethed for a moment, but let it go. "Well, captain, are your men ready?"

"Yes. Desmond: get the waterbreath wine, the ropes, and cavestones, and have the landing party ready with skinsuits. You're going down."

"Yes, Cap'n," I grunted. I gave a shout to the men, and as I turned away from them, my eyes fell again on the ancient tower, rising hundreds of feet out of the middle of the sea, and descending who knows how many more beneath it. "Gods save us," I muttered.

\*\*\*

I wanted to search the top of the tower first, and told him so, but Cap'n put him in charge of the cursed landing. She stayed on the *Dancer*, with just a few men, making sure that our securement to that blasted tower didn't break, stranding us (well, maybe 'cept him) out in the nowheres, food for the Turtle.

"The city is below," he said, in that queer accent, and he beckoned us down. We began to descend. Somehow, it weren't flooded. We had pots, o' course, but it's easier to climb down stairs than swim down a hole, and we began to feel that this whole adventure might be worth it. For hours we climbed down, down, below the waterline, hell, below the ocean floor for all we knew.

After a while, we had climbed for so long that I called a rest, so that the men could sleep. He weren't happy, then, and tried to pull rank on me, saying that we were almost there and that the Cap'n put him in command, and so on. But I told him, I said, "Yeah, you're in charge, 'tis true, but the First Mate has certain rights when it comes to the crew, and I can relieve even the Cap'n if she starts actin' all crazy like you are now."

He stared at me heavily, but didn't act. How could he, without causin' a mutiny on him right there? "Very well," he said, "we will rest for six hours."

The next morn' or midnight (for we knew not what time it was) we got ready to go again. But somethin' was wrong. Riordan had started actin' all funny, his eyes dream-like, and his slack mouth constantly chattering. We couldn't understand everythin,' but sometimes he would say things we could, like "they're singing" and then, "the stars and the sea are married, the moon their handmaiden, the sun their child." Then it was, "The ages of the People are the waves, countless and eternal, the ebb and the flow the tide of history." It was all crazy, and he wouldn't listen to *us* at all, just the voices in his ear, and so he just spoke, sometimes in tongues, and followed us, vacant.

I told Semosh then that we should go back. Riordan was getting cabin fever, and it might affect us all in time, or he might start gettin' violent. But he just grunted, scorn in brow. If anything, Riordan's jabbering spurred him on. By the time we stopped to rest again, some twelve hours later, Johnson and Hesbren were doing it, too. What was worse was that, on occasion, their mad speeches would briefly align, turning them into some awful chorus. The men complained that they were turning sirine, and such nonsense. They're always superstitious, sailors, but this new happenstance justified it, to my mind. So's I begged him to turn around again, and the men were almost ready to mutiny, but he just kept checking the backside of his infernal map, saying, "We're almost there. Just a few hours more and treasures unimaginable will be ours." The rest of the men, their greed barely overwinning their fear, relaxed their cutlass grips and began to rest for the next descent.

When we started again, two more of our number were chattering in that strange speech, and I fancied that even I was startin' to see things in the gloamlight. Whether it was the fanciful walls, ancient pictures made up all of shell mosaics that seemed too lifelike, or the real spirits of the dead and drowned swirling 'fore my eyes, or something else, I don't know. But my mind started to cloud, and it came a struggle not to let it drift like deadwood, pulled down into that whirlpool with so many of the others, into madness.

Then, when I was only half myself, we 'gan to see a cold light below us, a-slowly glowing brighter. The heavy soup clouding my head thinned somewhat, as we entered an enormous chamber, bigger than the great port of the Fair City. At its center was a statue, some forty stories high, methinks. It was made of coral, shell and gold, and likened to a fearsome titan or God, one I have never seen. In his right hand he carried a conch, in the sinister a trident, its three prongs embedded in the marble floor, as if the bedrock of the very ocean were rent by his power. Around him were smaller figures of consorts, divers, sea-nymphs and mermaids, all suspended in the air, as if swimming around him. Semosh snarled when he saw the room. He cried out in excitement. He laughed, while saltwater tears wet his feet. He hurried the men down to the floor, but told them not to touch anythin' until he could judge it safe. The half of them that weren't crazed seemed bitter at this delay, as there were riches here: pearls and goblets, and ancient weaponry preserved perfect. But he demanded to look at it all first. On the far wall, facing the statue, stood hundreds of rows of stacked marble seats, arrayed in semicircle. He had this look on his face then, the look of a prophet seeing his God made flesh, or of some greedy serpent reunited with his horde.

Timory, though, was having none of waiting. While Semosh gaped, he picked up a wicked, snake-sinous dagger, and tucked it into his belt. He scooped piles of coins and treasure into his rucksack. Others followed his

lead; hungry sharks that strike when once the first red drop mixes with water. I was afraid and touched nothing. I yelled to the men to hold, to wait as Semosh requested.

But there was a strange, alien sound then, reverberating through the chamber. I looked up in surprise and saw that the great coral statue speaking, proclaiming in a tongue I couldn't understand. Semosh screamed in frustration, as his God raised his trident from the ground and lowered it into Timory, its huge middle prong completely coring the chest. Then with a flick he killed three more of us, including poor Johnson, still staring upwards and muttering nonsense. Semosh was on one knee, yelling and begging in the same strange tongue, but without relief. Those of us who still had our ballast tried to make a run for it, but most didn't make it out. I trailed behind to help usher people up, and there I saw him still, prostrate and pathetic, begging. He wasn't leaving. Curse him, I thought, he's done for us all. But then I remembered what he did for poor Riordan that night, and the Cap'n's interest in him, and I ran towards him. I grabbed his arm and yelled for him to follow. Behind me the great trident destroyed a small section of stairs, dropping a handful of fleeing sailors. He ignored me, first, then pushed me back. A casual backswing of the trident's butt end trailed towards us. I barely ducked it, but it hit Semosh in the shoulder, sending him flailing. He slumped unconscious, so I picked him up. He was light—so light—I thought, and I ran with 'im on me back, hopping the gap in the stairs and placing him onto the stairway 'bove. Turning to help the poor mad tarryers, I was too late, and another stab killed Fenreh, and destroyed the rest of the stairs. The few of us left ran up, up the steps, which were shaking now from the tumult below. The tower was failing. Ancient stone walls warped, then burst, like the bubble of air that allowed us to breathe down here. We were in the water, then, but we still could see with the cavestones. I gulped down a pot, and tried to feed one to Semosh, but he seemed to be breathing fine, which made sense with those fins, I s'pose. We were too deep, our pots would never get us up top, so I pulled out the Sailor's Saviour, grabbed Jenea, who was sputtering next to me and pressed the small anchor seal after opening it. A tumult of water then, and the three of us, like teabags in a boil, hit the surface—mayhaps ten minutes later. We swam to the Dancer, which had been cut free. I screamed for Cap'n McGrady to sail.

\*\*\*

He had a terrible fever, and slept a long time, near a week. His right arm was broken, so we splint 'er up and tried to keep him comfortable. When he did wake, he was venomous. Did he thank me for saving him, ye ask? Oh no, all he could talk about was the map which he had dropped and which I hadn't saved. He raved and bellowed and more than once tried to strike me. I wanted to hit him then, to throw him overboard. He would've deserved it, I swear he would have, but instead I turned and left the cabin, and didn't speak to him for the rest of the sail back, many weeks. He kept more to himself than ever, not even speaking to the Cap'n, who was, I thought, the closest the arrogant bastard had to a friend. Of our original 51 crewmen, we were down to eight, barely 'nough to keep the *Dancer* afloat. It was misery. In port, I thanked the Cap'n for treatin' me so well for these past years, and left the ship. I saw her for the last time then, talking to the poor fool who I assumed 'ould take my place.

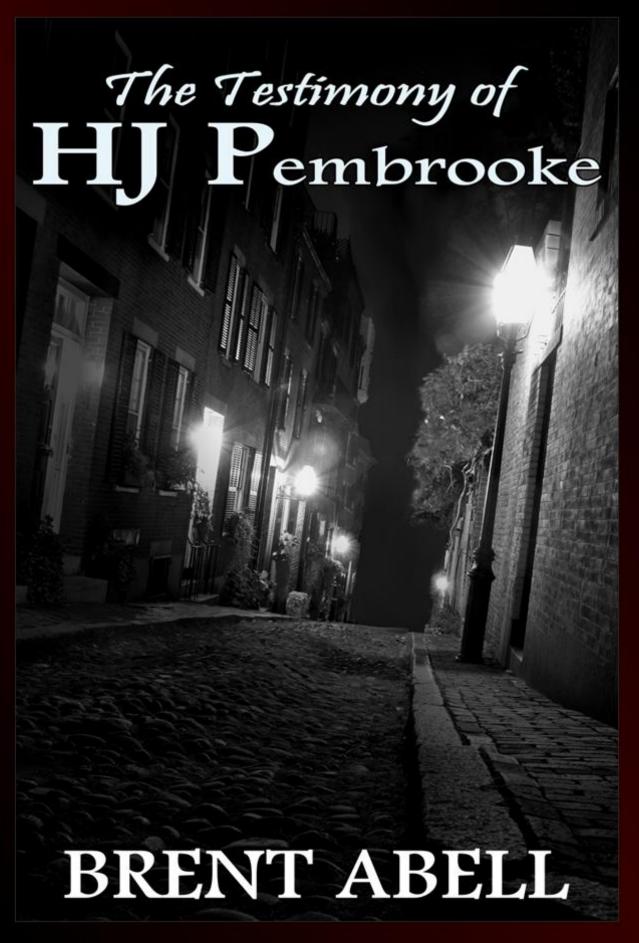
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I'm a foreman now, my longshoremen the laziest trout you've ever seen. It's not like being mate, but its rhythms are reassuring, more in stroke with my thoughts now. I never again want to look upon what honest men were never meant to see, Gods willing, nor wonder what lies beneath the waves, stirring. But some nights, when my eyelids begin to flutter, and that shoal 'tween waking and sleep is slowly crossed... sometimes I think I hear the queer voices, calling to me. Calling me back. This too will pass in time. 'Tis best not to think on it.

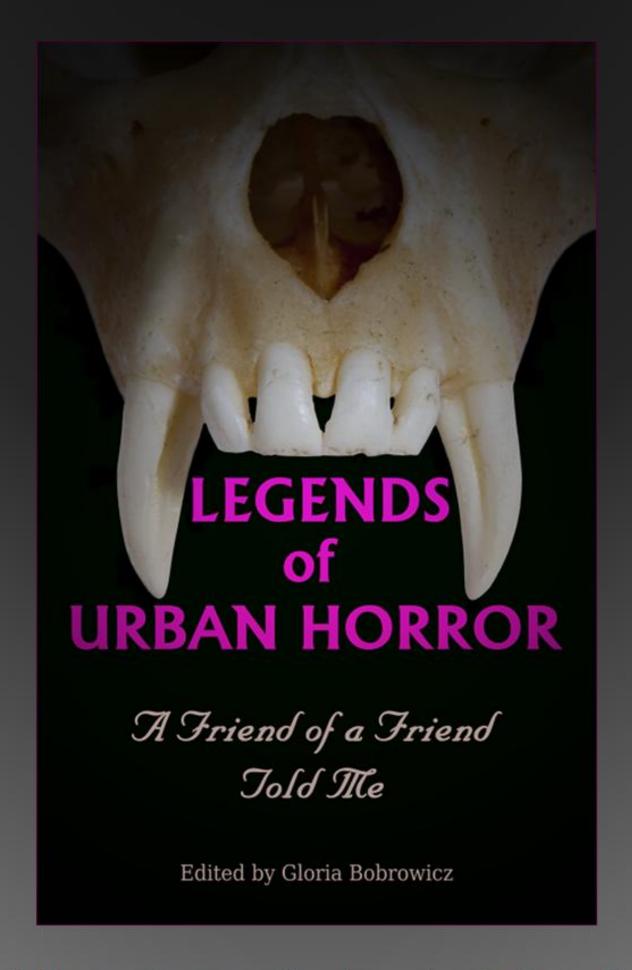
#### **About the Author:**

Brian Psiropoulos teaches English and the Humanities in Central California. His particular area of expertise is the Victorian Gothic novel, although sadly he lived too late to write one. Instead he writes weird fiction, reads comics, and plays tennis and too many video games.

Twitter: @brianpsi



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### Night Watch | Alyson Faye

Fountain Reid had been at sea for ten months. He missed his son's first summer, his chubby fists waving at dandelion clocks, blown by his beloved Emily's sweet breaths.

Reid's summer solstice had been spent in the crow's nest, cramped and sickly, whilst he imagined his village celebrations: dancing, imbibing, a hog roasting.

No one ever died of the pox in the summer, he thought, but come the damp chill autumn days, when the cold burrowed into every crack, the disease flourished. He prayed his boy was not yet dead, before he could set eyes on him. He touched his well-worn Bible, a cause of mockery among the other men.

"There goes God's Fool," they said.

That chill October night, as Reid perched up top, on watch, his thoughts roamed to Emily, with her soft blooming flesh and scent of homemade rose water. There were no women allowed on board 'The Hesper'.

Reid knew his letters, had learnt them at his mother's knee. She had wanted the best for him. He scribbled in his linen paged notebook, '. . . Dearest Emily, I would drink all of this ocean for a taste of you, a kiss. . .'

Reid paused in mid-sentence, hamstrung by a noise from the starboard rear. A whistling cry. A trio of notes sung oft-times.

Pod of dolphins, was Reid's first thought as he scrambled down from the crow's nest, barking his shins and collecting a skinful of splinters.

He stood alone on the deck, a tall man, casting no shadow under a moonless sky.

"Who's there?" he yelped, startled by a slithering movement behind the fore cabins. "I'm armed." He rubbed the blade of the knife at his belt taking comfort in its edge.

A voice, sexless, whispered behind him, "Fountain. . ."

A tongue licked his neck, wet and salty. His skin throbbed. He whipped around. No one there. No person anyway. Reid shivered, wiped his neck. Slime dripped from his fingers.

"Over here." This time he discerned it as a woman's voice. "Oh Fountain... man of water..." The giggle that followed raised his spirits. He felt no fear, only arousal. His senses were in overload, the salt in the air burned his nostrils, the tar on the ropes, the sewage in the buckets—every latent scent overwhelmed him. Hands snaked around his chest, unbuttoned his shirt. He leant back into the feline embrace. Willingly.

"Emily, my love, come to me."

Tendrils of hair wrapped around his neck and arms, securing him, while talons scratched his bare skin and a tongue licked the blood off his chest. He was as if drugged with the poppy's powder. A puppet with no will. The claw touched his jacket pocket, where his Bible nestled. An albatross screech wrenched the air. Reid dropped to the deck, blood speckled, but breathing.

The Siren flicked her muscular tail, called to her Sisters and dived overboard, in search of easier prey.

### **About the Author:**

Alyson lives in West Yorkshire in the UK with her family and gang of rescue animals. She teaches creative writing, blogs, and mentors. Her flash fiction is published widely on line on sites such as the Horror Tree, Horror Scribes, Ellipsis mag, zeroflash, Tubeflash and in print anthologies like 'Women in Horror Annual 2'. Her debut collection, 'Badlands', is out to buy on amazon. Her horror story 'Mr Dandy' in 'DeadCades' from Infernal Clock indie press is out in October.

Blog: <a href="http://www.alysonfayewordpress.wordpress.com">http://www.alysonfayewordpress.wordpress.com</a>

Twitter: @AlysonFaye2

### Meathook | Tim Tolbert

I've been told to Go vegan; Take what comes from the ground, And nothing that needs Mother's milk.

How can I When I feel hunger in my belly? Hunger for you: The new miracle Diet.

But plants don't beg for life, Languishing on the metal vine— Meathook buffet.

You're finger-licking,
Perhaps some pink in the center
Medium-well cattle
Crying tears
Cleaning my hands,
Cleavers of want
Love is a messy business.

Smoked
Salty
Preserved.
I'll never be famished.

I'll eat your flesh Right off the bone.

### **About the Author:**

Deviant by day, Tim Tolbert moonlights as an author or horror/weird fiction and poetry. He is based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and frequently collaborates with another horror author, Stormy Skies. His work has been published in Junto and ABSENCE.

Instagram: @tim.tolbert



### Scream Lydia Prime

If walls could scream the world would hear me. The atrocities I'd witnessed within my brick and plaster structure were of my own design. Though it may seem odd, those who chose to occupy my space never stayed very long. The locked doors, gas leaks, faulty carpeting on steps, even household devices in precarious locations seem to assist in their, shall we say, departure. However, they seem to keep on coming.

The newest arrivals have been interesting. They were ecstatic to find such a "gem" on the market for "an absolute steal!" I watched as they tried to remodel, tried to alter me, but faltered at every adjustment. Most recently they began touching up my basement. Disgusted at their lack of appreciation for my appearance; it seemed that a water main had broken and wouldn't you know it, the damn door wouldn't open again. The murky level rose to their hips before they realized they weren't getting out. Those defeated looks upon their faces were more marvelous than I'd anticipated.

They may have been nice, you know? But if I'm being honest, I just wanted to see what they'd look like floating face down.

### Featured Author | Lee A. Forman

While I primarily write horror, I've always been a fan of both horror and science fiction. Growing up, two of my favorite movies were Alien and Hellraiser. I think both genres compliment one another, and I wanted to write something that incorporated that.

Zero Perspective was my first attempt at something with a heavy sci-fi element. I'd read and watched science fiction for years; Arthur C. Clarke has always been one of my favorite authors, Star Trek one of my most loved shows. Both literature and film fueled my love of hard sci-fi, so I suppose it was going to work its way into my writing at some point.

As an obsessive fan of movies in general, they've always been a great source of inspiration when it comes to writing. I get my creative edge from many sources;



books, photographs, random conversations, sometimes from even the most mundane and unexpected things. But if I had to give credit to where most of my ideas originate, it would probably be movies. I didn't know where I was going with the story when I first got the idea. The book actually began as short fiction. I wanted to try my hand at something with a heavier sci-fi element, and figured a short story was the best place to start. A full-length work wasn't my original intention, but as the story got longer, I realized it had potential to be more.

I grew to love the characters and their differences. When I write, characters seem to develop themselves, as if they're making their own decisions. At a certain point, I no longer have to think about what they'll say or do—it just comes naturally. All I had to do when writing *Zero Perspective*, was give them situations in which to react. I didn't have a set plan to follow. I was a passenger to the story as much as the reader. It was like conducting an experiment where I put them in situations to see what they would do. It was my own curiosity at that point which drove me to finish the book.

Zero Perspective doesn't necessarily have a specific antagonist. And I thought, what is a story without a villain? Throughout the creation of the book, I tried to think about what worked with the main characters; should they struggle with their own fear, should there be creatures to fight, should there be a force they face off with in the end?

As the story played out, none of these on their own turned out to be really "correct". I realized the book needed all those things.

Desperation, fear, and hope in a dire situation can affect the mind and judgement of a person. When I really thought about it, I saw that the true antagonist of *Zero Perspective* was the story itself. I wanted to get this across in an adventure anybody could pick up and read—something light, but hard-hitting. Full of mystery, and in the end, broad enough for personal interpretation. I wanted it to have a heavy sci-fi element, but keep that horror edge I love to write.

This made Zero Perspective a fun book to write. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed creating it!

Zero Perspective is available on <u>Amazon</u> in print and eBook as well as all other major on-line retailers.





Lee Andrew Forman



### Chapter 1

John sat ready at manual control, just in case. It was a habit he committed to without shame. He never fully trusted automation of any kind, especially when it replaced a human being. Despite his mistrust, the docking procedure went smoothly. The *Tyson* connected to the derelict vessel by automated program with mathematical precision.

"Why do you insist on doing that for every single docking maneuver?" Hailey asked.

"It's procedure."

"I know, but no one actually does it. Even Captain Flynn doesn't enforce it."

"I feel better if I'm still in control. You know, just in case."

"In case of what?" Hailey laughed. She tilted her head to one side and looked at him with squinted eyes. "No Cosmo-class ship has ever made a mistake."

John unbuckled himself and stood from his seat. "I'm going to get some coffee before mission briefing. You want any?"

"Nah, it always makes me have to go. And that's no fun when you're stuck in a suit."

"All hands to the briefing room." Captain Flynn's voice boomed from the communication panels located all over the ship.

"Damn," John said, "no time for coffee."

The crew piled into the briefing room one by one. Ready and waiting, the captain sat at the end of the table, tapping his fingers.

"Communications with *Esometa* stopped just before it reached Jupiter," Flynn began. "That was two weeks ago. It was supposed to be in orbit around Europa on a research mission. We don't know the condition of the crew, but from outside the ship appears to be powered down completely. If it had no power this long, it's not likely anyone is alive. So be prepared for what we might find."

"What's it doing in orbit around Ganymede?" John asked.

"I don't know," Flynn answered. "That's what we're here to find out. Grant, John, Miles, I want you to scout the ship. Be ready at the airlock in one hour. Everyone else is on standby for second team. Dismissed."

Hailey grabbed John's arm on the way out of the briefing room. "Good luck."

"Thank you." He gave a quick smile.

John retreated to his quarters. He'd never seen a dead body before, and it looked like he might see his first. He prayed he wouldn't vomit in his suit. He'd seen it happen once and it wasn't pretty. That, and Miles would never let him live it down. That bastard was always on his ass about something. The only thing he felt thankful for was that he'd been picked for first team. On rescue missions, second team always collected the bodies.

At least I won't have to do that, he thought.

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After suiting up and meeting Grant and Miles at the airlock, John led the team into the *Esometa*.

"It's a ghost ship," Grant said, shining his helmet light down the dark, silent corridor.

"Have you ever heard a ship be this quiet?" Miles asked.

"It's completely shut down," John added. "Dead in the water, so to speak."

"Why are the gravity systems still operational?" Miles noted.

Grant shook his head. "Strange. They shouldn't be."

They made their way down the hall. John tried to prepare himself for the sight of corpses, which he felt sure they'd find. His stomach cramped at the thought.

"Where's the bridge?" Miles asked. "You know the designs on these ships, don't you Grant?"

"I thought I did," Grant answered. "This corridor should have ended ten meters back and I still can't see the end of it. It doesn't conform to the design specifications. I don't understand."

"You've got the right display, haven't you?" Miles' tone carried a wavering anticipation.

"Of course I have the right one."

"Then where the hell are we?" Miles asked.

Grant studied the information on his arm display. He seemed transfixed, the soft glow of the screen casting pale light on his face. His eyes stared hard, jaw locked in concentration.

"Well?" Miles took a step closer to Grant.

"I don't know," Grant said. "Let's turn around and go back. Maybe we just missed it in the dark."

"Where does your computer say we are?" John asked.

"It's not working," Grant answered.

"But what does it say?"

"It says we're not even on the ship. It says we're out there," he pointed a gloved finger at one of the port windows, "in space."

"Then it's obviously malfunctioning," Miles said.

"No shit," Grant replied. "I just said it wasn't working."

"We'll turn around and make our way back," John said. "We don't want to get lost in here. We'll go get a replacement so we know where we're going."

Grant looked hard at John. "Sure, we need a new computer. But something still isn't right about this. I know these ships like the back of my hand. And I'm telling you, there's no way this corridor is as long as it is. I don't need the computer to tell me that."

"Radio the captain," John said. "Let him know our situation before we move on. Maybe he knows something about the ship we don't."

"This is Grant to Tyson. Come in, Tyson."

They waited for an answer, but were met with silence. Not even static came through the speaker.

"Grant to *Tyson*. Can you read me?" He tapped his helmet. "Hello? *Tyson*, are you there? This is Grant. We have a situation."

Sweat beaded on John's brow. A drop ran down the bridge of his nose and rested at the tip. He focused on it, blurring all else in his vision. It shook slightly, as though seismic activity rumbled beneath the surface of his skin.

"I'm not getting anything," Grant said. "Nothing at all."

"This is John. Can anyone hear me?" He tried to keep his voice calm, despite the simmered blood rushing through his heart. He didn't want anyone to panic. That would make a bad situation worse. And things were already off to a less than perfect start.

"Let's start walking," John said, still straining to keep his voice cool and even. "Once we get back to the ship we can figure out what's wrong with our equipment."

"I'm telling you, it isn't the equipment," Grant said.

"To hell with the equipment," Miles added. "I don't care. Let's just go."

They turned and walked back in the direction of the airlock. They looked carefully for the way that should have led to the bridge, but not a single deviation from the main hall existed. It was just one long corridor without any doors or alternate routes, a tunnel that seemed to go on forever. John got the impression of walking on a conveyor belt that matched his speed, so that no matter how far he went, he never left the spot where he started. He carefully inspected the walls, ceiling, and floor for identifiable marks that might indicate some kind of progress, but everything looked exactly the same. All appeared to be perfectly uniform in design: the standard flooring, perfectly shaped wall panels, and large port windows showing the stars.

John nearly walked into Grant when he stopped suddenly. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know how, but we missed it," Grant replied.

"Missed what?"

"The airlock. We went too far. We're way past it."

"How far past?" Miles asked.

"Nearly sixty meters."

"What?" Miles yelped. "How? There's no way."

"I don't know. I didn't see it."

"Neither did I," John said, "but I don't see how we could have missed it. That doesn't make any sense."

"We didn't," Grant said with a sigh. "I scanned that wall every inch of the way. The airlock simply isn't there."

"It's there," Miles said. "I just have to find it." He started to walk off on his own.

"Miles, where are you going?" John called out. "We have to stay together!"

"Screw you. The both of you. I'm getting the hell out of here!"

Grant chased after him. He grabbed Miles by the arm when he caught up.

"Get off me!" Miles turned and shoved Grant back with both hands. "This is just some sick joke you guys are playing on me. I know you don't like me. It's no mystery. So to hell with you, I'm going back to the ship. You can stay here all you like."

"Miles, listen to me," Grant said. "Do you really think we'd play a joke during a rescue operation? On a derelict vessel we know nothing about?"

His eyes darted back and forth behind his visor. "I don't know." His demeanor calmed, body conforming to a more relaxed posture. "I suppose not."

"Come on, Miles." Grant put a hand on his shoulder. "Let's just get back. I promise no one's messing around with you. We have to stick together. We don't want to get separated."

"Everything okay?" John asked when they rejoined him.

"I'm okay now," Miles said. "I just panicked, that's all."

"It's okay," John said. "We're all shaken up right now. What we need to do is make a plan. I think we should keep going. There's got to be something at the end of this corridor. Once we find it, whether it's the bridge or not, we can figure out where to go from there."

"I agree," Grant said. "We can't just keep walking back and forth."

They continued in the same direction, searching for anything other than the hallway. Fear followed closely, its footfalls at John's heels with every step. It ran its finger up his spine and tickled his neck. It pushed at the back of his knees, weakened his legs. In an attempt to outpace it, he walked faster, but it leaned against his back, pressed solid despondency into his soul. He passed Miles and Grant, taking long strides ahead of them.

"Slow down," Grant said, "you're going to use up your oxygen faster."

John took a deep breath and slowed his pace. "This is really getting to me."

"I know what you mean," Grant replied. "I feel myself starting to get nervous. I don't get it. We're trained for this shit. We're not supposed to panic."

"This isn't exactly a typical situation," John said. "If it were a pressure leak or some kind of mechanical failure, we would know what to do. That's what we were trained for. This doesn't make any sense. Our training doesn't know what to make of it. It's lost, just like we are."

"Don't say we're lost!" Miles blurted out. "We're not lost. We're going to get out of here. We're going to go back to the ship, and I'm going back home. To hell with this job. To hell with all of it!" He shook his white-gloved fists.

"Calm down, Miles," Grant said, trying to emphasize reassurance in his approach. "It's okay. We're going back to the ship right now."

Miles pointed at Grant. "Don't tell me what we're doing. I'll tell you! I'll tell you something. I'll tell—"

Grant placed his hands on Miles' shoulders with a firm grasp. He looked hard through his faceplate and into his wide, fear-ridden eyes. "Relax. Just breathe and listen to what I'm saying."

Miles' brow tightened as he stared back.

"There's no reason to panic. We have plenty of air. Nothing is going to happen. Just like you said, we're going back to *Tyson* right now. All we have to do is walk a bit further and second team will deal with the rest. Our job is done."

Miles' eyes moved from one side to the other. His breathing slowed.

"Come on," Grant urged, "let's get going."

"Alright," he replied. "Let's just go. I'm okay now."

A vibration moved through the floor like a wave. It went through John's feet and shot up his legs. The creaking of metal followed, sounding as though it came from the entire ship. Then a shockwave came crashing through the corridor, knocking them all on their backs.

"What the hell just happened?" Miles cried out.

"Grant to *Tyson*, come in." He called out again and again over his radio. "Can anyone hear me? Please answer!"

John put his hands to the floor to see if any vibrations still resonated, but it was completely still. He stood and looked around. Miles and Grant both got to their feet.

"What the hell was that?" Miles whined.

"I don't know," John replied. "That shouldn't have happened."

"Damn right it shouldn't have happened!" Grant said. "There's nothing I can think of on any ship that could do something like that. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't part of the ship's design, unless there's something we don't know about it."

"Let's keep moving," John said. "I really want to get the hell out of here."

As they continued walking John's senses went into overdrive. The beating of his heart thumped in his ears. He darted his eyes in every direction, following the beam of his helmet light with focused intensity. He'd never encountered a problem he couldn't explain, and this was one of those problems.

The echo of a voice came through the corridor, calling out John's name. He thought his mind invented the sound, a fear-induced hallucination born of hope. But everyone heard it. Miles and Grant turned around swiftly, startled by the voice of another person on the ship.

"You hear that?" John asked. Grant and Miles nodded. "So it's not just me. Thought I was hearing things."

"Either that, or we all are," Grant said.

The voice came closer, and as it became clear, John recognized who it belonged to.

### Chapter 2

"Hailey!" he called out into the darkness.

She appeared from the black end of the corridor as if she had come through a portal. One moment she wasn't there, the next she was. Even the light on her helmet appeared from nowhere.

"What's going on?" Miles asked. "How did you get here?"

"What do you mean?" she said, panting. "I came through the airlock. Now what's the emergency?" "You heard me over the radio?" Grant asked.

"No, I heard John calling out my name. It came from the intercom in my quarters. He sounded terrified. But there was a lot of static. I could barely hear him."

"We've been out of communication since we got here," John said. "Grant has been trying to contact the ship but I never called out your name. Are you sure it was me you heard?"

"I heard you calling for me not more than ten minutes ago." Hailey's features contorted into a perplexed look. "If this is some kind of joke..."

"This is no joke," Grant said. "We've been trying to reach the ship. And we're lost."

"What do you mean you're lost? How could you be lost in the main corridor?"

"We can't find the airlock. We've been going back and forth since we got here."

"It's just down there." She pointed back the way she came.

"Well, lead the way then," Miles said. "We're obviously a bunch of idiots who can't find our way out of a damn hallway."

"That's not what's going on here," Grant said. "That airlock isn't there."

"Come on," Hailey said, "the airlock isn't there? Don't be ridiculous. Just follow me. I'll save your dumb asses."

"I hope you're right," John said. "I hope we are a bunch of dumb asses. Because if not, you're stuck here with us. Did you tell Flynn you were coming?"

"No. I just rushed over."

"Damn!" John slammed his fist against the wall.

"It's no big deal. The airlock is just ahead."

He sighed. "I really hope so."

They followed Hailey back in the direction the airlock supposedly existed. Hope permeated the air. It filled John's lungs and he breathed unwillingly. This hope, a poison in disguise, waited to strike until despair was within reach. If they couldn't find the airlock, it could certainly kill. Despite the possibility that they would soon leave that place, he kept thinking about how Hailey said she heard him calling her name. Something about it wasn't right. It bit at his nerves, a raging sore in the darker parts of his imagination.

"The airlock should be right over here," Hailey said, slowing her pace as she aimed her helmet light at the wall. She stopped. "I don't understand. It should be right there. What the hell?"

Grant gave her a friendly pat on the back. "Sorry, but I guess you're stuck here with us."

"It must be further down. I must have miscalculated..."

"No," John said. "It's simply not there."

He saw panic grow in her eyes. They glistened behind her visor, pupils dilating, their black centers filled with terror. They expanded until little color remained, until shadows fully claimed her vision. "What are we going to do?" she asked. Her hands went up to her helmet, groping the clear faceplate in an attempt to get at her skin.

"Don't worry," John said. "We'll find our way out."

"Yeah, don't worry," Grant said. "It's going to be okay."

"So what's the plan?" Miles asked. "Just keep walking around until we run out of air? Is that what we're doing? We're all going to die here, you know that?"

"We're not going to die here," John said. "We have plenty of air. Just stay calm. Don't work yourself into a panic again.

"Let's keep going the way we were before Hailey showed up. Like I said, this corridor has to lead somewhere."

They all nodded and followed Grant. John walked in silence, his mind searching not only what his eyes could see, but what might be beyond that limited frame of vision. He dove into the creative side of his brain, began to formulate theories, even radical, impossible ones. Outlandish as they might have seemed, the situation called for outside thinking.

He stopped dead; everyone ahead turned to look back.

"What's wrong?" Hailey asked.

John removed a food ration from his pocket and left it on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Miles leaned over and gave John a strange look.

"Leaving breadcrumbs."

"Breadcrumbs?" Miles asked.

"I see what he's doing," Grant said. "This way we'll know if we're walking in circles or not."

"How can we be walking in circles if this is a straight hallway?" Miles asked. "It can't be circular, a fact easily discernable by the shape of the outer hull of this ship."

Grant shot a look at Miles. "I didn't mean it literally."

"Then what the hell do you mean? Explain it to me since you're such a genius."

"I think John here has a theory."

"It's not much," John explained, "but whatever is happening doesn't make any sense. We can't be walking in circles, but the airlock couldn't have disappeared either. Since the possible seems impossible, the impossible may be likely."

"Are you low on oxygen?" Miles asked. "Check his tank. He's talking nonsense."

"My oxygen is fine. I'm just keeping an open mind to the situation. We have to explore all possibilities."

"You keep an open mind all you want," Miles said. "But we have a limited supply of air and we have to get out of here."

"We will," Hailey said. "Your idea seems a bit out there, John. I think you've been reading too much."

He smiled. "You know me. Always the deep thinker."

"A little too deep, I think." Hailey shot him a forced grin. "You know, it's fun to be illogical once in a while."

"I'm sure it is," John said. "But I can't help it."

"There's no hope for you, is there?" Hailey began to laugh but the mention of hope stifled all levity.

As they continued in the decided direction, leaving the food ration behind, John felt the tension grow around him. Fear struck them all, but Miles worried him the most. He knew the man could snap under pressure. He wasn't sure how he passed the psychological tests required for a job on *Tyson*, but he figured it must've had something to do with his father.

"Miles, what made you decide to pursue a career in space anyway?" He asked not only out of curiosity, but to promote conversation and keep everyone's mind off the situation.

"What the hell do you care?"

"Just making small talk."

"Jesus, Miles," Hailey said. "No need to jump down his throat."

"I'll put my hands around his damn throat and squeeze as hard as I can!" Miles lunged for John, arms outstretched. "I'll fucking kill you!"

Grant rushed in and grabbed Miles from behind. "Calm down, man! What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to kill that bastard!" His breaths came long and heavy. "He's not making it back to the ship, I guarantee you that. I swear I'll tear him apart!"

"What the hell's the matter with him?" John asked.

"Look at his face!" Hailey gasped. "What happened to him?"

John looked through his glass faceplate. Miles displayed a complexion the color of the moon. Blue veins bulged from his neck and wormed their way up his face. His eyes—both fierce and red. He bared his teeth. Spit and foam dripped from his mouth and sprayed on the inside of his helmet.

"Check his oxygen and suit pressure," John said, approaching with caution. "He could have a leak."

Grant managed to get a quick look at his pressure gauge. "It looks normal. No leak. Plenty of oxygen."

"None of us are ever leaving here!" Miles screamed. "We're all going to die."

Grant held him tighter. "Shut the hell up, Miles!"

He laughed in tones of madness. John stared, perplexed by the chaotic nature of the situation. He knew the man was prone to panic but what he saw went far beyond that. The bastard had gone completely off. Miles struggled against Grant's hold, grunting and snorting like an animal. Grant lost his grip. Miles ran down the corridor, releasing a throat-ripping scream, until he could no longer be seen or heard.

"What just happened?" Grant leaned against the wall.

Hailey's gaze went back and forth between them. "I don't know, but that didn't make any sense. What did that to him? What was it?"

Grant shook his head. "I have no idea, but that was crazy. He's completely mad."

"Did you see his face?" John said. "It could be a pathogen."

"That's the last thing we need."

"A pathogen?" Hailey said. "What kind of virus could do that to a person? Damn well nothing I know of."

Grant took a deep breath. "Hailey, try getting in touch with the ship again. But make sure you tell them quarantine procedures need to be taken. Just in case."

Hailey pressed the button for her communicator to hail *Tyson*. "Hailey to *Tyson*. Tyson, come in." Static answered her call. "Still nothing."

"I say we go in the direction Miles went," John suggested.

"Sure, why not?" Grant replied. "I've got nothing better to do anyway. Let's follow the madman."

They roamed the corridor as they did before. John kept a lookout for Miles. The man was dangerous and possibly infected with something—something horrible.

"Where do you suppose he is?" Grant asked.

"Hard to say," John answered. "We don't even know where we are."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"You're welcome."

After walking themselves nearly to exhaustion they came to a hatch.

"Holy God!" Grant said. "We finally found a door! And look at that, it has power." He pointed at the lit green button.

"Yeah," Hailey said. "But a door to where? Where did it come from? Where's the airlock?"

"Who knows?" Grant answered. "But I'm anxious to find out where it leads. I don't want to be in this damned hallway anymore. I don't even care where we go at this point."

"Let's just take it slow," John said. "For all we know Miles is right on the other side."

"That bastard," Grant said. "If our situation wasn't bad enough..."

"Leave it up to Miles to make things worse," Hailey added.

"Exactly." Grant gave a thumbs up.

"All right," John said. "I'm opening it. Be ready in case he's in there."

He pressed his hand on the pad and stood back. It opened to the bridge of the ship.

"This doesn't make any sense," Hailey said. "The bridge shouldn't be here."

"In case you haven't realized by now, nothing here so far makes sense," Grant said. "The whole time we've been here, it's been all out of place. Every step of the way."

"I'm still trying to make sense of it," she replied.

"Well, good luck. Let me know if you figure it out."

John cautiously put one foot through the doorway, then took it back out again. He stuck his hand over the threshold and removed it.

"What are you doing?" Grant asked.

"I don't know. Just checking to see if it's really there, I guess."

"To hell with it, I'm going in." Grant stepped through the hatch and walked onto the bridge. Hailey and John followed with hesitant steps.

"Holy shit," Grant said, "what in the name of God happened?"

Hailey gasped and turned to run back to the corridor, but the hatch closed before she could make it. She frantically pressed her hand to the panel, desperately tried to open the door, but it wouldn't respond.

The crew which once piloted *Esometa* still sat in their chairs, computer screens lazily glowing on their faces. But they had decomposed. All appeared to have been dead a long time, much longer than the ship had been missing.

Hailey pounded on the door panel. "Open! Please open!"

"Hailey," John said, "try to keep calm. Take a deep breath."

"I'm sorry. I've never seen a dead body before. I don't know what to do."

"At least you didn't puke in your suit," Grant chuckled.

"If this is where the corridor led, where the hell is Miles?" Hailey's expression changed, her skin paled, and her eyes flitted in all directions.

"That's a good question," John said. "He's obviously not here. Which again, doesn't make any sense. Where else could he have gone? We followed the same path. There was nowhere else to go."

"I don't think this ship is playing by the rules," Grant said.

John inspected the bodies. They were no more than skeletal remains covered with a thin layer of what was once living flesh—pale, ashen, flaking like chipped paint. He was no doctor, but he didn't need a medical degree to tell him something didn't add up. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled. He needed to focus his center. He needed to remain calm.

"I don't get it," Grant said. "There aren't any hull breaches. And why do they look like that? It's only been a couple weeks, their bodies shouldn't be that far gone, should they?"

"No," John said. "Definitely not."

Hailey went to one of the consoles, weaving between the seat and its deceased occupant. "We should check the logs. Might offer some explanation. I'm thinking some kind of illness, but I've never heard of anything that can do this to a person, leave them looking like that after only a couple weeks."

Grant tapped the visor on his helmet. "Good thing we're in these suits."

John sighed. "Yeah, but what if Miles contracted the same thing that killed this crew?"

Silence lent itself to the dead air around them. Each considered their own mortality in that moment. John wished he hadn't said what he did, but it was far too late. The micro-epochs between his acknowledgement of the worst scenario, and the imagination's reaction, could bring down even the strongest of minds.

Hailey broke the pause of introspection by touching one of the computer terminals. All lights in the ceiling flickered and went out. So did the ones on their helmets. Complete darkness overtook the bridge. All that remained was a soft glow from the arm displays on their suits.

"Damn. Thought we were in business," Grant said. "What the hell happened to our suit lights?" Hailey tried pressing the screen again.

On the monitor, the normal interface was non-existent. What replaced it was a jumble of odd moving colors and symbols Hailey didn't recognize. Static and ear-piercing computerized beeps came from the machine as the unusual glitch increased its chaotic dance. Strange colors that couldn't be described flashed with the brightness of daylight, splashing the entire bridge in a frenzied array of illumination.

"Turn the damn thing off!" Grant screamed over the increasing noise.

Hailey rapidly pressed the screen, and after achieving no result, began slamming her palm against it. Silent darkness replaced the madness that filled the space moments before. Then everything in the bridge lit up, computer screens, lighting, all of it revived as if risen from the dead. All except for the lights on their helmets.

John scanned the room, suspicion lying in the forefront of his mind. His temples pulsed with it. He could feel it match the beating heart in his chest. The rhythm, the soft thump, echoed in his suit, in his ears, in his soul. He fought against the surge of primal instinct which tried to overthrow rationality. An internal war was fought in the span of only seconds, but its outcome would be the key to his survival. With deep breaths he maintained the winning side.

"I guess this isn't a rescue mission anymore," Grant said. "Just a recovery at this point."

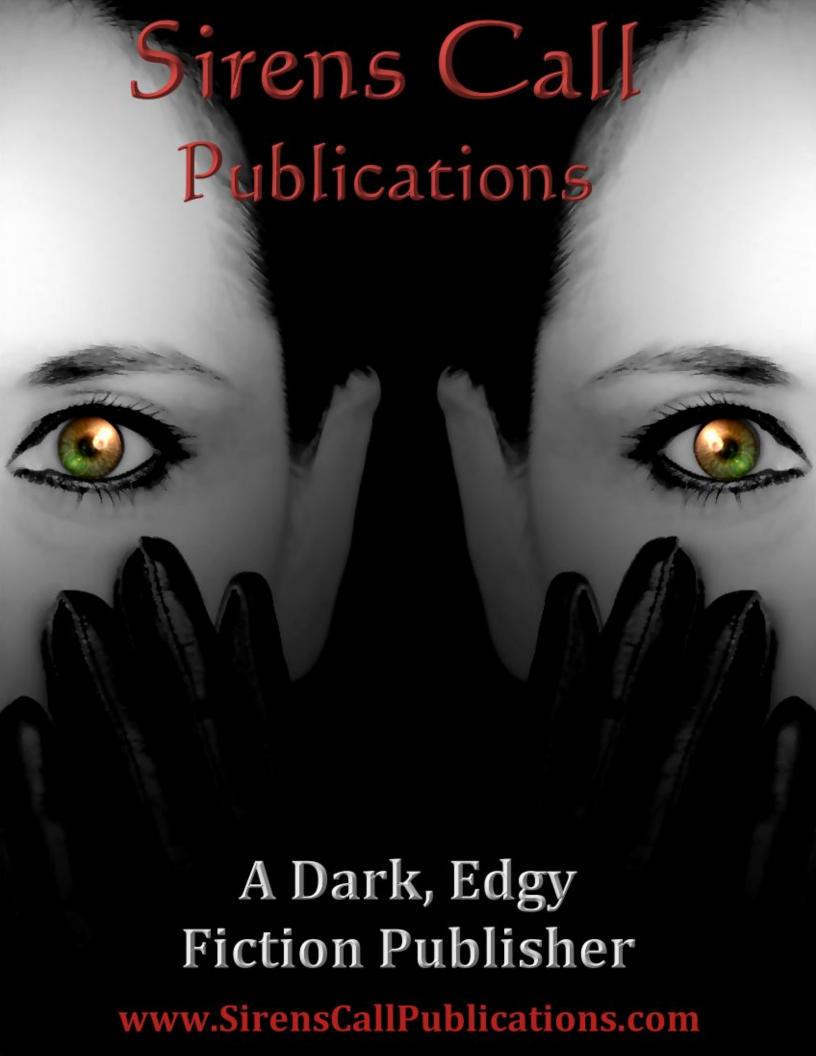
"At least the lights and system came back online," Hailey said. "Maybe we can figure out what's going on. Try the door. It wouldn't open before. It might be working now."

John placed his hand on the pad to open the only door in the bridge. It rose with ease, but on the other side, the corridor they came in from was no longer there. Instead, a small room took its place—the walls, ceiling, and floor a matching charcoal black with a rough texture. At the other end was a dark stairway going down into some unknown place. He stepped back, teeth clenched until they hurt. He cried out when he bumped into one of the seats where a dead crew member still sat. "I don't understand. Where's the damn corridor?"

Grant placed a hand on his shoulder. "Like I said, this ship ain't playing by the rules."

### **About the Author:**

Lee Forman is a writer, editor, and journalist from the Hudson Valley in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. He's a third-generation horror fanatic, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters. His work has been published in numerous magazines, anthologies, websites, and podcasts. He's an editor for Sirens Call Publications and writes, edits, and is an administrator for the horror fiction website PenoftheDamned.com. He's a regular contributor of non-fiction articles for *Living Paranormal* Magazine, and he often writes for two podcasts: *The Lift* and *The Wicked Library*. His debut novella, *Zero Perspective* is available from Amazon and other retailers, as well as a collection of short fiction titled *Fragments of a Damned Mind*. When he's not crafting horrifying creatures and tales of terror, he spends his time playing guitar and writing music. For more information and a list of publications go to <a href="https://www.leeformanauthor.com">www.leeformanauthor.com</a>



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