

The Sirens Call



August 2019

issue 46



*A Dark Fiction,
Horror eZine*

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork*

*An Interview with and
featured artwork by
Jessica F Holt*

*An essay by featured
author Sonora Taylor
plus an excerpt from
her novel
'Without Condition'*

www.SirensCallPublications.com

Table of Contents

pg 03 - Extrusion <i>Rivka Jacobs</i>	pg 76 - Insomnia <i>Ivanka Fear</i>
pg 06 - Nothing to Give <i>Angela Yuriko Smith</i>	pg 77 - Underneath <i>Ivanka Fear</i>
pg 07 - Flaming <i>Angels Yuriko Smith</i>	pg 78 - They Follow <i>Ivanka Fear</i>
pg 08 - Unaware <i>Mark Steinwachs</i>	pg 80 - Abyss <i>Jessica Kuilan</i>
pg 09 - The Night of the Dance <i>R.J. Meldrum</i>	pg 80 - Not Under the Bed <i>Radar DeBoard</i>
pg 11 - Yuki-Onna <i>Laya V Smith</i>	pg 81 - Turn on the light <i>Colin Walsh</i>
pg 12 - A Bowl of Bones <i>Ken Hueler</i>	pg 82 - The Tallow Chandler's Relict's Valediction <i>Alyson Faye</i>
pg 14 - Killing Frost <i>Sharon Frame Gay</i>	pg 83 - Companion <i>Victoria Crawford</i>
pg 17 - Fear <i>Patrick J Wynn</i>	pg 83 - Cat Cliches <i>Victoria Crawford</i>
pg 17 - Kisses <i>Patrick J Wynn</i>	pg 83 - Dust Bunnies <i>Victoria Crawford</i>
pg 17 - Your Turn <i>Patrick J Wynn</i>	pg 85 - Sunflowers <i>Brian Rosenberger</i>
pg 19 - Buckets of Fun <i>Diane Arrelle</i>	pg 86 - The Bonfire <i>Veronica Schultz</i>
pg 20 - Party <i>Patrick J Wynn</i>	pg 87 - Now I Lay me Down to Sleep <i>Ann Christine Tabaka</i>
pg 21 - Relationship Gut <i>Radar DeBoard</i>	pg 87 - Nursery Rhymes <i>Ann Christine Tabaka</i>
pg 22 - A Fire Within <i>Ashley O'Melia</i>	pg 89 - The Labyrinth of Night <i>S.C. Hickman</i>
pg 23 - Petal, Page, Piel <i>Sonora Taylor</i>	pg 91 - Trypophobia <i>Abigail Linhardt</i>
pg 25 - Katy Did <i>Christine Lajewski</i>	pg 93 - Growl and Snarl <i>Kieran Judge</i>
pg 28 - Peace Offering <i>Roger Ley</i>	pg 94 - Lighter Fluid <i>Abigail Linhardt</i>
pg 29 - Beware The Humans On The Beds <i>Terry Miller</i>	pg 95 - Death Trumps War <i>Clynthia Burton Graham</i>
pg 29 - Lab Rats <i>Terry Miller</i>	pg 97 - Rains of Death <i>Ann Christine Tabaka</i>
pg 29 - The Bad Child <i>Terry Miller</i>	pg 99 - Fingernails <i>Michael S. Walker</i>
pg 29 - The Eyes Have It <i>Terry Miller</i>	pg 101 - The Child <i>G. Allen Wilbanks</i>
pg 30 - Fire in the Night <i>Holly Rae Garcia</i>	pg 102 - Thinning the Privileged Herd <i>Roxy Thomas</i>
pg 32 - The Hunted <i>Alex Grey</i>	pg 102 - It <i>Ann Christine Tabaka</i>
pg 35 - A Weekend by the Sea <i>B.E. Seidl</i>	pg 103 - Red Shirt <i>Colin Walsh</i>
pg 36 - Tranquility of Death <i>Austin Muratori</i>	pg 106 - Purple Sky <i>Ruchira Mandal</i>
pg 38 - Limbo <i>Uma Venkatraman</i>	pg 109 - In Giving, We Receive <i>Naching T. Kassa</i>
pg 39 - Of Things Forgotten <i>K.T. Tate</i>	pg 110 - Debutante <i>Carolyn Barnard</i>
pg 40 - Lilith <i>Sibylla Nash</i>	pg 112 - Summer Breeze <i>Vivian Kasley</i>
pg 43 - Button Eyes <i>Reneé Boyer</i>	pg 114 - Cocktail Hour <i>Nicole Nevel</i>
pg 43 - Every Gallon in the Pool <i>Michael D. Davis</i>	pg 116 - The Hook <i>Catherine Kenwell</i>
pg 44 - Marley's Ghosts <i>EV Knight</i>	pg 117 - Conspicuous Consumption <i>Gabrian Cui</i>
pg 46 - The Bookworm <i>Edward Ahern</i>	pg 118 - Last Stand <i>Greg Fewer</i>
pg 50 - How Does Your Garden Grow? <i>D.S. Ullery</i>	pg 120 - Frozen Promises <i>John C. Mannone</i>
pg 52 - Parched <i>Nick Romeo</i>	pg 123 - Identity Theft <i>Tony-Paul de Vissage</i>
pg 53 - The Alien Species Protection Act (ASPA) <i>David Lewis Pogson</i>	pg 124 - Rear-View Mirror <i>Ian Blackwell</i>
pg 54 - Lockdown <i>Eddie D. Moore</i>	pg 126 - Listen <i>Catherine Kenwell</i>
pg 54 - Jungle Secrets <i>Eddie D. Moore</i>	pg 128 - Nightmare Shoppe <i>Tim O'Neal</i>
pg 54 - Shady Oak Gardens <i>Eddie D. Moore</i>	pg 129 - Kenneth <i>Dawn DeBraal</i>
pg 59 - The Knight in Green <i>Zoie Watterson</i>	pg 131 - If Only <i>Rory J. Roche</i>
pg 60 - The Rudderless Moon <i>Meg Smith</i>	pg 132 - Suspicious Minds <i>K. T. Tate</i>
pg 60 - The last clouds <i>Meg Smith</i>	pg 134 - Things That Go Bump in the Night <i>Logan Fourie</i>
pg 60 - Moth Elegy <i>Meg Smith</i>	pg 136 - The Killer Griller Barbecue Blues <i>Michael D. Davis</i>
pg 61 - The Call of the Fiddle <i>Mathias Jansson</i>	pg 137 - Roomie <i>Bill Bistak</i>
pg 62 - What it Takes to Be a Mermaid <i>Stephanie M. Wytovich</i>	pg 139 - Rock Bottom <i>Pauline Yates</i>
pg 62 - What Lingers Between Shipwrecks <i>Stephanie M. Wytovich</i>	
pg 63 - Licorice Waves <i>Stephanie M. Wytovich</i>	pg 56 - Featured Artist <i>Jessica F Holt</i>
pg 65 - Three Deaths <i>Angela Yuriko Smith</i>	Artwork:
pg 66 - The Village of Twee <i>Lynn White</i>	pg 05 - Nature of Death
pg 67 - A Dormouse Dreams <i>Lynn White</i>	pg 31 - Snake Bite
pg 68 - Easy Pickings <i>Timothy Hosey</i>	pg 42 - Demons On My Mind
pg 68 - Stick and Stones <i>Lydia Prime</i>	pg 55 - Venus
pg 69 - Moses Container <i>David Brandt</i>	pg 70 - Creepy Cotton Candy
pg 69 - In the crowd of men <i>Geoffrey A. Landis</i>	pg 88 - Flesh and Feathers
pg 71 - Minnesota Giant Frog <i>Richard Stevenson</i>	pg 98 - Mother Fracking
pg 71 - Reptoid Encounter <i>Richard Stevenson</i>	pg 119 - Skelly
pg 72 - Waheela <i>Richard Stevenson</i>	pg 133 - Snow Witch
pg 73 - Night Hag <i>Richard Stevenson</i>	
pg 74 - El Chupucabras II <i>Richard Stevenson</i>	pg 142 - Featured Author <i>Sonora Taylor</i>
pg 75 - I Walked Beneath a Shining Moon <i>Sonora Taylor</i>	pg 144 - Featured Book <i>Without Condition</i>

They gathered along the redwood railing of the deck; another group of tourists from out of town.

"Would you-all like some lemonade?" Erline sang as she swept through the open sliding-glass doors, carrying a tray with several tall glasses. Ice made a clinking sound as she stopped behind a young man in the corner. "Would you like some nice, cold lemonade?"

The young man appeared to start; he backed around several steps and faced the woman. "Uh, yeah, I guess...." He reached for a tumbler.

"Anyone else?" she insisted, waltzing to the different visitors and holding the drinks under their noses. Her bright yellow Capris and halter-top seemed spotless and untouched by perspiration, her plastic-jewel encrusted sandals glinted under the hot summer sun.

A pre-teen girl with blonde French braids turned and scrunched her face. Her parents were on either side of her and each accepted the lemonade. She looked forward again, her ribs pressed against the rust-colored wood. "I don't like it here," she grumbled. "Can we go now?" She surveyed the sloping stretch of scrub and sage-brush that dropped away from the deck, the more distant rolling hills, patchwork of corrals, pastures and ranches in the valley below that all ended abruptly at the foot of a dark, mountainous mass shimmering unnaturally in the late afternoon heat. "It stinks!"

"Why yes, dear, it does. I heard one scientist say the funny smell might be gases escaping from the depths of the earth," Erline replied. "If anyone has to use a restroom, we have two. Please remember to wash your hands before you exit."

"How're things going out here, Mommy?" a middle-aged man asked as he walked out onto the deck. "My, it's getting hot, isn't it?" He looked up at the cloudless deep-blue sky and made mopping motions at the back of his neck, tugged at the front of his pale-yellow short-sleeved golf shirt.

"Why, everything's just lovely, Bruce, sweetheart," Erline answered, moving to his side and planting a light kiss on one of his cheeks. "Would you like some lemonade?" She lifted the tray slightly.

He smiled and patted his ample belly. "Had some earlier, in the kitchen, thanks." He reached a hand to Erline's rear end and gave it a pinch. "Isn't my wife adorable?" he said, looking into her upturned face.

"Oh!" she squealed, and hopped. "You are such a goof!"

"Excuse me, ma'am," a tall, rangy man interrupted, pivoting from the view and facing them. He wore glasses. A neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard covered his chin. "Have you heard anything more about what might be out there?"

Before Erline could reply, the blonde girl's father twisted half-way around and said, "I checked online again just before we got here. Still no definitive news. All anyone seems to know is that it began as a mound here in Apache County, in the Buell Mountain area two months ago, and no one can figure out why, or what it's made of, or how it grows. I read on a couple of news-sites that the military is getting involved now."

"Well, honestly, just another one of those little mysteries of life," Erline answered, her tone light. "The homes up here are a good ways outside the perimeter; everything's been just fine and dandy here!"

"We're glad to give you folks a chance to see this thing for yourselves," Bruce added.

"But what is it?" a young woman in her twenties insisted, peering ahead at the hulking mountain-like thing on the horizon, her hands locked on the railing.

Bruce wrapped an arm around Erline's lower back. "The satellites, the drones, the probes, all our scientists say it's not lava. It's not a magma dome. It's not water or steam. It's not an uplift."

"It's not geological," said a stout, short woman with curly, inky hair. She wore enormous sunglasses, through which she continued to gaze at the monstrous thing in the distance..

"Now, we don't know it's not geological," the tall, bearded man interrupted. "It's not something we've seen before. Apparently some kind of force or radiation or gas seeped out of the ground in a twenty-mile radius around this ... extrusion ... and killed everyone and everything. But people, animals, plants just a few feet away from the dead zone, were unharmed. No one knows why."

"Well, we're just glad y'all could visit us, and we're happy to let people stop by," Erline interjected, her red mouth stretching into a dimpled grin.

"For a price," the blonde girl's father muttered, then sighed. "Come on gang, Heather's right, let's get going." He touched his wife's shoulder, patted his daughter's head.

"It gives me the creeps." Heather's expression turned sour as her father shepherded her and her mother toward the interior of Bruce and Erline's ranch-style home. "Maybe it's aliens," she mumbled as they crossed the threshold.

The ten or so other guests all turned at once. "What did she say?" someone asked.

Heather paused, her parents continuing on without her for a few moments. She faced the others. "You know," she said loudly, "like in the movies. They land and build underground nests or laboratories and then strange mounds show up and one by one people are implanted with these computers in their necks and they became zombie alien tools." Her father grabbed her wrist and pulled her away, into the house.

Erline smiled. "Well, she certainly has some imagination." She giggled, then continued, "I'll be in the kitchen, if any of you need me. You're welcome to stay for dinner. We do it buffet style, and have enough for everybody...." She winked at her husband, and sashayed back inside.

A youngish man with rippling muscles covered by tattoos folded his bulging arms. He wore aviator shades. "You know, if that damned thing isn't volcanic, and isn't any known geological phenomenon, then what the fuck is it?"

Bruce raised his palms and lifted his eyebrows in a *Don't-ask-me* kind of way. "I think I'll go help Erline with supper," he said. "You folks make yourselves right at home. We'll set out the food in about twenty minutes."

The short, chubby black-haired woman leaned back against the railing, both hands flat on the wood. "How can they not have any idea what it is? It's so weird. It looks and smells like the entrance to Hell. Like the devil decided to build a new stairway to our world. Avernus, a place fatal to birds...."

"A place fatal to everything, for twenty miles surrounding it," the tall, bearded man added.

"This had to happen on Navajo lands, of course," an older man said. He was wearing baggy jeans, a Western shirt and a cowboy hat. "Y'all don't think the government had anything to do with this? All that atomic testing around here in the '50s...?"

No one spoke. As if on cue they all silently circled in place and confronted the anomaly once more; they squinted and peered, shading their eyes.

The jagged outline of the humongous uplift was even darker now, a silhouette shrouded by a purplish haze as the setting sun flashed behind it. It looked like someone had cut out a piece of the sky.

"You know," a young woman in a UCLA t-shirt said, "scientists don't have all the answers. Because we have no experience with the phenomenon, doesn't mean this isn't perfectly natural. I mean, this could be a black hole colliding with earth, it could be related to gravity or the magnetic fields...."

"I don't know what's more disturbing, that monster out there, or Erline and Bruce," one of the tourists joked.

There was some laughter. Then abruptly exclamations of "Hey," and, "What the...," and, "Oh shit," and, "Oh fuck...." as the spacious observation deck began to rock and sway. There was a low rumbling sound--soon the shaking was enough to make the entire house rattle and jangle. They heard something crash and break inside.

"Oh my god," a woman still wearing her motorcycle helmet shouted. "What is it? Is this an earthquake?"

The rumbling stopped. The deck stilts creaked and groaned, then the world was completely quiet.

Erline reappeared, wearing a ruffled flowery apron. She pranced through the open side of the glass sliding doors, waved her arms, working her fingers in the air. "Please, don't be alarmed. This happens sometimes. We're perfectly safe." She patted her perfect hair. Her white teeth gleamed as she smiled. "Dinner is almost ready. Everything is fine. I'll bet someone is really hungry!"

"Yeah, well, that thing is bigger. I swear...." The tall man with the glasses and beard said as he studied the horizon.

"Maybe it is....," another of them muttered. "I don't know...."

The murky, looming mountain now seemed askew. The apex was sharper and higher but the whole thing seemed to lean on its side, the right flank more vertical and steep.

Erline clapped her hands. "Well, let's go get some food, shall we? We've got hamburgers and hotdogs, tea and soda, chicken and tuna sandwiches!"

Several of the visitors exchanged concerned looks. "No thank you, ma'am," one of them said. "I'll be leaving now."

"The food is free. It doesn't cost extra," Erline called as the rest of the current crop of guests shuffled past her, their heads bowed, their faces anxious and lost in thought. She pursed her lips and set her fists on her hips. "Well!" she huffed. She stamped one foot and moved to the railing, glared at the monster on the horizon enrobed in glowing twilight against a blazing orange sky, one jagged peak expectantly catching a last flash of sun. "You couldn't wait a few more minutes?" she hissed, her brows arched, her chin in the air. "Well that's too bad. Now you'll have to wait another whole day!" She turned toward the sliding glass doors, held a hand to the side of her mouth and yelled, "Daddy, don't touch the food, Throw all of it out. We'll make a new batch tomorrow!"

About the Author:

Rivka Jacobs lives in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the *Women of Darkness* anthology. In the last few years she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Fantastic Floridas*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

Facebook: [Rivka Jacobs](#)

Twitter: [@RivkaJacobs](#)



Jessica F Holt

She watched the moon rise behind her former home. Her gaze was as cold as the babe in her arms. A feather drifted across her vision, letting her know the Trickster was with her. She didn't look away from the castle.

"Why am I here?" he asked. His voice rasped with words as sharp as his beak. The misty dark expanded into the emptiness in the silence between them. The Trickster ruffled his feathers and hopped forward to look at the castle rising out of the ragged valley.

"Why am I here?" He asked again, and turned to look at her. His eyes burned bright in the shadow. Any girl would quail under such fierce observation, but she was no longer a girl. Circumstance had seen to that.

"They took everything," she finally said. Her voice was flat and emotionless. "Now I have nothing." She turned her eyes away from the stone towers and looked at the Trickster. "Give them nothing as well."

His beady, ember gaze swept over her. A young girl, shabbily dressed clutching a bundle of baby and rag to her breast. There were no tears left in her eyes. There was no soul left to bargain with. She had nothing he wanted.

The castle sat on the horizon like an entitled queen, towers of stone shining like powdered skin. A smear of rouge across the gatehouse would make as fine a courtly whore as any he'd seen. He could smell the acidic scent of pride and gluttony even where he was. The castle was ripe pickings, if he had the excuse.

"Give me your babe, and I will do what you ask."

"My baby is no more. They saw to that—a nameless bastard given a bastard's end." She clutched the bundle of baby and rag closer.

"You ask a task, I ask a price. That's how bargains are struck. Give me your babe and I will give them nothing in return."

The girl nodded and let her arms drop limp to her side as if the life had left them. The bundle thudded to the ground at her feet, rolled and lay still. The Trickster hopped down onto the bundle and gripped it tight.

"So it will be done," he said. He spread his wings, until they blotted out the moon and castle from her view. He flapped, straining to take air with the added weight. The girl started keening as she watched her baby boy rise up and realized it would be the last time to see him. She held out her hands in futile desperation. Her wails cut the night and filled the Trickster's wings with vengeance, lifting him all the way.

He landed at the castle gate, dropping his bundle. There was a guard sleeping inside the narrow window, he knew. He let out a sharp, grating caw that was meant to rattle dreams. It did, and he heard the guard inside wake up with a yelp. He cawed again, and a man's face peered out the opening at him.

The Trickster cawed a third time and then turned his fiery gaze fully on the man. The guard stumbled back from the window and exited the room into the walled courtyard. The Trickster could hear him yelling a warning to all within.

"Demon! Demon at the gate!"

His cry was taken up by other voices. Torchlight came to life inside, touching the slumbering stone with a blush. The Trickster was pleased. Let them come and see what they have wrought. It took no time at all to gather a nice collection of heads at the top of the wall. They muttered to each other as they looked down at the raven and his bundle on their doorstep. A fat man carrying a sword on his shoulder stood up straight and looked over at the Trickster. On either side, two guards kept a hand on him, ready to pull him back.

"Why do you show up at our door, Demon? We have no truck with your kind."

The Trickster drew himself to his full size, the raven form lengthening and growing until he was twice the size of the biggest guard. He picked up the tiny bundle, a fragment of cloth in his now massive palm. He spoke, allowing his voice to amplify loud enough to shake the depths and rattle heaven.

"Your actions expose your lies. You fouled innocence in a horse trough, drowned like a kitten. You bring a curse to your house and lands." He held the baby up, letting the winds blow the rags away. It lay still and blue in his hand. "You took everything a girl had and left her with nothing, so nothing is what you shall receive in turn." He opened the foundation stones of the castle and planted the small body inside before leaping up to take wing.

He circled the castle three times, relishing the cries below. They were in hysterics at his theatrics but they would endure the slow desolation of their curse with barely a sigh. They would soon boast how they drove away a demon one night—a demon who cursed them with nothing. He would be a song and a joke... but the punch line would be his in the end.

Beneath the foundation he could feel consequences taking root. The curse was already moving through the stone, weakening mortar, crumbling it into the cistern where the water would sour stomachs, wither gardens and weaken livestock.

The castle would collapse, one slow stone at a time. The people would sicken and pass without ever attributing the decline to their own guilt. *The worst sinners die with the cleanest conscience*, he thought. He vanished into the sky, bargain accomplished and pleased to rid the world of what was not needed.

Years later he found himself called back by an old woman who lived on the edge of a ragged ravine overlooking a ruined castle. He recognized her. Now wrinkled and bent, she carried the same empty look in her eyes.

"Why am I here?" he asked. His voice rasped with words as sharp as his beak. She looked directly at him, her eyes tired of watching the castle below for so long.

"I have another favor to ask," she said. "I asked you to give them nothing, and you did. Now I ask you to give me nothing as well."

The Trickster studied her. There were no tears left in her eyes. There was no soul left to bargain with. She had nothing he wanted. He had nothing to give, so he gave it.

He laid her down on a bed of pine, consequence and conscience rising up through the misty dark, expanding into the emptiness that grew in the silence she left.

Flaming | Angela Yuriko Smith

Last Sunday, she caught him wearing a dress.

It hadn't seemed wrong at the time. He had been balancing the budgets at the kitchen table. She had just come home from a sticky day in church. As she walked through the living room, she pulled her navy and polka dot sundress over her head to drape over the couch. She leaned on the back of it so she could slip her stockings off and toss them over the dress.

"Christ, it's hot," she said. "You are lucky men don't have to wear stockings." And she left to take a shower.

He stared at her discarded clothes on the back of a couch. She had walked away pasty and sweating, like a hermit crab without a home. He always had admired her powerful feminine aura. Walking away, flabby white ass trembling like gelatin, he realized all her allure and mystique came from her clothes. Without them, she was weak.

The moment of clarity hit
Pow! Bop! Kapow!
into his brain. Superheroes
had secrets in their pantyhose.
Superheroes had secrets.

He donned his costume
Bam! Boof! Kablam!
formerly known as hers
and gave himself a mask
of ruby red lips and rouge.
Superheroes had secrets.

The screaming harpy found him
Zap! Karack! Kazaam!
stretching her stockings, getting
stubble in her compact
and exposed his secret identity.
Superheroes had secrets.

Pow! Kablam! Crack!

"I am not right," he said. She wept, knowing this was the end. She closed her eyes to not see who he was and shivered.

"You are not right," he said. He touched her cheek, soft and wet, and tasted her tears. He discarded the last of himself then. Her skin was fragrant and warm. She bled without reserve, helpless without her costume. He draped her

across his strong shoulders—she was the mink, dangling and limp—and became her. The thought was hot and it burned through his scalp. He was a woman in flames. His new self stood in the bedroom door. Behind him, her naked pieces lay in disarray, powerless.

“...to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. Two lives become one,” he said. And he left the house with hers.

About the Author:

Angela Yuriiko Smith is an American poet, publisher and author. Her first collection of poetry, *In Favor of Pain*, was nominated for a 2017 Elgin Award. Her latest novella, *Bitter Suites*, is a 2018 Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist. She publishes *Space and Time* magazine, a 52 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction. For more information visit SpaceandTimeMagazine.com.

Author Blog: [Angela Yuriiko Smith](#)

Unaware | *Mark Steinwachs*

My body shape-shifts, its growth stopping inches before grazing the low bedroom ceiling. I look like something out of a horror video game, a smooth jet-black creature with gangly arms and legs. The specks of gold laced among the blue of my oversized lapis eyes shimmer with the coming surge of energy.

With two silent strides, I stand over him. Centuries ago, humans were more in tune with their surroundings—the world around them and the world they could not see unless shown—my world. In moments the person of old would have been awake, calling to their god for help, unaware it was too late. My very presence blocked any chance of answered prayers.

Now it's different.

He sleeps undisturbed. And, like most people throughout time, he is unaware that his life is pointless, that no matter what anyone does, we shall be victorious. Their ability to think and learn is what led humans to make great strides and almost defeat us. But their hubris brought us back from the brink, stronger than ever.

The knife materializes in my hand. Any weapon is unnecessary for me and I miss the days when I was allowed to kill with my power alone. Watching as their veins blackened, etching a beautiful outline as death burned from the inside. Hearing gurgled croaks as they fought to live. In those days, I stood in the shadows unseen amid cries of *devil* and *demon* as families wailed.

Now it's come to this. I've been instructed to make the kill look like a modern-day attack, which is to say senseless and violent. Their fear of each other outweighs their fear of us. Emotions misplaced—they've given up fighting for each other. The few who do will be the first we take down when we are no longer forced to hide, when their gods are too weak to save them.

His face glows as the golden death energy brightens within me. The moment I live for, was created for, is at hand. I set the blade to the skin of his exposed neck and wrap my fingers around his shoulder. My touch jolts him awake, screaming as he sees the world for what it is and understands what an apathetic life he lived. I slash the knife across his neck, feeling it sink through the soft skin. His last thoughts will be the ones he carries through eternity.

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.

Instagram: [@AuthorMarkStein](#)

Twitter: [@authorMarkStein](#)

The Night of the Dance | *R.J. Meldrum*

It was all Victoria's idea; very silly really.

"Let's all spend Midsummer's Eve at the Middleton Bishop standing stones! We can watch the sunset and celebrate the solstice!"

It was a very silly idea, unfortunately quickly taken up by Belinda and Lucy.

"What fun!" said Belinda.

"We could bring wine and nibbles. Dress up in robes," suggested Lucy.

I said I was probably too busy, knowing all too well I wasn't. The others had heard this ploy before and weren't convinced. Victoria nudged me, laughing.

"Oh Susan, you're such a stick in the mud, you always say the same thing. Please come, it won't be the same without you."

I reluctantly agreed, unsure about the idea of playing dress up at our age. It wasn't as if we were teenagers, none of us would see forty again. Perhaps this was why Victoria had suggested it. I looked into their faces, the faces I had known since university. We had stayed friends for all those years, helping and supporting each other during the hard times. Belinda losing Mike to cancer. Victoria and her three divorces. Lucy and her high-flying city career that never really suited her. And me, dumpy Susan, the boring spinster who had spent her best years teaching history to ungrateful teenagers. We had stuck together through thick and thin, good times and bad. I smiled, perhaps playing dress-up would be fun.

Midsummer's Eve was on the twenty-first of June. We met at Belinda's house. As I entered the lounge, I saw my three friends dressed in what passed for Druid's robes. I was wearing a bedsheet, draped across my shoulders and knotted at my waist. At the sight of each other we all burst into giggles. Victoria spoke.

"I knew even Susan would come dressed for the occasion!"

"This is going to be a super evening," said Lucy, clapping her hands.

I checked my watch.

"We better get going, it's an hour's drive to the stones."

"Ah, Susan, always organized!" laughed Belinda.

We arrived at the stones at about 8 p.m. The standing stones sat on a low hill that dominated the flat landscape of the surrounding area. We were the only people there, I half-expected the place to be full of hippies and Druids. Lucy suggested a fire and the others agreed. I didn't, thinking there must be some local bylaw against lighting fires. Belinda laughed.

"Oh, Susan. Such a stickler for the rules. There's no one here, what does it matter? And if someone arrives to tell us off, I'm sure Victoria can persuade them otherwise."

The others fluttered off into the nearby woods, picking up sticks and small branches then placing them in a pile in the center of the stones. Belinda unrolled the woolen picnic rug and laid out bottles of wine and various comestibles. Victoria lit the incense and I gingerly stuck a match into the kindling at the base of our bonfire, setting it alight. It was near to 9 p.m. and despite it being the longest day, the sun was starting to set. The woods surrounding us were already in darkness. We sat in a rough circle round the fire, eating and drinking. There was silence between us, but it was the comfortable silence of friends who don't feel the need to constantly chatter. Time passed. Belinda sipped her wine then spoke.

"Well, it's nearly sunset so we need to decide what to do."

"How about a chant?" asked Lucy.

"Yes, great idea. Let's stand and hold hands."

I stood and took the hands of Lucy on my left and Victoria on my right. Belinda was opposite me, across the fire. I felt very silly. Lucy started to chant, using nonsense words and making us all giggle. She scowled, silencing our giggles, then continued.

I don't know what it was; whether it was the looming darkness, the wine, the smoke from the fire or the incense, but my head started to spin, and I felt almost drunk. My vision became blurred as the chant continued. I saw my friends all had their eyes closed, swaying in time to the chant. Our mouths spoke words we didn't know, our lips moving in sync. In my hazy state I saw, or thought I saw, vague figures moving in the woods. I had difficulty in making out what they were. They came closer, seemed to float between us. Victoria and Lucy dropped my hands and I felt the shapes touch me, taking my arms and moving me away from the fire. I glanced back and saw the others were also being guided away from the light.

I have very little recollection of what happened next. I remember being surrounded by twisting, insubstantial shapes. I heard music and saw the shapes start to move in rhythm. It took me a moment to realize they were dancing. I joined their dance, the figures twisting and moving round me, their touch soft and welcoming. We danced amongst the stones and in the woods. We danced as the music floated around us, the notes wild and free. I saw the sun set and darkness descend on the world, but we kept dancing. I caught occasional glimpses of the others; they were the same as me, dancing with abandon amongst a group of swirling, morphing figures.

The music grew wilder and wilder and the dance became more frenzied. Part of my mind was lost in the dance, feeling the rhythm of the music and of nature. The other, more rational, part was wondering what the hell was going on? Had we absorbed some hallucinogens by accident? Was it real? Were the spirits of the woods and stones dancing to celebrate the solstice?

Time flickered by and still we danced. I felt no aches or pains from my muscles even though I must have been dancing for hours, instead I felt an elation like no other. Then, suddenly, the music stopped, and a stillness entered this new, mystic world. The shapes stopped dancing and stood still. I saw my friends standing with their heads bowed and I found myself doing the same. There was a rustling from the darkness of the woods and the bushes parted as a figure emerged into the clearing where the stones stood. My heart leapt; this was it, the dance had worked. I finally knew the reason for the dance, it had been to call *him*. He stood at the center of the stones and I saw the hairy hindquarters, the hooves, the human chest and the horns on the top of his head. He raised his pipes to his lips and blew a series of notes. Those notes, golden and perfect started the dance again. He joined us.

I must have blacked out at some point, I only have very hazy memories of the rest of the night. I remember dancing, the shapes around me and *his* face pressed close to mine. I remember seeing my friends dancing close to me, but I don't remember much else.

I woke to find myself lying on wet grass with the sun already high in the sky above me. I was lying next to the ashes of our fire, my friends close by. Memories of the previous night came flooding back into my mind. The chant, the dance, the figure who was half-man and half-goat. I felt as if something, something I couldn't quite remember, had happened to me. Belinda spoke.

"Quite a night."

"What happened to us?" asked Victoria.

"We must have been drugged," replied Lucy.

"Yes," said Belinda, as she rubbed her eyes, but she didn't look convinced.

"I think we should go home," said Lucy.

We all agreed.

In the car on the way home, no one spoke. It was almost as if none of us could really believe what happened. We went our separate ways after we got back to Belinda's house, with some muttered platitudes about getting together for drinks.

The night at the stones was six weeks ago. We've met once or twice since then, but none of us have even mentioned the night, let alone discussed what happened. But I will have to mention something to them soon, something I'm scared to admit. About two weeks ago I felt there was something different about my body, some change. The doctor confirmed it yesterday. The test was positive, I'm six weeks pregnant. I'm scared, more than I ever have been before. You see, I'm not just a spinster, I'm a virgin; I've never been with a man. So, what happened during the night at the stones and what is growing inside me?

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, The Infernal Clock, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Smoking Pen Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

Facebook: [Richard Meldrum](#)

Twitter: [@RichardJMeldru1](#)

The engine sputtered and gave out. She quickly shifted into neutral and tried to restart it, but the old thing wasn't trying anymore. Drifting to the side of the road, she carefully dodged a sheet of black ice.

She should've rented a car instead of borrowing her grandfather's, but the old man would've been so offended. She was already a stranger to the family, an American who could barely speak the language. She couldn't be rude, too.

Three weeks she'd waited for a break in the storm to make the trip up into the Hida Mountains, but it wasn't coming, and her flight home was in four days. After traveling halfway around the world to visit the village where her mother was born, she wouldn't let a little snow stop her. But this winter was the wettest in years, and the coldest. Even with thermal underwear and a thick Irish-made sweater under her coat and snow pants, she couldn't stifle shivers.

Popping the hood, Miku stepped out into the blistering cold. Hail mixed with snow bit her face. A gust of wind froze the inside of her ears, causing an instant headache.

She knew enough about cars to change a tire, check the oil or jump a dead battery, but otherwise it was Greek. She poked at the battery terminal.

Defeated, she got back into the car, but as she closed the door a flash of movement caught her eye.

A little girl stood frozen in the road. Six or seven years old and pale as the snow circling her. Bulging blue lips trembled. She only wore cropped pants and a white tunic, her bare feet sinking into the snow. Flakes clung to her eyelashes and salted her long black hair. Her eyes shined like twin full moons, unblinking.

Goosebumps rose on Miku's skin. Something urged her to stay in the car, but she shook it off. With a deep breath she stepped out into the blizzard.

"*Sumimasen?*" she called, taking careful steps towards the child. "*Shoujo!*"

The girl looked up. Snowflakes falling from black heavens reflected in the mirror of her eyes. Her expression remained static. If not for her shaking lips, she would've seemed more like a doll than a human.

"Come... come here," Miku said, momentarily unable to remember a word of Japanese. "We need to get you out of the cold."

The girl lifted her arms and held them out as if waiting for a hug. Her little head cocked slightly. "*Onegai shimasu.*"

"Please?" whispered Miku, translating. Normally, she would've been quick to gather the freezing child in her arms, but again something warned her to take a step back. But what did she have to be afraid of?

The girl grew bluer by the moment, shudders speeding over her tiny body.

Snow crunched under Miku's boots as she crept closer. Gingerly, she knelt down, and the child rushed into her arms.

As frosty fingers sunk into Miku's neck, a bitter thrill raced down her spine. The child was colder than ice. She pressed her face hard in Miku's hair and began to sob.

"Shh. It's gonna be okay. Don't cry," she comforted, trying to rub some warmth into the girl's back. "*Douzo*, it's warmer in the car."

She tried to pull away, but the girl screamed and dug in her fingernails. Miku drew her back in and she resumed sobbing, louder and harder than before.

"We can't stay here in the middle of the road," said Miku, although she knew the child wouldn't understand her. Carefully, she gathered the little girl up in her arms and took one weighty step.

The skinny girl weighed twice what Miku had expected. Her muscles could barely hold her up.

The snow redoubled; flakes the size of quarters covered them quickly as Miku took another step. It felt as if she were wearing iron boots. Her blood had turned to frozen slush, oozing through solidifying veins. The girl clung tighter.

Another step. Miku heard her knee crack although she didn't feel it. Glancing down she saw ice rising up her legs, encasing them. Feathers of hoarfrost clung to her hands. When she looked up she couldn't even see her car anymore. The snow was thick as fog, whipping around them, isolating them.

The only sound she could hear was the child crying, but even that was growing weaker.

She forced her other leg forward, but the weight of the girl was suddenly so great she couldn't keep her balance. Her knees buckled, the ice breaking off them. She crumpled to the ground, then fell back into a bank of powdery snow.

"*Onegai shimasu,*" said the girl, softening into Miku's embrace. Her weeping ceased as snow gathered over them, obscuring the bleak sky.

"Please..." said Miku, but her eyelids were heavy, her tongue stiff. Suddenly, she felt warm...

The next morning a passing plow found the abandoned car on the roadside. A huge mound of snow had gathered beside it, which the driver quickly cleared away. It was the third abandoned car he'd found that winter, the

coldest winter he'd ever known. The villagers had given up searching for the bodies. Yuki-Onna—the snow woman ghost—consumed her victims without a trace. They never even found a footprint.

About the Author:

Laya V Smith is a writer and audiobook narrator. Her short fiction has been featured in Page&Spine. She is the co-author of an ESL textbook published by Kendal Hunt. She lives in Salt Lake City with her husband and three children.

Author Blog: [Laya V Smith](#)

Twitter: [@LayaVSmith](#)

A Bowl of Bones | Ken Hueler

Imp skittered through the branching miles of cave tunnels, chuckling at old bloodstains that marked past excitements with water-slick rocks. The tunnel flared into a cathedral of a cavern, stalagmites towering like organ pipes, and in the center waited Doll, bare and still.

"A week absent! Your task needs one night."

Imp hopped across the floor, holding the granite bowl above his scarred head. "What, you, standing there so helpless, would have me work close by and risk drawing attention?" Setting the bowl down, Imp selected a finger bone and brought it to Doll's face. He rubbed it against her cheek until the bone dissolved into the porcelain skin.

"What stories have you?"

"Not a one," Imp replied, dipping a jawbone into Doll's thigh.

"Tell me what you saw."

Imp grinned. "I saw a cart without a horse, and made of metal besides; it rolled along a pitch black road, a man and a woman inside."

"Your lies are ridiculous," Doll snapped.

Imp danced around Doll. "I only tell the truth—else how could my lies dodge through? Doubt me? Come, I'll show you."

"You know I cannot move."

"That is well, for I break into homes and I slip out men's bones, and oh, how those cripples would thank you."

"You keep the best tales for yourself," she accused. "Bones and news, that is our pact."

Imp grinned and pressed Doll's sternum, tilting her. She screamed until he let her settle back flat.

"Immortal! Ha!" he crowed, "how easily I could end that."

"Ridiculous," Doll snapped.

Imp snatched up the bowl and capered from the room, laughing.

Outside, he scowled at the wide landscape: Each trip required a longer trek to reach the wary, desolating humans. He paced. "Back to the cavern is shorter. I could push her at last, for she will be dashed if she tumbles; or I could leave her alone, for without eating bones she will crumble." He giggled—weighing which execution he would choose, and when, always bloomed a thrill.

Imp snorted and clapped his hands and started walking. "Next time, next time, I'm sure to do it next time..."

About the Author:

Ken Hueler teaches kung fu in the San Francisco Bay Area and, with fellow members of the Horror Writer's Association's local chapter, he gets up to all sorts of adventures (only some involving margaritas). His work has appeared in *Weirdbook*, *The Sirens Call*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Weekly Mystery Magazine*, and the charity anthology *Tales for the Camp Fire*.

RECREATIONAL
SUICIDE
IN PROGRESS

BITTER SUITES

Angela Yuriko Smith



available at
amazon

James Frost leaned back in the recliner, adjusting his body into the soft confines of the old chair. It was leather, shiny with age and comfortable as a slipper. It was the only piece of furniture he had brought with him from home when he moved into Garden Court last year. Hell, at 92 it was time that he treated himself to a little comfort. James was tired of cooking, tired of housework, tired of watching his late wife's garden wilt and deteriorate into patches of dirt, only memories remaining of the gladioli, daisies, and Lily of The Valley that Millie loved.

After Millie died, Checkers, the old spaniel, withered and died too. Suddenly the lonely house echoed with the groans of ancient boards and mice in the attic. The sound of his own footsteps shuffling down the hall was enough to make James wish he had died too.

So when he talked to somebody at the doctor's office one day, and they mentioned Garden Court, James was ready to look into it, and liked what he saw. His life was quickly reduced to a single room down a hallway, just big enough for a TV, bed, chest of drawers and his recliner. He preferred it that way. Streamlined. No worries. The small retirement benefit he got from the electric company along with social security just barely covered the cost, but James wanted for nothing, as content as a person could be, all things considered.

"Here we go, James" said a cheerful voice beside him, as the day nurse, Charla, handed him his pills for the morning. She leaned over and he saw her bosom peeking out from her sky blue uniform. She smelled sweet, like vanilla sugar or cinnamon, her red hair tangled in wisps around her face.

When I was younger, I could have had you, and I would have. James thought to himself, but he let her pat him on the head, tuck a napkin into his collar, and watched as she swayed out the door. *Cute little thing* he thought, and then went back to watching the news.

Later that day, the entire retirement center met in the main hall after dinner. Tonight was the weekly mixer and dance. James was amused that they actually served wine, warm and listless, in paper cups that wobbled in old hands and cookies on a table near the door. Everybody who wandered in picked up a name tag and stuck it on their chest as though they may forget who they were, or perhaps to keep out strangers who were just dying to come to the dance. James snorted at this thought, cracking his knuckles. He was pretty damned sharp for 92. He could still dance, too, making him a very desirable commodity here. This was another thing he just loved. The women outnumbered the men three to one, and half the other guys were stuck in wheel chairs or limping along in walkers. James had always kept himself fit, walking 5 miles every other day well into his 80's. Hell, the gals here threw themselves at him. And don't you believe for one second that there wasn't sex here in old Garden Court. There was, and plenty of it. With the advent of Viagra, there was a sharp uptick in sex related issues in retirement homes nowadays, and James had had his fair share with the ladies.

Tonight it was Betty Forester who was giving him the eye. She wasn't half bad, either. Late seventies, a bleach bottle blond who kept her breasts hoisted up in one of those wonder bras and slathered on the makeup and perfume. He hadn't gotten to know Betty very well but tonight looked like a good start. Charla the nurse wandered through on her way home after her shift, and patted him on the arm.

"Such a sweet little man you are, Mr. Frost," she said as she whisked out the door.

James felt a rage brewing inside. *Sweet old man*, he thought angrily. *What she doesn't know would fill a book.*

If it was one thing James hated about growing older it was that he was no longer the strong, edgy man he was years ago. Everybody treated him like an old codger, caught in the headlights of life like a deer. Not one of them thought about what he might have been in his prime. A handsome man. A man with muscles and sinew, and brains. Yeah, let's not forget about brains. Because James Frost, 92 years old, the sweet old man in the corner of the Garden Court hall listening to old World War Two tunes and watching Betty out of the corner of his eye, had brains to spare. How else could you make it this far, live this long, and fool everybody, living in plain sight.

James Earl Frost was a serial killer. He had gotten away with murder 15 times. In his dresser drawer was a small can of shaving cream, the bottom hollowed out, filled with the curls from all 15 of his victims. It was the only proof, the only clue, to a virtual lifetime of murder, now lying among some old socks and a few coins. DNA just wanting to pop out of that can and get him arrested, but even that was a thrill as he sat in his chair, wondering if he'd be caught before or after his death, if at all. The shaving cream would likely be tossed in the garbage when he

died, and along with it, years of delicate and strategic planning, memories, and the ultimate proof that James Frost was able to let you live, or let you die, all in his hands. Even tonight he felt a stirring like an addict as he watched the women wander back and forth across the room like so many innocent rabbits just itching to get caught in his snare.

It had been over 40 years since James Frost took a life. His last victim was a young girl, perhaps the youngest yet, named Andrea Wells. Blond and fit, a runner, the kind of girl you saw dashing through the wooded trails like a deer, her little butt pumping in her tight spandex, step by step. James watched her for days, got to know the routine. A runner himself, he blended in right behind her at times, a steady pace she hardly noticed. One time he passed her, grunted out a hello. She nodded and smiled back as they ran along the ravine near the back of the park. The ravine where her body was later found strangled and bruised her fingernails torn and bloody. Oh, that one put up a good fight, alright. At one point, he thought he might lose her altogether as she kicked in fury and wiggled under his arms like a slippery puppy. But when he snapped her neck, the fight went out of her, and she lay among the leaves in a crumpled heap. James did not rape her, though he had raped many others. He changed up the crimes to confound the police, strangling one woman, knifing another, bashing another's head in with a rock. Some he dumped in quiet lakes, while others he left in the open, proud of his kill, like a cat with a mouse. Each time, the murder was slightly different, except for one thing. He always cut out a lock of hair. Not much, just a tiny bit behind their ears, a curl that he brought home to the shaving cream can. His secret indulgence.

Not even Millie suspected, though she had long ago given up on much affection from James. They had no children. Some pets over the years. They did not share any common interests. They led a life of quiet contentment, Millie working in the garden, James killing women. Neither of them met in the middle long enough to discover the deeper side.

James was not an affectionate man. He loved only a few people in his life and even then had trouble showing it. He was not a particularly cruel man, in the true sense of the word. At least he thought so. He did not enjoy hurting the women, or watching them cry out in pain or even take pleasure in the short bursts of passion as he parted their legs. What James enjoyed was watching that spark leave their eyes as they took their last breath. Knowing that it was him and him alone who had the power to let them live, or die, is what drove him. He only let one live. A tiny brunette he grabbed off a cold sidewalk one December night, right before Christmas. He dragged her into the bushes by the hair, threw her face down into the dirt, pulled his knife from his pants and stabbed her in the kidney.

"Please," she cried out feebly, "I'm a mother."

Maybe it was the holiday season and he felt compassionate, but something stopped the next down draft of the knife in mid air. James felt panic come over him, something he had never felt before, and backed away from her almost in terror. He jumped to his feet, turned and ran, didn't stop until he got all the way home and tossed his bloody clothes in the washing machine before Millie had a chance to ask him what he was doing.

The brunette lived. It was all over the papers the next day. She could not identify her assailant as he had attacked her from behind. James kept a low profile for nearly ten years before killing somebody else. Number fifteen. Just to prove to himself that he could still do it. Then he quit. It wasn't easy to quit. Kind of like swearing off alcohol or drugs, but he was disciplined, smart and cautious. He had come this far. It was time to rest on his laurels and know that he outwitted and outlasted Chicago's finest. It was almost like winning the gold medal in the Olympics. But sometimes the idea of murder was hard to resist. Like tonight.

Now here he sat, tapping his toe to a frisky song and watching Betty Forester glide across the floor towards him, a smile on her face and arms opened wide.

"Will you dance with me?" she asked in a breathy voice, and James rose and gathered her in his arms, guiding her around the room, feeling the weight of her against his chest and the faster beating of his heart as it matched hers.

They danced for hours, until the lights flicked on and off in the hall, and everybody else wandered back to their rooms. It was inevitable that Betty asked him back to her place for another glass of wine. She tossed her blond curls and batted her eyelashes. James felt a familiar stirring. Oh, how he longed to hold her little neck in his hands and feel the satisfying snap of her vertebrae beneath his palms and watch as her eyes rolled skyward and clouded over.

James had thought a lot about killing here in Garden Court. It would be so easy. A pillow placed just so, a slip and accident in a room, an overdose of pills taken by mistake. He had even chosen a few victims and ached with desire as they shuffled past him in their walkers or waved from a wheelchair. But up until now, he had resisted. Tonight, however, he felt as though Betty was asking for it, and he longed to be the one to send her to meet her maker.

They wandered back to her room. James was amused to see that she had a soft candle burning in the corner, the bed turned down just so with a basket filled with wine, bread, cheese and chocolates. Oh yes, she was asking for it alright, and she had hunted James down in particular. He understood that. He understood what it is like to scheme and hunt and finally to pounce. Tonight Betty planned to pounce.

She perched on the side of the bed, crossing her legs expertly, letting more than a little thigh show as she reached for the wine. James sauntered across the room and sat down next to her, feeling the bed springs groan beneath his weight. Gently, he touched her leg, first as though by accident, but then with softer strokes, like you would a cat. Betty moaned and turned towards him, reaching for his hand, drawing him closer. James lifted her chin and brushed her lips with his own, then let his hand drift down to her breast. She responded with a small sound deep in the back of her throat and wound her hands around his waist.

James was acutely aware of every sound, every smell and every sight surrounding him. He could smell Betty, her breath, the shampoo in her hair, and feel the warmth of her body, mingled with the candle and glowing in the lamplight like a pearl. He felt her blood pound through the thin vein in her wrist and longed to open it up, smell the coppery tang and lick it with his tongue while it was still warm. This would be so easy, he thought, as he pushed her down on the mattress. So very easy. A quick bit of lovemaking, then the snap of the neck. Then he'd tip-toe out of her room after he arranged her on the floor, the wet wine in puddles as though she had dropped the bottle and then slipped.

But James had made it for 92 years, and he guessed it was a source of pride that he not get caught now. He didn't want to spend what time he had left sitting in a jail cell with all the other fools who were idiotic enough to get caught. No. He was part of an elite community out there in the world. Part of a secret club, a brotherhood of killers and burglars, con artists and war criminals who were living a life of freedom, enjoying the afterglow of their crimes. The smart ones. The ones who got away. The ones who had tucked themselves in nooks and crannies throughout the world, hunkered down and coiled into their lives like snakes. Betty reached up, unbuttoning her blouse. James stopped her.

"Not tonight" he said, patting her hand. "Perhaps another time."

With great effort, he straightened up and pressed his sweaty palms down his sweater, ran his hands through his hair, took a breath and turned towards the door.

"Oh my," Betty sighed, "I really wish you would stay."

"Another day. I promise," James said, his hand on the door knob. "I'm not quite ready yet. But I promise I am coming back for you, darlin'." His heart sped up as he thought of all the possibilities.

"Have a good night Betty."

Betty sat back on the headboard, twirling her wine in her crystal glass and whispered "You are quite the lady killer, James Frost."

James smiled and whispered back, "You can say that again."

About the Author:

Sharon Frame Gay grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road. Her work has been internationally published in anthologies and literary magazines, including Chicken Soup For The Soul, Typehouse, Fiction on the Web, Lowestoft Chronicle, Thrice Fiction, Crannog, Saddlebag Dispatches and others. Her work has won prizes at Women on Writing, Rope and Wire Magazine, The Writing District and Owl Hollow Press. She has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize.

Facebook: [Sharon Frame Gay-Writer](#)

Twitter: [@sharonframegay](#)

Fear | *Patrick J Wynn*

Claustrophobia rages as I take deep breaths to calm myself but stop, knowing that my air is limited. The coffin they've buried me in gives me little movement. The black so deep I can't see the padded lid, panic rises and I begin to scream and rage beating against the side and lid. I stop and listen hoping against hope. The sound of digging brings me back to sanity and I laugh and scream joyfully.

"MY GOD, THEY'RE DIGGING ME OUT. THANK YOU GOD. THANK YOU"

My joy turns to horror as I realize the digging is coming from beneath me.

Kisses | *Patrick J Wynn*

Kyle quietly shuffled down the hallway. He took the stairs leading down carefully knowing which stairs squeaked. Reaching for the doorknob he smiled but froze as a voice called him from the kitchen.

"Kyle honey. Did you forget something?" his mother called.

"Uhhmm," Kyle stuttered.

"Come in here young man," Mother demanded.

Kyle hung his head turning back up the stairs. He crossed the hall and entered the kitchen.

"You forgot to kiss your mother"

Kyle leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"What about your father?" She said holding up the plate holding his father's head.

Your Turn | *Patrick J Wynn*

The baby's cries pulled Karley from a deep sleep. She rolled over and waited to see if the baby would fall back asleep but after a few minutes she knew it was not to be. Throwing an elbow in her husband's back, he grunted and continued snoring.

"Seth." She whispered throwing another elbow.

"Huh?" Seth groaned and slid away from his wife's pointy elbows.

"Get up," Karley growled.

"Why."

"The baby is hungry and it's your turn." Karley snapped tossing another elbow that missed.

"Ok, Ok. Ok." Seth coughed and tossed back the covers.

Seth pushed himself up and stood by the bed scratching waiting for the baby to stop crying.

"Seth," Karley warned.

"Ok, I hear him," Seth answered.

Seth shuffled his way out of the bedroom and then across the hall. As he opened the door a chorus of whines echoed out. Seth stood looking down at the rows of small children chained to the walls and with a big yawn he selected one and unchained it. Grabbing the small crying child by the feet he dragged it down the hall toward the large pit dug into the floor at the end. He held up the wiggling crying child and tossed it down into the dark. He stood listening to the crying child in the dark hole until a heavy crawling sound reached his ears followed by a loud crunching snap and then silence.

"Love ya buddy," Seth called down into the darkness and returned to bed.

"You get to change his diapers," Seth grumbled to his snoring wife.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. His works have been published in Sirens Call, Dark Dossier, Short Horror and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.

When the dust settles, who will reign supreme?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Becca was coming home from camp!

Gloria glanced out the window at the glorious morning and smiled. She'd been upset for days, but now she was excited. She still felt hurt by her daughter's childish outburst last week. She remembered how Becca had been at the edge of the lake, tears streaming down her cheeks as she hugged her yellow bucket and beach ball. The seven-year-old girl had sobbed, "I hate Mommy. She's making me go away. I hate her so much, I wish she was dead!"

Those words felt like a physical blow to the gut. Gloria had blinked back shocked tears, then strode over to her daughter. "Come on, Becca."

"Don't want to go. I wanna stay and play."

"I know, Honey, but there are no children here. Don't you want to have friends to play with?"

"My toys are my friends! They love me!"

"Really!" Gloria snapped, still smarting from the childish hate-filled wish.

"Yes, they told me so!"

Gloria didn't bother to argue about talking beach toys. She grabbed Becca by the arm, dragged her to the car and drove her to overnight camp.

The week had gone by so fast and yet so slow. But today, Jack was picking Becca up after work. They'd be home for dinner. Gloria stared at the beach, so calm and quiet in the morning sunshine. The water sparkled and the sand was smooth except where the bucket and shovels were strewn about.

She walked down to the toys and frowned. *Why were they out again?* She wondered, positive no one with kids was visiting this side of the lake.

Probably teenagers! Yep, teenagers making a mess. She strode past the toys to stand knee deep in the perpetually cold water and wondered why the water never grew warm, even on hot, sunny days like this. It didn't really matter to her, she never went above her knees. That was as deep as she ever went. People asked her why they lived there if she couldn't, wouldn't swim or go out on a boat. "Because," she'd say, "Jack and Becca love it, and I enjoy painting the view."

Gloria decided to wade along the water's edge and then go back and pick up the beach toys. The icy bite of the water felt good contrasting with the warmth of the day. Ten feet down the beach, her foot went down into a huge hole that hadn't been there yesterday and she plunged forward, falling face down in the shallow water. Her head went under and hit the sand. She panicked, splashing and screaming, inhaling the lake. Water rushed down her throat and she choked on the burning sandy liquid until she instinctively pushed herself up. Kneeling in the shallow water, her throat on fire, pain making her eyes tear, she wondered with a deep sense of dread, *Who... why would someone dig such a deep hole?*

Her brain spun with residual terror and her face burned red with embarrassment over panicking in such shallow water. She took stock: her throat hurt, her face hurt and her ankle hurt. "Great start to a beautiful day!" she croaked and wiped a trickle of bloody water off her nose.

Limping slowly, painfully toward the cottage she wondered why the toys kept appearing on the beach. Twice she had almost fallen into large holes dug next to the patio, exactly where she usually set up her easel and oil paints. "I should call the police," she muttered and bent to gather up the bucket. The slight morning breeze kicked up, blowing sand onto her wet clothes and hair. Movement on the edge of her vision made her turn and look at the lake. "Now how'd that get out of the shed?" she muttered as she watched Becca's favorite beachball drifting on the tiny ripples, the growing wind taking it out toward the middle.

"Damn it," she grumbled realizing she would have to go and get it. Becca would carry on if her ball was gone Gloria really wanted this perfectly beautiful day to be a happy reunion.

She hobbled to the shed and pulled out the small, child-sized inflatable boat and paddle. She looked for the vest, but couldn't find it. She stood, frozen with indecision. The few times she'd been on a boat, she never went out without a vest. Inspiration hit and she grabbed the inner tube and struggling, got it over her shoulders and around her waist.

Tugging the boat to the water, she was annoyed at how nervous she felt about going out alone. She forced her legs to bend, forced her heart to slow down to a less death defying rhythm, then she got in the boat and paddled. The sun felt warm on her hair and face, but the growing breeze was cooling her as she pushed the oar through the water.

The drifting ball bobbed just out of reach. Frustrated and a little scared of the chilled, dark, water, Gloria pushed the paddle hard and grabbed out for the ball. Her fingertips brush it away. She stretched farther.

The boat wobbled, tipped and flipped. A cold, wet, wave of terror washed over her and she screamed as she fell. Then calmed down when she realized the inner tube was keeping her afloat. She squinted through the sun glare on the ripples and watched the inflatable boat speed away, chasing after the ball in the gusting wind.

"All right," she said, trying to remain calm and rational. "I'll doggie paddle back to shore," but the tube seemed to be fighting her, carrying her out deeper, almost, she thought, as if it had a mind of its own.

She clung to it, fighting to push herself to shore until she felt the tube around her waist getting soft. She flailed her arms and legs struggling to get it off and somehow succeeded.

Her head dunked below the water but she managed to hold onto the deflating tube. She bobbed up and saw the plastic plug that sealed the air hole had somehow popped opened. Struggling to stay afloat, she managed to blow it up, then clung to it, calling for help until she was hoarse. Hopefully someone would walk on the beach or go boating and hear her.

She could handle this, she decided, calming down. She might even drift to the other shore. Even if no one came by, Jack and Becca would be home by nightfall and find her.

All she had to do was keep her grip on the ring and stay afloat. Then she saw the plug pop out again and heard the hissing air. She blew it up a second time, pushed in the plastic sealer hard and waited.

The sun beat down but its warmth couldn't penetrate the icy current below the surface.

"All I need to do is hold on and wait," she said through chattering teeth and watched in disbelief, as the plug suddenly seemed to wiggle clear of the sealed hole. She weakly blew, slowly inflating the ring and then struggling with numb fingers, managed to push the little plug back in. The cold water was drawing the feeling from her arms and the energy from her body. "All I have to do is wait for help. Just gotta hold on," she assured herself over and over as the lethargy that comes with hypothermia sapped her stamina and her will.

She clung to that inflatable ring, so weak and cold, she didn't even have the strength to react when the air plug popped open ... again.

About the Author:

Diane Arrelle, the pen name of South Jersey writer Dina Leacock, has sold more than 250 short stories and has two short story collections: *Just A Drop In The Cup* and *Seasons On The Dark Side*. Retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center, she is now co-owner of a small publishing company, Jersey Pines Ink LLC. She resides with her husband and her new cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

Party | *Patrick J Wynn*

Waves of nausea brought May up out of a foggy restless sleep, she rolled over and fought the urge to puke. Taking deep breaths to fight the room from spinning May slowly sat up and let her legs drop to the floor then leaned over letting her elbows drop to her knees. The room spun and wobbled around her, her stomach rolled and she gagged a little fighting to keep things down. If there was one thing she hated it was puking. Deep slow breaths seemed to help and after a few minutes the room came back to normal and her stomach settled. Standing up she held onto the dresser until she got her balance and then exited the bedroom.

Getting the coffee maker going May tried to piece together the previous evening. She remembered her date Bill picking her up. Together they drove to the party and spent the evening playing games and laughing with friends. As the night progressed May remembered the start of the drinking games and then the night went fuzzy. She remembered bits and pieces of the drive home and coming in the apartment but from there she drew a blank. Did Bill sleep here? Did they sleep together? Did he leave? She just couldn't remember. As the coffee maker buzzed May felt her stomach roll and a wave of nausea made her run for the bathroom. Barely making it she lifted the lid and vomited. Her stomach rolled and she retched until dry heaves took over. Taking deep breaths she leaned forward and looked into the bowl. Three fingers floated in the brown water of the toilet. It was then she remembered what happened to Bill.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. His works have been published in *Sirens Call*, *Dark Dossier*, *Short Horror* and *Trembling with Fear*. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.

Deshawn let out a long breath, feeling his stomach push out against his waist band. His focus drawn to his bulbus stomach which had been created by his obvious weight gain. He would have to go up another pant size if this continued. "Supper is almost ready!", Teresa hollered from the kitchen. Deshawn stood up from the couch, his mind now focused on Teresa's cooking. He made his way to the kitchen table, admittedly feeling a surge of excitement for the approaching meal. He had never tasted cooking anywhere near as delicious as Teresa's, which had easily become the highlight of their relationship to him. He plopped into his usual spot, his stomach jiggling as he landed. Deshawn had always heard about the relationship gut, but now he was actually experiencing it firsthand.

When him and Teresa first met he wasn't a workout junkie per say, but he did like to keep in good shape. He would go on runs, do some biking, or even play a few games of pickup at least a few times a week. When they started dating he still kept to the same workout regimen for the first few weeks. It was after about a month of dating when he first tried her cooking, and he found himself falling in love. After a month or two of her delicious meals he found himself only doing workouts once a week. That soon fell to once or twice every other week, and that eventually led to him not working out at all.

Teresa emerged from the kitchen with two plates in hand. A small one for herself, and a larger plate for Deshawn, containing extra portions. She set the plate down before Deshawn, allowing the aroma of the meatloaf and mash potatoes to fill his nostrils. She slowly pulled out her chair, lowering her small frame into the seat. Deshawn had noticed her weight loss before, but for some reason it seemed especially evident today. If Deshawn was making up the weight gain of the relationship, then Teresa had been supplementing the weight loss. She had been a little on the chubby side when Deshawn first met her, but over the past few months she had gotten rid of the excess fat. Teresa had continued to lose weight, whittling her down to little more than skin and bones.

She never really seemed to eat much of her food, having minuscule portions or not eating at all sometimes. This was fine with Deshawn, because it meant there was more of the food left for him. He dug into the meal before him, eating with an extreme level of gusto. Teresa swirled her potatoes around with her fork, watching with a smile as Deshawn devoured the food. Teresa asked, "Does it taste good babe?". Deshawn barely heard her speak, as his focus was on the food before him. He simply nodded at her and continued to eat.

She let out a little chuckle, "That's good. That means you'll really be able to feel the surprise." Deshawn looked at her quizzically. He opened his mouth to ask her what surprise she was talking about, but a sudden bout of dizziness hit him. In fact, he started to feel very tired, so tired his head began to feel incredibly heavy. All his energy left him as his whole face fell right down into the plate. The last thing Deshawn saw before darkness took him was Teresa slowly standing up, with a wicked grin stretched across her face.

Deshawn awoke to the sound of metal tapping against metal. His eyes were blinded by a light shining directly down upon him. He blinked several times, letting his eyes adjust. His head had been slightly elevated, allowing him to see easily in front of him. The first things his eyes saw was Teresa, dressed in a white uniform, complete with a large apron. The large sleeves seemed to engulf her small arms, barely allowing her glove covered hands to poke through. Deshawn tried to move, but felt that his limbs had been restrained. He looked to see why he couldn't move, finding each limb bound to a leather strap attached to a metal table.

He let out a loud scream, causing Teresa to jump a little in surprise. She ran over to him, ripping off a decent chunk of duct tape from a roll in her hand and slapping it over his mouth. "You scared me there," she chuckled, "I wasn't expecting you to be awake yet". She walked back to the other side of the room, grabbing hold of a large, silver tray. She wheeled it over to the right side of Deshawn, leaving it up by his head.

"It's good you're awake now", she picked up a pristine hacksaw. "Fear really adds a distinct flavor to the meat, there's nothing quite like it." Teardrops began to flow down Deshawn's cheeks, as his eyes looked pleadingly at Teresa. "You have your relationship gut," Teresa pointed at his stomach. She then brought the hacksaw down, resting just above Deshawn's right ankle. She smiled, "And now I'm going to get mine."

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a young writer and student living in the center of the United States. He has a passion for all things horror, and loves to incorporate horror elements in his writing. His only hope for his works is that someone will enjoy and share them with others.

"I think we're safe," I said as I peered in the side view mirror. Only grass and trees whizzed by. We had left the horrid monsters behind.

News reports claimed that other towns were safe. Only Lavania had been affected after the earthquake that had split the ground like a lip, vast amounts of molten rock oozing forth like blood. That was when the creatures first appeared, just one or two at first, but the incidents steadily increased. Nobody could explain what they were or where they had come from. The religious nuts said they were a sign of the apocalypse, God's punishment of Lavania for its sins. Of course the scientists said that was ridiculous, but they had no better claim on an explanation. They could only say that the things were there, they were dangerous, and we had to get out.

So that was what Tommy and I had done. We left behind almost everything in our apartment—because we could always acquire a sagging couch and numerous empty pizza boxes wherever we ended up—and jumped into his Jeep. We hadn't seen any of the creatures as we sped out of neighborhood, but we wouldn't feel safe until we had crossed the town border.

And so it was that I told him we were safe as I saw the sign whiz past, 'Thanks for Visiting Lavania. Come Back Soon!' I sank against the back of the seat, not ready to think about where we would go but glad to leave behind where we had been. The wind picked up my hair and flung it around my head, a refreshing sensation after the sweat and the fear.

"I bet we could crash with my aunt for awhile," Tommy volunteered, glancing at me from the driver's seat. That was Tommy: he always had a plan and a place to go because everyone loved Tommy. I loved Tommy, but I wasn't going to tell him that. In retrospect, I probably should have, but it's hard to confess your feelings when you're speeding down the highway and watching your rearview for homicidal beasts.

"Are you hot?" I asked. A burning sensation was creeping up the back of my neck. It heated me from the inside despite the breeze that washed over us from the open top of the Jeep.

"I'm good," he shrugged. Of course he was good. Tommy was always good.

But as beads of sweat popped out on my upper lip, I knew that I was not good. I didn't know why, but I wasn't. I was just about to tell him so when a clawed hand wrapped around my neck, pinning me to the back of the seat. It seared into my flesh with a hissing noise. I gagged as I tried to pull it off, but I only succeeded in burning my fingers.

Tommy slammed on the brakes, then hit the gas, then slammed on the brakes again. He didn't know what to do, and even if I did I wouldn't have been able to tell him with the creature's hand around my throat.

The creature pulled himself into the cab of the vehicle despite Tommy's wild driving. It hovered before me as though the speed of the Jeep and perhaps even gravity didn't affect it. I hadn't seen one of the beasts up close, only blurred videos on the news, but at that moment I wished I hadn't.

It was humanoid, insofar as it had a head on its shoulders, two arms, and two legs. But its skin was the deep black of something burned, crackled and crispy like a hot dog that had been forgotten on the grill. A fiery redness glowed beneath, peeking out from the fissures in its skin. I couldn't see a face, but I didn't need to in order to know it was looking at me, studying me, boring into me.

My horror froze me in place. I should have been fighting it off, kicking, punching, anything, even screaming. But I sat inert in the seat of the Jeep, the creature looming over me. Tommy was screaming something from the other side of the vehicle. I was too hypnotized by the burning creature to understand him.

I didn't know how the creatures took their victims. I only knew that missing people were all over the news, their pictures flashed across the screen every night after dinner. I didn't have to wait long to discover their methods.

The creature bent back his leg as though to kick me. But when he brought it forward, something jabbed into the end of my big toe. I looked down, regretting my choice of flip flops that day. The thing had a fat claw on the end of its foot, like a blackened thorn from a burned bush. It was buried completely in my flesh.

I think I did finally scream at that point, but the pain has blocked out the audio on the memory. A scorching like a private hell was pushing its way up through my foot, charring my bones as it went. I stared in horror as it made its way up to my ankle. I tried to yank my foot back, but my efforts were useless. The claw remained implanted in me, infecting me. The flesh around it blistered and blackened. It flaked off, falling like black snow to the floorboard of the Jeep and revealing bright embers underneath.

My breath left me as I realized how it worked. The blackness crept up my leg, and I understood why the police never found any bodies. I was becoming one of them, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The fire incinerated its way up my body. It wrapped around my heart, reducing it to a pile of ashes before

moving on. Even my vision was taken over with a hot darkness for a moment before it cleared to reveal a world that burned around me.

I looked down at my body, now a mass of hot coals in human form. Fire danced inside them, a deep crimson blending with shades of orange and sulfurous yellow. I was no longer afraid as I looked up at the demon that had made me.

It extracted its thorny toe from my foot with a quick yank, and a claw of my own grew in its place. I turned to Tommy.

About the Author:

Ashley O'Melia is an independent author and freelancer from Southern Illinois. She holds her bachelor's degree in creative writing and English from Southern New Hampshire University. Her books include *The Wanderer's Guide to Dragon Keeping* and *The Graveside Detective*. Her short stories have been published in *The Penmen Review*, *Paradox*, and *Subcutaneous*. Ashley's freelance work has spanned numerous genres for clients around the world.

Facebook: [Ashley O'Melia Author](#)
Author Blog: [Ashley O'Melia, Author](#)

Petal, Page, Piel | Sonora Taylor

Petal, page, piel. Petal, page, piel. Hanna sang the words to herself as she glued the pages of her book together. This book would be her finest yet, one filled with her fondest memories of Seth.

Petal, page piel. Petal, page, piel. A vase of wilted roses sat near her materials. Each flower was a gift from Seth, each page a transcript of the loving words he'd said to her. A book of love notes that would hold his words forever, even though he stopped saying them to her long ago.

Hanna sighed a little as she capped her pen, then turned the page. The book crackled like creaking bones beneath skin. Hanna remembered how books of old were made from skin, both animal and human.

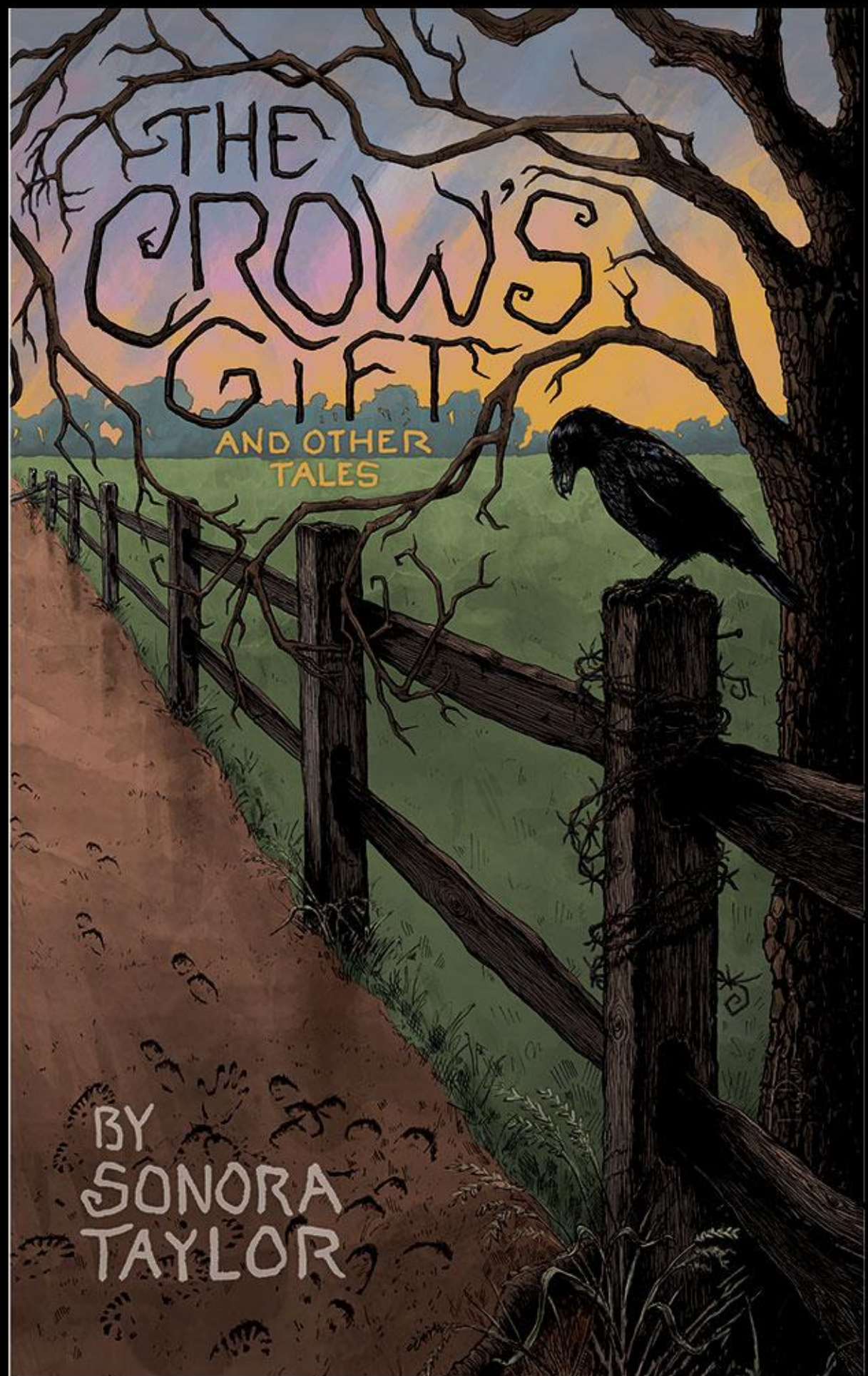
Skin. Such a blunt word, one that pierced the tongue like a shard. Hanna much preferred the Spanish word, piel. It sounded like peel. To peel away skin sounded so much nicer than to skin someone to the bone. She loved the way Seth's skin had looked between her fingertips. She loved it now as she caressed the pages of his skin inside her book, sheets she'd filled with all his lovely words.

Hanna placed a rose from Seth between the crease and shut the book to flatten it. Seth's gifts, words, and body would be forever hers. *Petal, page, piel. Petal, page, piel.*

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition*, *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, *Please Give*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *Mercurial Stories*, *Tales to Terrify*, and Camden Park Press' "Quoth the Raven." She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

Facebook: [Sonora Taylor](#)
Twitter: [@sonorawrites](#)



Available on Amazon

The sight of her made Robby sick. Unfortunately, he'd been placed in Braintree's alternative high school, where classes were limited to twelve students each. They were both juniors so Katy was almost impossible to avoid. She got Robby in trouble his first day back.

He could not fathom how the girl had even made it to adolescence. Katy had a spinal deformity so severe she looked like a reversed comma. She always dressed in loose black dresses and tunics over black leggings, which did nothing to lessen the impression. She would not use a wheelchair or crutches. She walked the halls with a tortured, crouching gait on bowed legs. Her arms were almost always bent at the elbows, her fists resting against her chest like a wedding guest waiting to launch into the chicken dance. She could relax her arms and use her hands but few people had seen it. She always skipped lunch, sipped water through a straw and used speech recognition software on her own laptop to write her assignments. Her speech was even worse than her looks—raspy and vibrating like an insect was caught in her throat.

Repelled yet fascinated, Robby spent much of his first day in the alternative school sitting where he could see Katy or following close behind her in the halls. The other students, who knew his reputation, treated him like an outcast while they were tolerant, even friendly with the freak.

Before long, Robby was whispering things whenever he closed the distance between them—easy to do because she was so jerky and slow. “Are you a retard?” he hissed. “Do you know how ugly you are?”

Katy pretended she didn't hear him. Robby was determined to get a reaction. Just as the dismissal bell rang, he leaned in close and made a vulgar observation about what no one would ever want to do with her, assuming it was even physically possible.

At 7:30 the next morning, Robby found himself sitting with Mr. Driscoll, the director of the alternative program. Katy had said nothing but one of her friends (Katy had friends?) had overheard the last of Robby's comments.

Driscoll could have rehashed the bullshit accusation that got Robby excluded from school for most of his sophomore year: Supposedly, Robby had cornered a girl with a disability in the stairwell and said lewd things to her. The girl was timid but her friend, who was coming down the stairs, had plenty to say. Everyone believed her; no one believed him. The next thing he knew, Robby was being tutored in the library.

Driscoll didn't mention any of that. He sat silently at his desk, watching Robby, for several minutes. When Robby began to squirm, the director said, “You've been given a second chance to finish your education in this building. We can help you. That's what this program is for. But the headmaster won't give you another chance if you ruin this one. As long as you are here, you will treat teachers with respect. You will treat other students with respect. You won't post things on the internet about people you don't like. And you will leave this girl alone. Do you have any questions?”

Robby shook his head.

Mr. Driscoll sighed and said, “You have two days of in-school.” He picked up the phone to tell Robby's mother what had happened.

Robby had plenty of time in ISS to think. He hoped his dad wouldn't hear about the latest trouble. His mom wouldn't tell if she thought she could get away with it. Robby's dad didn't hit much anymore; Robby was big enough to hit back. But he hated everything else his dad did when he got mad—the yelling, the sarcasm and the looks, like a fat toad staring down its lunch. Robby spent much of his time in ISS drawing the way he felt. He drew himself as a bug.

He watched Katy as she lurched up and down the hall outside the ISS room with her equally weird friends. She hung with a small group of kids who loved computer games, cosplay and anime. They took college classes online instead of AP classes in the mainstream and swapped stories about their anxiety attacks. But she rarely spoke except to Leon, her best friend. He was in the theatre guild and was constantly drawing in his sketchbook. He wore black tee shirts and skinny jeans and heavy, black-framed glasses he didn't need. He had this routine with Katy. She said something outrageous in a low voice. Robby couldn't hear the words, just the whirring hum of insect wings in her throat. Then Leon would howl with laughter and say, “Oh, Katy, you didn't.”

“Oh, yeah, Katy did,” she responded. Every time. Every fucking time.

He couldn't stand that voice. Robby heard it again and again over the length of his suspension. Near the end of his second day he finally identified what it resembled. He remembered lying awake on stifling summer nights, driven crazy by the scraping drone of green bugs on the window screens. A *katydid*—that was the sound. Oh, yeah, Katy did.

She's a bug, just like me, Robby thought and he immediately shook his head violently to clear his mind. He did not like the odd direction his imagination sometimes took when he was alone. The bell rang for lunch and, thankfully, his time in ISS was over.

The alternative program had a group meeting every day. This was where students talked about peer issues and asked each other for feedback and support to earn special privileges within the program. If someone did something wrong, they got hammered by the other students. After lunch, it was Robby's turn.

Katy wore just a hint of a smile as the student 'leaders' lectured Robby about bullying, rehashed his past mistakes and advised him about what he needed to do to be a success in the program. He even got the 'I used to be a bully but look what I've done with my life' stories. He swallowed his anger, smiled back at Katy and plotted his revenge.

Leon could make bug jokes with Katy. Why couldn't Robby do the same?

The following week, Katy did not show up for school. Then, on Thursday, Robby got to see Katy's mother. He knew she was Katy's mom because the woman looked exactly like her daughter, although she was much taller. She had the same, crouching, bow-legged walk, the same torsion in the arms and an identical curve in her spine. Even the voice was like Katy's, only worse. When this woman spoke—when she breathed, for God's sake-- it sounded like a bird was trapped and dying in her throat, frantically flailing its wings to get free.

She clutched Katy's lap top in the crook of her elbow as she was escorted by the headmaster into Mr. Driscoll's office. They were followed by the community police officer assigned to the school and the director of computer services. Robby knew the latter was there to help Mr. Driscoll get past the school's fire wall and open up a fake Facebook page.

That was fine. Let them look at it. Robby hadn't actually posted it; one of his friends had. It was no worse than the way Leon teased Katy. And the page was hilarious. Robby's friend drove by Katy's house and got a picture of her waiting for the short bus. They placed it on 'Katy's page' along with likes and hobbies a bug would have: living underground until maturity, babysitting maggots, masticating leaves and avoiding spider webs. Robby found a picture of a female praying mantis devouring her mate and wrote underneath, 'After fucking my boyfriends, I like to bite their heads off.'

It was a long meeting. It ended just as the alternative students were passing to their next classes. Katy's mom lurched out of Driscoll's office and stared at Robby with glittering green eyes, as if he was some kind of insect. Robby collided with Leon, who gave him a sneer of contempt then smiled at Katy's mom and nodded.

Robby had nothing to say when Driscoll and the headmaster questioned him. The police officer got permission from Robby's mom to look at his phone and began scrolling through text messages and photos. She identified his friends and interviewed them. By the end of the day, Robby's parents had been summoned to the headmaster's office. Their son would finish his high school career in night school. His friend had a five-day suspension. Katy's mom was pressing charges against both of them for cyber-bullying.

His dad chased Robby up to his room as soon as they got home. Robby was fast and strong enough but his father threw a belt around his son's neck from behind and lifted him off his feet. Robby wanted to breathe so he allowed the old man to beat on him.

Robby was awakened that night by the thrumming of insect wings. It was November and much too cold for bugs. Even so, when Robby threw his window open, the rasping sound was as loud as a table saw. The pit of his stomach went cold. There was more than one creature out there: One making the initial buzz, a second one responding. They kept it up all night—and the next night and the next.

It continued intermittently over the next month. No one seemed to hear it but Robby.

One December night, as he walked home from class in a freezing rain, a car pulled alongside. The passenger window opened and Leon's voice called out, "Need a ride?"

Robby shrugged and got in, grunting perfunctory gratitude. They passed a Dunkies and Leon nosed into the drive-through. "Want some coffee?" asked Leon.

Robby was almost too surprised to answer but said, "Extra cream, extra sugar. Thanks."

When they reached Robby's street, Leon pulled over. Robby opened the door but Leon said, "Just a sec."

Robby looked at Leon and waited.

"Have you had enough?" asked Leon.

"Enough of what?" Robby asked.

"You know what. Have you had enough?"

"I'm on probation. What else does she want?"

"An apology. And reparations."

"Reparations?"

"Like community service. Life isn't easy for her, you know. You could help."

"I didn't do anything and I don't owe anyone," said Robby as he got out of the car.

Robby woke up in the middle of the night and almost fell out of bed, jolted awake by an idea.

Katy was harassing him. Leon had all but said she was. Leon was part of it, too. There were at least two people making those noises. It occurred to Robby that if he was patient and smart, he could turn the tables and teach that little freak a lesson.

After a period of quiet that lasted through the holidays, the bug calls started up again. Robby got out of bed and dressed, crept to the back door and waited. The rasping sounded again from the back yard. He eased out the door and followed the noise. His phone was in his hand, ready to take the picture that would prove he was being bullied.

The sound moved to his neighbor's yard and Robby followed. He pursued it around the corner and down a dead-end street to a fence bordering the T station. Like every kid in town, he knew where to find the loose boards that provided access to the area around the tracks. He squeezed through the narrow opening and followed the rattling hum to a stand of trees alongside a lot for service vehicles.

Leon stepped out of the shadows to greet Robby. He was twirling one of those metal noisemakers people use on New Year's Eve. It was not what Robby had expected.

"You were making all that noise?" Robby exclaimed, taking a photo. "What's wrong with you?"

"Most of the time, it wasn't me," said Leon. "But I wanted to talk to you, so..." He shrugged. "Look, we asked you before and we're going to ask you one more time."

"Ask me what?" *Who is we*, Robby wondered.

"Do you want to help Katy—to make up for the way you treated her."

"I never did anything to her."

Leon gave an exasperated sigh. "You know, I was an asshole just like you. Then I realized what a unique, beautiful person Katy is. She needs help getting around and getting things done. I've been assisting her for the past three years. But I'm graduating soon and going off to college. Someone's got to take over. We think you should do it. You owe it to her." The rasping noise had started up again in the stand of trees just over Leon's shoulder.

"I didn't do anything to her and I'm not doing anything for her. You know what you two are doing? You're stalking me."

"So your answer is no?" asked Katy as she slipped out of the trees. Every breath she took rattled in her throat, like something was trapped and dying in there.

Robby opened his mouth to make a retort but the words died on his tongue. She was much taller than he remembered. Her head bobbed delicately atop a long, slender neck, taking in all her surroundings at once. Her loose clothes fell away and Katy stepped towards him with smooth, long strides on two pairs of slender legs. The lights from the adjacent lot shone on scales of black and gray chitin covering her graceful, tapering body. Her arms, tortuously bent and clutching at her chest, relaxed and unfurled into the spiny, grasping appendages of a mantis. Her hands and flexing, functional fingers were actually attached to her elbows.

Leon was right. Katy was beautiful. Robby was mesmerized.

As she loomed over Robby she suddenly coughed. Her teeth flew out of her mouth, revealing horny, chewing mandibles. A wet mass that could have been either fur or feathers landed at Robby's feet. Something had actually died in her throat.

Robby turned to run but Katy grabbed him with her fore legs and lifted him off the ground.

"I don't actually fuck guys before I bite their heads off," she said, and she took Robby's head with one clean snap of her mandibles.

Leon grimaced and took a long walk while Katy methodically gnawed her prize from the stub of its neck down to its toes. By the time he smoked a cigarette and returned nothing was left but a few dollops of blood he easily scuffed away with snow and wet leaves.

"I was starving," said Katy, delicately nibbling blood from the spines on her front legs.

"Wow," said Leon, inspecting the ground. "You even ate the clothes?" He laughed. "Katy, you didn't."

A rattling chuckle sounded deep in her thorax as she replied, "Oh, yeah, Katy did."

About the Author:

Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired teacher, haunt actor and naturalist at Mass Audubon. Publications include the novels *Jhator* and *Bonebelly* and the horror collection *Erring on the Side of Calamity*. She was born and raised in Flint, Michigan and now lives in Norton, Massachusetts near her adult children.

Author Blog: www.christinemlajewski.com

Twitter: [@cmlajewski](https://twitter.com/cmlajewski)

Riley signed for the package and came back inside the house.

"What was the delivery?" asked his wife Barbara looking up from her tablet?

He looked at the label. "Actually, it's from Estella."

"Your ex-wife?"

"How many other Estellas do I know? Apparently, she's trekking in some National Park in Brazil at the moment."

"Been keeping in touch with her, have you?" asked Barbara.

"Estella stays in touch with a woman at the office and she told me," he said.

Riley understood her anxiety. The new younger wife needing to be sure he no longer had feelings for the mother of his children.

"I expect she's trying to walk off her feelings. That was the whole point of her taking a sabbatical after our divorce." Eager to change the subject he tore open the package. "It looks like a bulb or corm, it's a plant, anyway. Hang on, there are instructions. We're supposed to plant it in a pot of damp compost and leave it on a windowsill."

Barbara grunted and went back to her tablet. Riley knew better than to expect her to do the watering. He planted the bulb, a shoot appeared within a few days and the tip immediately began to form a fat bud.

Two weeks later, he came into the kitchen and found that the bud had opened and produced a strange but beautiful red bloom. He'd seen nothing like it before, so he used the FlowerChecker app on his phone. Barbara came down a few minutes later, hair tousled from sleep and wearing the silk dressing gown he'd bought for her, looking lovely even without her makeup.

"Where's my tea, you said you'd bring me one up?"

Riley ignored her, he'd double bagged the plant and put it into their wood-burning stove. He was kneeling, adding paper and kindling from the basket at its side.

"What are you doing?" asked his wife.

He stood, picked up his phone and read from the screen. "I can't pronounce the name but it says, 'Proto-carnivorous plant. The flower produces spores which secrete an opiate-like psychoactive substance, which causes a rush of pleasure as they are inhaled. The spores lodge in the sinus cavities of the victim and develop filaments which infiltrate the brain and quickly kill it. They utilize the nutrients of decay in their growth cycle.' Nasty, very nasty, Estella," he muttered.

"That bitch, she tried to kill us," said Barbara.

"Hell, hath no fury...."

"Yes, but murder?"

"Look, I'm not excusing her but she hasn't got over our affair and the final break-up of the marriage. She can't accept the relationship was on its wobbly last legs, and our affair was just the final push. Until she accepts that, she won't be able to take the step from anger to acceptance."

"We've gone over this repeatedly. She just has to come to terms with it. You both changed as time passed, you weren't the same people you were when you married twenty years ago."

But we went through a lot together, thought Riley, and now she's alone.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Burn this bloody thing first," he said as he knelt and struck a match, "and then send her an email."

Dear Estella,

Thanks for the bulb, it looks intriguing. Barbara and I are going on holiday for a month, so I gave it to your sister. It'll be a nice little project for her and her kids. I'll be interested to see what it grows into, something exotic I expect.

Thanks again, and I hope this means you're moving on emotionally and getting over your feelings of bitterness towards Barbara and me. I hope that, in the interest of our sons, we can become friends eventually. Let's move on like adults.

I'm sure you'll find somebody to share your life with soon. After all, they say fifty is the new forty and you're still closer to fifty than sixty.

Best regards,

Riley.

About the Author:

Roger Ley has just released a novella called 'The Muslim Prince' which asks the question, 'What if Princess Diana hadn't died?' It's an alternative history about the Islamification of the British Royal Family. A love story with a seasoning of sci-fi.

Author Blog: [Roger Ley](#)

Goodreads: [Books by author Roger Ley](#)

Beware The Humans On The Beds | *Terry Miller*

Beware the humans on the beds,
Dear Ol' Mum would say.
They wish our kind all be dead
Just 'cause beneath we lay.

Why must we all live in fear,
In the places we each hide,
Of the steps that's coming near?
We dare not move at night.

How they tell stories of us all,
So many lies within their heads.
Quickly beneath the mattress crawl!
Beware the humans on the beds!

Lab Rats | *Terry Miller*

The lights flickered before they went out sending the house into complete darkness. A loud hum rattled the walls, pictures beat against the drywall. Nate tumbled in a dizzying fall to the cold, wooden floor.

He awoke upright, his eyes focused on another man across from him in some strange pod, another beside, and so on. Nate tried to move but the effort proved futile. He couldn't speak.

Down the corridor, a figure approached. Seconds later it stood before him, scaly skin and deep set eyes staring expressionless.

Further down, a scream erupted through the hall. The creature smiled, still staring.

The Bad Child | *Terry Miller*

The bad child is always in his room. Always. That's the way the story goes. To this day, the room remains bolted shut from the outside. Visitors say, at night, you can still hear the sobbing and sniffing behind the door; sixty years of tears fallen to the wooden floor.

The last tour of the evening, a bit of curiosity struck Bobby Evans. He could barely reach the latch but he managed. The door lightly creaked. No one was inside. What a rip-off!

That night, Mrs. Evans passed by Bobby's closed bedroom door, the sobs and sniffles broke her heart.

The Eyes Have It | *Terry Miller*

The jars on the basement shelves held stories of torture. Doctor Gaines admired his collection but couldn't be satisfied without the occasional addition. That's where Tara would come in, she had such pretty eyes; such pretty blue eyes. How he would love them to stare into at his convenience!

Tara squirmed, struggling against the restraints to no avail. The shot going into her arm quickly took effect. She watched in horror as the instrument drew closer, then closer; she watched until pitch black darkness engulfed her.

The beautiful blues settled in the formaldehyde, the Doctor lost in their mesmerizing hue.

About the Author:

Terry Miller lives in Portsmouth, Ohio. His work has been featured in Sanitarium Magazine, Devolution Z, Jitter, Rhysling Anthology 2017, Poetry Quarterly, and O Unholy Night In Deathlehem.

Amazon Author Page: [Terry Miller](#)

The soft earth shifted as they walked, throwing dust around them like funeral confetti. Abigail pulled on her brother's hand.

"Come on, I'm sure we're close".

Gideon nodded, too tired to raise his eyes to hers. Fallen leaves crinkled beneath their feet, birds yelled at one another across the cloudy sky, and trees rustled in the wind. All a part of the terrestrial symphony around them.

Abigail missed the other sounds: Mama's laugh, Papa's heavy boots on the front porch when he returned home from the fields, the way he would stomp them to loosen the day's dirt and mud before coming into the house. The tea kettle singing from the kitchen.

She didn't miss the crackling of the fire, or her mama's voice calling out to them on that clear November night. That's what had pulled Abigail from her slumber, her mother's voice. Harsher than usual, high and frightened.

"Go out the window!"

Abigail had grabbed her brother's shoulders and shaken him awake. She pulled him, sleep-shuffling, towards the bedroom door. The doorknob's hot iron had singed her tender skin, leaving a sizzling ring branded on the pink flesh long after she jerked it back. Beneath the door, in that small space between wood and floor, angry red and orange light flashed. Their mother screamed again, from further away and in between coughs.

"Go out the window!"

So they did. Abigail and Gideon collapsed, coughing, beneath the large oak tree in the front yard. There they remained through the night, tears running rivers down their soot covered faces while they waited for their parents. Timbers crackled and collapsed, throwing flashing embers up into the dark night. The forest around them held its breath and waited for morning.

The dawn broke with a whisper. Harsh yellow beams of light illuminated dancing plumes of smoke amid the smoldering wreckage. Hesitant at first, the birds resumed their song and the trees their dance while Abigail peered into their parents' bedroom window. Leaning over as far as she dared, her cheeks flushed red with the heat still emanating from what used to be her home.

There was Papa, sprawled out on his back with their mama's favorite butcher knife protruding from his chest, and Mama lying next to him. Abigail jumped back from the window with a gasp.

It didn't make sense. Mama had called out to them, why hadn't she left as they did? And the knife...Abigail shook her head and glanced at Gideon behind her, sleeping at the base of the old Oak tree. She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand, smudging the soot across her cheek, and roused him from his nest of grass and branches. He looked at the house and back up at Abigail, but she couldn't answer the question in his eyes. Not yet, anyway. She gathered her arms about him, hoisted him onto her hip, and began walking away from their Mama and Papa and whatever had happened in that room.

They walked in the direction Papa would come when he returned from his trips to town. She hoped they were going the right way.

About the Author:

Holly Rae Garcia is a corporate photographer on the Texas Coast. Her short works have been featured in *The Sirens Call eZine*, *The Bookends Review*, and *The 81 Words Project*. Her debut psychological thriller novel, *Come Join the Murder*, will be released March 2020.

Author Blog: www.HollyRaeGarcia.com

Twitter: [@HollyRaeGarcia](https://twitter.com/HollyRaeGarcia)



Jessica F Holt

Diana looked up – the light from the top of the well shaft was a distant star, beautiful, unreachable. She became aware that she would die here, her pain-ridden mind overwhelmed with the grief that she'd hoped to escape...

Spain, Diana mused, was not what she'd expected...

She'd bought a finca in the wilds of Murcia to get away from the world, to run away, if she was being honest. She'd sold her flat in London, convinced that she and Spider, her greyhound, would find peace in the ramshackle farmhouse surrounded by fallow fields and shady orange groves.

But she'd arrived at the start of the hunting season...

She loathed the local hunters, their blatant disregard of the law and brutal, casual cruelty were repulsive. Her first job had been to erect tall fences around her estate to prevent the hunt from trespassing on her land; but they often broke through, rampaging across her fields without apology or reparation. The sounds of the hunt grated on her nerves as they ricocheted off the resonant stone walls of her home. She hated the crescendo, the excited yelps of the dogs, the gunshots and the revving of big truck engines that sang the song of a successful kill.

She stroked Spider's velvet ears; he tilted his head, then rolled onto his back, begging for a belly rub. Diana obliged. Spider had been her salvation after witnessing her husband's slow and painful death from bone cancer. She'd been so strong, right up until the wake, when suddenly her weakness had overwhelmed her. Spider comforted her in the bleak nights, had given her a reason to get up in the morning...

Diana listened; she could never let Spider out while the hunt was in the area. She recalled the agent's advice when she'd moved in to the finca...

"Keep him close, the hunters are not...sentimental, galgos are not pets here."

The silence convinced her that it was safe to go out. She called to Spider and they walked through the orange grove. The old well at the center held a strange fascination. The wide, deep shaft uttered a sound at the edge of hearing, plaintive yet repellent. She'd once lowered a torch into the shaft, afraid that something had fallen in; but the depth had snuffed the light. She dropped pebbles into the pit, but the return was never the 'plunk' of rippling water, only a hollow clink and a faintly revolting smell. She dreaded to think what was down there and was pleased that Spider cowed away from the low-walled structure.

She'd asked the agent about the noise from the well; he'd been brusque and furtive as he told her it was just the wind in the trees. Diana had challenged him, it was obvious that he had heard something, something that had disturbed him, but he had turned away and refused to say more.

Diana walked round the borders of her finca; the hunt had broken through and stormed across her fields yet again. She had remonstrated with Edgardo, the head honcho in the nearby village; but he was pitiless and arrogant, citing centuries of tradition as a valid reason for violating her boundaries. History dictated that he could take his hunt wherever he wanted. He had sneered at her weakness, what could a woman and her 'pet' know of men's work, of the proud legacy of his forefathers and the strength that his sons would inherit from the hunt? She'd complained to the authorities about the property damage, but they turned a blind eye, the mayor and police chief were hunters themselves. She could only wait until the end of the hunting season, at least then she'd have a few months to build stronger fences.

The morning after the last hunt of the year, Diana woke up, feeling relieved that she could finally roam her finca without fear. She reached out to hug Spider.

He wasn't there.

Her heart tightened. He never left her side, never.

Her ears filled with a subliminal whine, urgent and pleading. It drove her to run from room to room, calling Spider's name. Her terror coalesced when she saw that the front door had been forced open. She ran to the gaping holes in her fence, hoping that Spider had just run away to chase butterflies. As she spun around she saw the trees in the orange grove shivering as if caught in a violent gale; but the hot air was still and stagnant, too thick to breathe.

She ran towards the orange grove. Edgardo was there with his laughing cronies. She saw him pick up a galgo and thread its head through a crude noose attached to a tree branch. Before she could cry out, he dropped

the dog, its back legs scrabbling to get a purchase on the ground, desperately trying to save itself from strangling. Edgardo laughed and turned away from it, reaching for the next dog. Around him, the trees shook in the cyclone of the dogs' struggles.

Diana screamed. Each of her wholesome orange trees bore a grisly fruit of tortured dogs. She ran towards them, hoping that Spider wasn't among them, that she might be in time if he was. She was yanked back as Edgardo's men caught her arms. Her panic-fuelled tunnel vision had hidden them, but now she saw twenty men and boys, intoxicated by cheap wine. Their faces were obscenely excited as they contemplated how sweet it would be to torment this meddling foreigner.

She slumped in their arms, alone and helpless. Then she heard Spider's yelping. It gave her the strength to break free and run to the well. From far away, Spider's agonized cries joined the swelling chorus of pain and fear and loneliness that had always been at the edge of her hearing. She yanked at the well cover and leaned over, desperate to see him. Although the depth obscured her sight, her ears still heard the terrible sounds of his suffering.

Edgardo's stinking breath hit her face as he grasped her hair and pushed her over the gaping well mouth. He croaked in her ear,

"We don't like soft women here; how dare you judge our traditions; dogs are dogs – you learn the hard way, yes?"

He sneered and shoved her away; she overbalanced, tearing her sleeve as she desperately tried to halt her inevitable fall.

Diana fell for an eternity, her dazed mind daring to believe that she was a feather in the breeze, until the shocking pain of her breaking bones tore a scream from her throat. She felt bundles of... something...fracture beneath her, the sharp splinters piercing her skin. She caught her breath, the stunning agony drawing another scream.

Spider, broken and dying, nosed her hand and whimpered softly, desperate to comfort her and to be comforted. She moved her hand and touched his blood-matted fur, consoled by his warmth. Diana reached out with her other hand, trying to dislodge the splinters digging into her flesh, but she recoiled as her fingers identified long skulls and scraps of fur. She cried as she lay with the bodies and bones of Edgardo's hounds, thrown into the dark to die together.

Diana looked up – the light at the top of the well shaft was a distant star, beautiful, unreachable...

She heard Edgardo's harsh laughter as he extinguished the light with the heavy well cover. As the black abyss engulfed them, she felt Spider's chest fall for the last time. Diana sobbed deeply, the effort tearing at her lungs and filling them with suffocating blood. She did not breathe again.

In the soft silence of the well, Diana's spirit resonated with the grief and suffering of the dogs that lay with her; but she did not share their humble acceptance. A spark of vengeance ignited her anger and gave shape to her spectre. She called Spider's name, called all of their names. They came. The well shaft drew their luminous spirits upwards like a chimney drawing smoke.

Back in the sunlight, Diana's diaphanous spirit sat on the low wall and hugged Spider, who lay beside her. She called to the phantom hounds...

"How did you suffer?" she asked.

They told her tales of abandonment, of disease and injury, of torture and forced breeding and of their slow, merciless deaths. Diana's pale eyes burned with love and revenge as she led the pack away from the stinking well...

Edgardo and his feral hunters were still in the orange grove. The dogs that had been struggling as they slowly strangled on the trees became still as Diana called their spirits to her. Edgardo didn't notice.

Diana sent her hounds to snap at his mind. She exulted as Edgardo swigged a bottle of cheap rioja and lifted his gun to take pot shots at the shapes hanging around the grove. He was oblivious to his men shouting. Driven by the ritual sacrifice of the hounds, Edgardo shot indiscriminately. He roared in triumph as his men fell silent.

Diana called the hounds back, allowing Edgardo a moment of sanity. He looked around at the remains of his eldest sons, of his friends, shredded by the deadly pellets from his shotgun.

Edgardo stumbled to his truck and drove towards the village. Diana followed, sending the hounds to gnaw at his mind again. His head was filled with confusion and misery. His wife shrieked as she saw his blood-soaked shirt; the other wives demanded to know where their husbands were. The young children cried, sensing something

was wrong. Edgardo's mind was overwhelmed as he obsessively fired and reloaded his shotgun, seeing only accursed dogs where he'd expected to find his family.

Diana called her hounds back for the last time. Edgardo dropped the gun and fell to his knees, surrounded by slaughtered women and children. He looked up as the black-clad village elders circled him, their wrinkled faces hideous with rage. They picked up stones from the ragged street and threw them at his evil head.

He rose and ran from their wrath. Diana released her phantom pack to finish the hunt. Edgardo ran onto the main road, where a car clipped him, breaking his legs, the driver seeing only a deer in the headlights. Diana watched as Edgardo crawled into a ditch, crying in fear and pain. She called to the ticks. Aroused by the scent on the blood that had soaked deep into Edgardo's pores, thousands came to the feast.

The city police found him the next day, shattered and raving. They followed his gory trail, first to the village where the woman and children lay. In the orchard, the bizarre sight of the hanging dogs and murdered hunters chilled the squad. The torn sleeve of Diana's dress fluttering at the edge of the well prompted them to excavate the pit. They recovered her body then filled the shaft with the ashes of the orchard, which they'd burned to the ground, desperate to hide the shame of the hunter's massacre.

The few villagers who'd survived Edgardo's madness tried to rebuild their lives. The region's tourist board tried to convince visitors that Edgardo had been a lone wolf, a singular lunatic. They attracted new residents with promises of cheap land and subsidized benefits. The newcomers never prospered. The men withered yet their women became pregnant again and again until their bones became brittle with the effort of carrying each child. The babies sickened and died, taking their mothers' joy and health with them. Greedy developers, eager to make the best of the cheap land, were forced to leave as freak accidents killed and maimed their workers.

The village elders stayed on briefly, their deathbed mutterings of vengeful spirits only serving to deepen the area's isolation. Diana smiled with satisfaction; she was the only revenant here; she and her hounds the only haunting souls.

When the last denizen had finally passed, she called her spectral hounds,
"Are we avenged?" she asked...

The galgos came to her one by one; she solaced them with a touch and each vanished like smoke into the wind until just Spider remained.

"What do you think?" she asked

Spider's eyes glowed with love and revenge - they had barely started...

Diana stood in the deserted village square. She called to the hunting dogs, to the sick, the broken, the abandoned, the tortured and the dead. They came to her in body or in spirit and abided in miraculous peace until their souls were sated. Their tormentors did not dare to cross her borders. But Diana and Spider knew no bounds, tradition, after all, allowed hunters to pursue their prey wherever it ran...

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grey is fulfilling her dream of writing fictional stories that engage the reader's emotions. She is inspired by the antics of her rescue greyhounds and by the rich environment of England's canals, which she experiences on her narrow boat, Indigo Dream. She dedicates this story to Galgos Del Sol, one of many charities that rescue Spanish hunting dogs.

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

The water is quiet, much quieter than you anticipated. On the horizon, the sun begins to set. A wave of sadness washes over you. It's been a long summer. At work you were counting down the days to your vacation, looking forward to a long weekend by the Mediterranean. Your boss at the stylish office was generous enough to grant you two days off after only four months at the company. Maybe he pities his employees, whose faces are constantly flushed in the strange summer heat.

It is the last day of your little holiday. Tomorrow a plane will take you back to the busy streets of New York. On the beach, your boyfriend is still reading the new Stephen King novel on his iPad. The tablet hides his face, blocking his view of the sun which is darkening into orange as it sets.

The water is still. Floating on your back you wave your arms like you're making a snow-angel. Dark birds throng the sky, cawing in the distance. They sound agitated, as if fleeing from unseen danger. There is something disquieting about them, how they suddenly swarm the sky.

It makes you feel a little uneasy.

The island has been a refuge since you were a girl. Almost every summer you came here with your parents until they got divorced. Later you went on your own, sometimes with a friend. Ben is the first guy you've invited to the place you've come to love. Do you regret that now? He is delighted with the food, especially the fresh salads and the goat cheese that makes his mouth water, and he's thrilled with the idyllic white stone house you booked, and how the beach isn't as crowded as the regular tourist spots. Other than that he just seems preoccupied with the books he never has time to read back in his busy, everyday life. It's OK. You don't mind spending time by yourself. You enjoy swimming alone. And yet, there's a sense of loneliness creeping in, the kind that makes you feel vulnerable.

The water smells. The scent is putrid, like something that used to be alive. Are there dead fish somewhere on the seabed far beneath you? Or, even worse, maybe the sewage from the island? Quickly, you brush the idea away. You haven't seen any fish and this is a small island, not an industrial beach. Isn't it strange there are no fish? You hadn't really thought about it before. Back in the small, idyllic town you grew up in, there were always fish tickling your legs when you waded through the stream. You wiggle your toes in the water. You feel something soft against your skin. You stop moving, but it's already passed. Only a chilling sensation remains.

The water is red. The reflection of the dying sun has painted it the color of blood. Only now do you realize how far the current has swept you from the shore. As you push against the tide, images flicker into your mind; discomforting images from TV. Hundreds of corpses, like jellyfish washed ashore. Facedown in the sand, exposed on the front pages of newspapers around the globe. Back in New York you avoided looking, when they showed snapshots of the drowned. You've discussed it with friends a few times, how wrong it is to showcase that on TV. Now, with the salty taste in your mouth, you try in vain to get the refugees out of your mind.

The sea is cold. You kick your legs like a frog, trying to push closer to the shore. You can hear your teeth. The chattering only pauses when you cough to spit out the sea water that's streamed into your mouth. Beyond the water on the cinnabar beach, Ben's silhouette is waving. You want to wave too. More so, you want to scream, plead for help. The water leans against you like a wall. Your arms are getting tired. The salt burns in your eyes. Suddenly, there's a shooting pain in your right leg. It feels like a cold hand has grabbed you. The weight pulls you down.

The sea is wide. In the dark blue water you struggle, disoriented. You try your best not to panic, pressing your lips together and pumping your arms like the wings of a bird. Through the salty water you glimpse your leg. You want to touch it, figure out what's wrong. As you lean forward you become aware of other things, white shadows floating nearby. You feel like they are watching you and wondering whether or not you'll become one of them.

You let go of your leg. You fight the water with all the strength you have left. As your head emerges from the water you gasp hard, lungs starving for air. Through your sore eyes you see Ben's dark shape on the beach. He seems a bit closer now. Surely he must see you're in trouble. Again, you can feel your body being pulled underwater. As if little hands, children's hands, are clinging on to your waist. You try to kick them aside with your good leg; the other is still numb. You want them to let go. You are not their mother! You cannot help them, cannot carry them all with you. You are struggling to make it to shore yourself. Your body has become so heavy and your arms are exhausted. More water pours into your mouth now that you're screaming, gurgling to be rescued. On the beach you watch Ben run away. It's just you now, and the figures in the water.

The sea is indifferent, the sea doesn't care. It doesn't know about the financial transactions you're responsible for at work, or the people waiting for you to come home. The waves are swaying, undisturbed, rocking you like a cradle. The inside of your mouth is bitter from the salt. The sea is all around you; it's also inside you now. The tugging of the hands becomes demanding. There are bigger ones too, now, dragging you down. Without looking you can see their faces, their dark incredulous eyes as if they cannot believe that you won't rescue them. Your arms seem to burn in the freezing water, the muscles painfully sore. You fight on. Surely Ben will come back any moment; surely he must have gone to find help. The beach looks so far away again, as if it's backing away. You're not sure where the water stops and the sand begins, everything looks the same kind of black.

Your arms don't respond anymore, sticking out of your torso like the branches of a tree. With nothing left to hold on to you give way to the pulling and glide back into the sea. The seabed is full of white faces looking at you. There are hundreds of them, maybe thousands. Their clothes are torn from their long journey, the only things remaining from the life they left behind. They are reaching out to you, offering you their hands, inviting you to join them in a strange kind of dance. You hear yourself moaning, the sound immediately swallowed by the water. The faded bodies become one big mass, like a swarm of fish your failing eyes can hardly make out.

What if nobody ever finds you and you just blur into the crowd—a memory for those who know you, a statistic for those who don't? You are getting very tired now. In surrender, you take hold of a welcoming hand. You let yourself fall. Your fear and your pain dissolve like salt in the water. Soon, crustaceans will strip your flesh to the bones. Whatever is left of you, it won't go to waste. The sea will look after you. The sea will keep you safe.

About the Author:

B.E. Seidl is a bilingual writer and literary researcher. Her work has appeared both in print and in online magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Tethered by Letters, Microfiction Monday Magazine and in several issues of The Sirens Call. In her writing she seeks to collect kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

Author Blog: [B.E. Seidl](#)

Twitter: [@BESeidl](#)

Tranquility of Death | *Austin Muratori*

Peering into the dark abyss my mind wanders and my breathing increases like the tide coming in during an ember sunset. Flashes of purple and red reflect off my retina evoking a momentary feeling of peace, that maybe just maybe everything will be okay.

I don't remember the shadowy figure sneaking up in front of me, or even the bullet entering my chest. The only thing I can recall is the sound, a bang that echoed in slow motion ripping waves into my mind with vicious velocity. Then, stillness.

Often, I would find myself in a daze drifting between thoughts of my own mortality. I didn't fear death as many do, I was just intrigued by the many aspects of the entire process. I imagined what it would be like to die. I always assumed that it would be painful. As a journalist I was exposed to all sorts of madness daily. Car accidents, murder, tragedy in all its illustrious forms.

The blood and guts were one thing that gets easier to deal with the more you experience it. The one thing that will never escape me is the smell of death itself. The putrid smell of a rotting corpse being pulled from a soggy lake. Or the blood curdling screams shed by a mother arriving to an accident scene only to find out her son had just been mangled in a freak motorcycle accident.

I can't help but to reflect on these thoughts now as I lie drowning in my own blood. It's different then I thought. Once the adrenaline washes away and the panic stops all becomes calm and tranquil. Death is an isolated journey with an unknown destination. It's a one-way ticket to one's own destiny.

Mine is almost complete...

About the Author:

A journalist by day and a versatile artist by night, Austin Muratori's love for storytelling runs deep within his soul. Whether it is writing, filmmaking, photography or even painting he is consumed by the need to create. Austin resides in the beautiful state of Michigan with his dog. When he isn't creating you can find him relaxing with a craft beer and good company.

Facebook: [Austin Muratori](#)

Twitter: [@AustinMuratori](#)

NATE
EALY



PICNIC
TABLE
#58

A SHORT STORY

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The last thing I remember is the glint of steel in Clare's hands. I have to admit, it shocked me. Clare had slapped me a few times, even punched me. But never had my wife of 10 years armed herself with a weapon during our arguments.

Not that I blame her. I suppose I deserve it. I had cheated on her more than once. Each time I had told her, "never again". And each time she had given me another chance. And each time her trust in me fell a few more notches.

This time she had read some incriminating messages on my phone. And that had been the last straw.

"You promised you wouldn't do it again, Peter," my wife screamed as she came at me with the knife. I guess I was knocked out cold when I fell backwards. It might explain why I am lying on the floor.

Except... where am I? This sure as hell isn't my bedroom. Everything is grey – the walls, the sheets, the wardrobe, the side tables. Not quite the colour scheme I remember.

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. It must be a nightmare. Time to wake up. I look around. Everything is still grey.

"Clare," I call. No reply. I get up and walk around. Nothing here is familiar. In the wardrobe, even the clothes are grey. I put on a pair of trousers and shirt and enter the bathroom. On the counter is a phone. I open the contacts list. There is only one number — Clare's.

I call her, but only get her voicemail. "Clare," I say, "please answer, sweetheart."

I wait. But she doesn't call back. I desperately want to hear her voice. I want to tell her, "Never again", and this time I will mean it.

I need to get out of here, but I don't see a door. I feel the wall, until I reach a panel that swings outward when I touch it. I heave a sigh of relief, which is short-lived — I am in another room. No, not a room; it is a church.

Not just any church. It is where Clare and I got married. She looked so beautiful in her white lace gown and flowers in her dark hair. I remember how happy we were, how blue the sky was, how brightly the sun shone. Our families and friends watched us say our vows. Childhood sweethearts, now husband and wife.

But it can't possibly be the same church. This one is all red, with rows of chairs instead of the familiar pews. Each time I move, I knock into what looks like a freshly painted chair. Streaks of red rub off on my clothes. My legs give way, and I collapse into a chair and put my head in my hands. I don't understand what's happening. Am I trapped in some alternate reality? How did I get here? God, I hope this is a nightmare. And that I wake up soon.

Or is this God's way of saying I am a sinner? Yes, I know I am — I betrayed my wife, I broke our vows. If it takes me the rest of my life, I will make it up to her.

I look around with increasing panic. But there's nothing here to help me figure out where I am. I see a door at the other end of the space. Maybe that is my way out.

I open it — it's a café. Empty, like the church. Hang on, I know this place too! This used to be our favourite hangout during our school years. Clare loved the red-and-white checkered tablecloths and the posters on the cheerful yellow walls. Now it is all white. They must have changed the décor. I recognize the posters, though.

We used to come here every week, sit at our favourite table by the window and have long conversations over endless cups of coffee.

Our last conversation here wasn't quite as pleasant. Clare confronted me about another of my affairs. We fought again. She cried. Told me it was over. She flung her ring at me and stormed out. I still bear the scar on my forehead. My fingers trace the faint indent, and the fury on her usually serene face is still a vivid memory.

I look at our favourite table by the window. A woman is sitting there. It is Clare! A huge wave of relief courses through me. She is here. I rush to her and sit down across her. She doesn't look angry.

I desperately want her to shout at me. Hit me again. Anything to prove I am back where I belong. "Clare, I am truly sorry. Just give me one last chance. I'll never hurt you again, I promise." I say.

She doesn't answer. She just looks at me sadly.

I reach for her hands. "Clare, say something, please," I beg.

"Peter...", she says. "Oh, Peter..."

Then she gets up and walks away. "Clare," I shout. "Come back, don't leave me here. Please."

She seems to walk right through the wall of the café. I get up and run after her, but there's no way through. I crash into the wall. Funnily, it doesn't hurt.

I bang my fists on it, kick it a few times. Rest my head on it in despair.

The phone in my pocket rings. My heart stops, starts again.

"Hello, Peter." The voice is unfamiliar.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"I am Peter."

"What?"

"I am you."

"That's not possible."

"Look in the mirror, Peter."

"There is no mirror."

The wall has turned into a mirror. But I don't see my reflection in it.

"I can't see anything," I say into the phone.

But there is no reply. The call ends.

I look again in the mirror. Now it has become a sheet of glass. I can see through it into a room. That's my bedroom. Oh, thank God!

I press my face against the cold surface and look around the room. There's a body on the floor, lying in a pool of blood. Clare is kneeling beside it — there is blood on her clothes and a knife in her hand.

"Peter, Peter, Peter..." she is saying.

"Clare, I am here," I scream. "That's not...."

I see the face of the dead man. I look at myself in the mirror.

About the Author:

Living in Singapore, India-born Uma Venkatraman is a journalist who has had poems published in anthologies such as *Good Morning Justice*, *Along the Shore and Beyond the Hill*, and online in *L'Ephemere Review*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, and *Plath Poetry Project*. Limbo is her first foray into fiction and short stories.

Author Blog: [And so it is Born](#)

Twitter: [@uvr2002](#)

Of Things Forgotten | K.T. Tate

The cities have changed us. We were things of trees and night. But now it's all concrete. Everything encased, tightly bound. No longer wild or free.

You hoped that urbanisation would rid you of us nightmares. Bury us under your manmade indulgences.

But no.

We're still here. Haunting your underpasses, bridges and abandoned places. We creep into your homes, creaking on the stairs as we once did the trees. Sneaking, silent, a delicate pressure on your sleeping skin.

You tell yourself it was the cat, the house, or traffic outside. But it isn't. It's us.

We're still here. Stalking. Hungry.

About the Author:

K. T. Tate is an author and artist from Cambridgeshire, UK. She enjoys writing weird tales, cosmic horror and stories from the monster's point of view. Often featured in anthologies she primarily writes drabbles, microfiction and short stories.

Author Blog: [Eldritch Hollow](#)

Author Blog: [Eldritch Hollow](#)

Money always had a way of making distasteful situations disappear for Max Theron. It was a lesson passed down from generation to generation in his family. Whether it was a late-night party that got out of hand causing ridiculous accusations to circulate or a misunderstanding about the misappropriation of authorship on a college paper, a tidy resolution was to be had with a call to in-house counsel, and somehow it would all go away. Not even a touch of impropriety would remain; except with Lilith. After three years, the unwieldy stain on the Theron reputation had only been reduced to a blemish. The trial hadn't exactly exonerated him, but he was free. Lilith was relegated to never being spoken of but not forgotten, a tragic memory. Who wanted to remember tragedy when there was so much more living to do? And women loved Max. He had a charm that was bred from a sense of entitlement, born of wealth. He made every woman feel like she was the only woman. No matter if her intuition and eyes told her differently.

When he saw Grace in yoga class the first time, he knew she was the one. She had him with her handstand Scorpio pose. One afternoon after class he followed her to the vegan restaurant a block away, although a rare steak or foie gras was more to his liking.

A smattering of raindrops was enough to send pedestrians scurrying, but Grace took her time walking. Not bothering to cover her long braids, she would tilt her head upwards from time to time as though to inhale the fresh air the impending storm promised.

They were pushed together several times as the lunchtime crowd surged, more to get out of the drizzle than the lure of the food. Each time he felt a little energized zap from the thrill of the hunt. She placed her order and carried her soup over to the counter. He followed behind her with a tofu wrap he had no intention of eating. In fact, he had lunch reservations at the country club in an hour.

Small talk was usually simple and easy. It wouldn't take much, he could make a remark about the weather, and because of his good looks or perhaps the sixth sense some women had when it came to net worth, he would secure a first date in no time at all.

She was different. She rebuffed his compliment about her pose, even as he feigned surprise to see her in the restaurant. She was less than forthcoming when he tried to extend the conversation into what she was reading on her iPad. Those tablets made it so much harder to strike up a comment about a book. She seemed less interested in him and more interested in her lentil soup.

He wanted to tell her about all the exclusive places he would introduce her to, much better than the hole in the wall they currently found themselves in. Before he could regroup, she was gone. Disappeared into the crowd and back on the sidewalk, this time with a purposeful pace.

He didn't see her again for three classes. With only a slight acknowledgment by the almost imperceptible nod of her head, she placed her mat next to his and stretched. He tried not to notice her leanness and length. Toned and taut, every muscle seemed ready for something. He thought she had a dancer's body. At 5'10" he could easily picture her pirouetting across the stage or straddling him. She was still no match for his 6'2" frame.

After class one day, she said to him, "Your Lotus is getting better."

Over tea, then dinner (another vegan place) and finally breakfast, he peeled away at her exterior.

They developed a routine and pretty soon, most of her things migrated to his place. It started with the sole toothbrush and graduated to hair care products which required their own shelf, extra clothes, and her favorite Buddha statue.

Grace. He loved saying her name. The way it rolled off his tongue in a low moan. She used her flexibility not only for yoga and it excited him in ways he had only imagined.

It was on a weekend trip to his family's country home that he got down on one knee. He flipped open the box, and a beautiful ring sparkled and winked at her with an energy of its own. She threw her arms around him, repeating yes, over and over again.

She didn't have a very large family to share the news with, an orphan with no siblings; there was a lone aunt on the other side of the country who sent her congratulations and a wedding gift.

His family thought their sudden nuptials could be perceived as poor form by those that think things like that. They convinced him a small intimate wedding would be best. A destination wedding, one far, far away, would be even better. They married on the white sands of Bali at sunset and moved back into the home he used to share with Lilith.

If Grace minded, she never said. Instead, she set about putting her touches on the decor. Asking for certain rooms to be repainted. Replacing the curtains in their bedroom. She never mentioned the large painting of Lilith and Max that hung in his office behind his desk. A portrait of happier times as they sat side by side, holding hands and smiling. Dreaming about a future full of kids and wedded bliss, Lilith never once imagining six weeks after sitting for the portrait, it would be unveiled at her funeral.

As different as Grace was from Lilith, Max started to notice troubling similarities. At first, he tried to brush them off. It was the house. He couldn't help but feel Lilith's presence in it. The way he would catch a whiff of her perfume, a sensual mix of

orchids and spice, lingering in the air as though she had just left the room. A fresh start would have been best, but he had no intentions of moving. Nestled in the Hollywood Hills, the view was to die for, and it had a state-of-the-art wine cellar. It was the plum in his real estate portfolio. But...ever since Grace started wearing her hair the same way as Lilith, sometimes he would he would get confused. Wasn't quite sure who was talking. Lilith and Grace were beginning to sound alike. Certain phrases. The way Lilith always said, "My pleasure darling," whether she meant it or not. Her laugh.

He told no one because he feared no one would believe him. He worried they would suspect guilt rather than grief for his sudden obsession with his dead first wife. After all, a hung jury wasn't the same as an acquittal. So, he consoled himself with the bottle. It started as a little nip before dinner and blossomed into two fingers of whiskey in the morning just to get out of bed. At night, he would be roused from his restless slumber. Grace, one hand thrown over his side in a loose embrace would whisper in her sleep. His blood ran cold the first time the words tickled his ears and made their way into his consciousness.

"How could you do this to me?"

Roughly he shook her awake. She remembered nothing and was startled by his anger. From then on, he chose to sleep in the spare room. He no longer ate at home. The meals she cooked were the same courses Lilith had slaved over. They even tasted the same. A certain blandness due to a fear of over-seasoning.

One night, he found Grace swimming in the pool. He fortified his intentions with the bottle and approached her much like he had approached Lilith that night after she had found out about the others. Even though they meant nothing, they could cost him half of everything.

He brought two flutes and a bottle of champagne poolside. Grace swam to the edge, her strokes so smooth, the water barely rippled. She persuaded him to join her. He lowered himself, fully clothed. The salt water felt like an open mouth kiss, welcoming him. Grace's laughter tinkled like little bells in the night air as she teased him about his brashness. The moonlight played tricks on him. He saw Lilith making small waves in the water as she struggled against him to stay afloat.

In two long strokes, he swam to her in the middle of the pool. She wrapped her arms and legs around him.

"I'm sorry," he said, his hands cradling her face.

She kissed him. Now, more than anything, he wished he could go back, but Theron's never went back. They charged ahead. Always. He felt a quick prick in the back of his neck, like the fleeting sting of a mosquito bite.

He found that once she released him from their embrace, he was unable to move. Unable to blink. He sank to the bottom of the pool as he watched her long, toned legs kick and her arms, one thrown over the other as she swam to the other side. She was beautiful.

Water rushed in, filling his lungs until they burned.

"Where are you going?" he wanted to call out.

He could make out her ghostly shadow as she stood over the pool and raised a glass of champagne in one hand and the glint of a hypodermic needle in the other. The harvest moon hung low in the sky and made everything appear silver. He felt tired, more tired than he'd ever been. He barely noticed when the upstairs light came on in their bedroom. Panic welled in his chest but had nowhere to go. He thought he saw Lilith floating beside him, the way she had looked that night in her black one-piece. Small bubbles floated up and disappeared until all was still. The moon reflected off the water like a pane of glass.

Small waves broke the calm and splashed against the side of the pool. Wet footprints appeared on the tile floor leading into the house. Grace was sitting on the bed waiting as the room grew chillier. Goose bumps sprouted along her arm. Grace twisted the ring off her finger and held it out in her hand. A few cold drops of water plopped onto her palm and then the ring was gone.

"You're welcome," said Grace.

About the Author:

Based in Los Angeles, Sibylla Nash has an MFA in writing from Otis College of Art & Design. She had a past life regression done, it scared the bejesus out of her and became the inspiration for *Lilith*. As a freelance writer, her work has appeared in a variety of outlets including *Today*, *LitHub*, *Essence* magazine and others.

Author Blog: [Sibylla Nash](#)

Twitter: [@starbabyla](#)



Jessica F Holt

Button Eyes | *Reneé Boyer*

You open me when everyone's gone outside. Your sister and her friends have tumbled out, a tangle of long limbs, whispers and spite. They don't want you to follow.

You're pushing the glitter-flecked wrapping paper from your sister's presents into an untidy pile when your fingers close on my solid, still-wrapped shape. You pull me free, frowning. You flick your eyes around to check you're alone. I'm unlabelled. Your sister hasn't seen me. Besides, she's had enough gifts for three people. Way more than you got on your last birthday.

I'm wrapped tightly in plain brown paper but you pull me free in seconds. You stare with disdain at my crude linen limbs, scrapped-together dress, woollen hair and black button eyes. I'm small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, and I think you're going to throw me back into the pile. But you tuck me into your pocket instead.

The air is thick with sugar and malice. The distant sound of girlish shrieks grates in your ears. You run your thumb over my button eyes. I quiver.

You throw yourself onto the sofa, bored, waiting for your sister and her friends to come back inside so you can show them how much you don't want to hang out.

The voices outside get closer. They push through the door in an explosion of giggles. Through your half-squinted eyes they meld into a many-limbed monster. Like one of those Hindu deities. Only noisier.

"Oh, hey Lucy. You're still here," your sister says, with a significant *look* at her friends that you're supposed to see.

They giggle again. A flock of twittering birds.

You reach your hand into your pocket again and squeeze my small shape. Pressure fizzles through me like a rush of life. A rebirth. You say nothing, and silence presses thickly on the room.

"C'mon, let's see if the pizza's here." They swarm out.

You pull me out of your pocket wondering where I came from and who sent me. You hold me up to your face, staring into my button eyes. It's time.

I hold your gaze with the mirrored depths of my polished buttons. You stop blinking.

You feel it in your fingers first, moving up your arms. Then your feet, then your legs. Your body, and finally your head. In seconds you realize what's happening, but by then it's too late. In under a minute you're pocket sized. And I've grown.

I take a moment to enjoy the feeling of my skin, the downy hairs on my arms. I reach up and pluck the buttons from my new eyes, the thread pulling free with a shiver of pleasurable pain.

You are frozen on the floor, your limbs useless, terror in your pretty green eyes. One last step. I pick you up, pull a needle and thread from my pocket, and place the buttons onto each one. Are you ready?

About the Author:

Reneé Boyer is a manager by day and a writer by night (and occasionally lunchtime). She lives in beautiful Raglan, New Zealand, and is working on a novel as part of her Master of Professional Writing. She also writes short fiction, plays and poetry. This is her first attempt at horror, but it won't be her last!

Every Gallon in the Pool | *Michael D. Davis*

I filled the kiddie pool for her gallon by gallon. She begged me for the pool, all summer. Day after excruciating day. She asked to go to the town pool, I said no, she asked to get a pool, I said no. but, finally, I gave in.

I've given in to a lot of things in my life. Like kids. I never wanted her, a child. Why would I? So, that a brat can complain and whine all summer?

I filled her kiddie pool to the brim. She splashed about and I lit the match on the gallons of gasoline.

About the Author:

Michael D. Davis was born and raised in a small town in the heart of Iowa. Having written over thirty short stories, ranging in genre from comedy to horror from flash fiction to novella he continues in his accursed pursuit of a career in the written word.

What the hell was he doing in the boonies of Alabama? The man had never left Alpena let alone the state of Michigan. Yet, there was no mistaking it; the photo the coroner emailed her was indeed her father. Marley could have had his ashes shipped, sure, but that wouldn't answer any questions.

The humidity sat like cement in her lungs and sweat tickled the scar on her belly. She scratched at it. The air conditioning in the damned rental car took far too long to kick in.

"Well, I guess I'm officially an orphan now, huh Mom?"

She didn't know if her mother would have found that funny. She'd never met the woman, only killed her.

"You didn't kill her," her dad used to remind her when she was little. The scar itched all the time then. No matter what he said, the red slash on her left side was proof of the urgent and furious surgery performed on her mother. The doc had just been a little overzealous in his heroic attempt and cut Marley too. There were pictures of the stitches, but her dad didn't like to look at them.

"Ugh, Dad, what were you doing down here?"

The lush landscape draped in Spanish moss gave way to short, spotty scrub grass. Houses way too big for any one family to occupy turned into old pick-ups on blocks and trailer homes on wheels. The closer she got to Brocton, where her father dropped dead two weeks ago, the more unease she felt. The road was eerily devoid of traffic and she swore she could feel eyes peering at her through dusty, moth-eaten curtains.

Towns like Brocton, Marley had come to find in her twenty-three years in rural northern Michigan, often had an abundance of two things: bars and churches. Brocton did not disappoint.

"Ok, Dad," she said pulling into a spot at The Handle Bar. "I'm gonna go have one for both of us before I get you and your phone. And one of those things better tell me what the fuck you were doing in this shit-hole town in the first place."

The inside smelled and looked just as the exterior promised. Smoke (of two distinct varieties her college educated nose noted) and skunky beer assaulted her senses. The floor clung to the soles of her shoes so that each step announced her arrival. The old man nursing a pint at the end of the bar looked up and smacked on the chipped Formica a few times. The bartender emerged from wherever she'd been hiding. The door left swinging in her wake fanned a vague essence of old fryer grease but nothing fresh or recent.

"What can I get ya, sugar?"

"Gimme a Tom Collins, it was my dad's favorite."

"You must be Trevor St. James' girl. Uh huh, thought I recognized your face," the old man said.

Marley fell onto the barstool with a plop, taken aback by the sound of her father's name on this man's lips.

"Yes, I am. Was he in here? Before he died?"

"Nah, I ain't seen your dad since your momma's family ran him outta town for what he done after she died. Took you with him o'course. That'd been right after the surgery." He sipped at his beer. "Used to come in from time to time before all that."

"What? We're from Michigan, I think you might have my dad mistaken for someone else."

The man shook his head. "Your daddy was always lookin' for a get rich quick scheme. Sad about your momma, but you don't look no worse for wear for all your daddy's foolishness."

Marley had no idea what he was talking about, but that strange sense of foreboding crept up her neck again and she shivered. The cocktail suddenly seemed inadequate to do the job she'd ordered it to do. She looked up at the bartender who was, in turn, looking up at the mounted TV watching some judge berate a shoddy landlord.

"Excuse me, can I get a shot of apple whiskey if you have it?"

They had it. She shot it. Her scar burned. She scratched it.

"So, you gonna head down to Gully's then, and pick up your sister?" The old man was not going to let it drop. Whatever he thought he knew about her family was flat out wrong, even if everything he said about her dad was true. The man spent his whole life looking for easy ways to make a quick buck.

"I don't have a sister." The Tom Collins looked worthy of another try. She skipped the straw and went for the chug.

"Guess you might not call it that. Old Darla's been up in that shop since Old Gully senior got the idea to buy her off your old man."

Marley threw a ten on the counter and stood up. "Thanks," she said toward the bartender and then to the old man, "Have a nice day."

He was old, clearly a drinker, and confused. He'd probably met her dad who frequented bars like this one and in his jumbled mind, got Trevor St. James confused with someone.

"I believe Junior's working right now, if you wanted to ask him 'bout your daddy falling out right there in his store," the man continued as if she'd said nothing to indicate the conversation was over.

Marley realized that she'd never asked *where* her dad had died. She assumed that he'd had chest pains and gone to the hospital and died like everyone else. Had he died in somebody's business? She pushed the door, intent to leave without acknowledging the man any further. Late afternoon sun hit her in the face and her eyes watered. They weren't tears, not really.

The sign for Gully's General Store was faded and most of the white background paint had chipped off but the big red 'G' stood out easy enough. A bell rung as she entered. A man about her father's age stood behind the register doing some math with a calculator and big green leger book.

"Afternoon, what can I do you for?"

"Hi, um, this might sound weird, but my name's Marley St. James. My dad died—"

The man chuckled. "Right where you're standing. 'Bout gave me my own heart attack," and then as if remembering what it was he was laughing about, "I'm real sorry about your daddy, darlin'. Trevor was a character, he surely was. Yep, I'm sorry. It ain't right the hand fate's dealt ya."

Marley was speechless. Even if she managed to find the words to say, her mouth had dried up and her tongue stuck to the back of her teeth.

"Let me go get her for ya. Your daddy never even got to see her before he had his spell."

Junior stepped out from behind the register and walked to the back of the store. Marley followed. He passed through a set of black curtains. A sign made from a cut up cardboard box and a black sharpie offered customers the chance to see The Monster of Brocton and other unimaginable sites for a dollar.

"I suspected I'd get all sorts of weirdos when I put her up on the internet for sale but never in a million-billion years did I suspect your daddy'd call," his voiced called out from behind the curtain. "Bought her back at three times what he sold her for."

The man reappeared holding a big gallon sized jar filled with a pink colored solution and something else. He cradled it in his arm so that his big country boy hand covered the view of whatever was inside.

Marley wasn't sure she wanted to see anyway. Before she could make that choice though, he turned the thing around and handed it to her. Inside the jar a face stared back at her. No, it was more than that. It was a head, neck, shoulders, and one thin and crippled arm. The baby creature's face was familiar. Marley'd seen enough of her own baby pictures—even if her dad didn't like it—to know this baby looked a lot like her.

"So, you gonna want the doctor's note proving authenticity? I'm pretty sure I got it in the back somewhere. Your daddy said he didn't need it. Suppose maybe you don't neither. You got the scar from where they removed her."

About the Author:

EV Knight writes horror and dark fiction. Her debut novel, *The Fourth Whore*, will be published in 2020 by Raw Dog Screaming Press. EV's short stories can be found in *The Siren's Call* magazine, the upcoming anthology *Monstrous Feminine* by Scary Dairy Press, *The Toilet Zone* anthology by HellBound Books. Her poem 'Nothing' will be in the upcoming *HWA Poetry Showcase Vol.6* anthology.

Facebook: [EV Knight Author](#)

Twitter: [@EvKnightauthor](#)

George had arrived outside the house two hours before the estate sale opened so he could gain a few minutes on his competitors. Once through the door and given a number he'd rushed to the mansion's library and began scanning titles. *The Truro Bear* by Mary Oliver was signed and inscribed, and George stuck it in his cloth bag before the other book-vultures could claw it.

'Large assortment of collectable books' the ad had specified. It was a half-lie, thousands of books, yes, but most could be found for a dollar at a church sale. George slithered through the thickening crowd in front of the bookshelves, finding five more salable books before giving up and moving on to the study.

He noticed a two-shelf bookcase behind the desk and pulled out a large book whose dust jacket proclaimed *The Codebreakers*. But George saw that the dust jacket hid a plain, leather-bound tome whose text was all strange characters.

"That's mine!"

George turned and saw a red-faced, thick-set man who yelled again. "I saw it first."

"You may have seen it but I'm holding it. It's mine now." George dropped the book into his bag and turned away. The large man scowled but backed off. George prowled through several more rooms and decided to leave.

The pro-forma smile of the woman at the check-out table disappeared when she saw that the dust jacket hid a different book. "What's this?"

"Dunno. I found it that way."

"I'll have to charge you more."

"How much?"

Her expression said she suspected thievery. "Forty dollars."

"That's outrageous." George started to give her the book, but noticed that the large man had followed him out and could overhear them. If another vulture wanted the book it must be worth something. "Okay," he said and paid for the seven books.

Once home, George logged in his acquisitions. The autographed Mary Oliver book, given her recent death, could be resold on ebay for ten times what he'd paid for it, the five other books from the library shelves for perhaps three times their cost. And that left the leather volume.

He picked it up and removed the camouflaging dust jacket. The soft leather cover had a complex mandala embossed on the front, but no markings or words. The inside text looked at a guess like Sanskrit, but the title page was in English: *The Pathway*, no author listed. The preface, also in English, was written in large script:

'This volume is the tantric path of dark enrichment. You who now read this are not competent to witness the journey, much less to undertake it. You should greatly fear even this touch. Hide this book beyond your memory, or better still burn it so it will not re-exist until after your lifetime.'

George set the book down and considered options. The preface was the usual pretentious "Violate this tomb and die" warning. Volumes on the occult commanded a premium, and if this book had a provable history it might be worth five figures. He fired up his laptop and plugged in the name of the recently deceased woman whose estate had housed the book. Lovina Willman.

Married to Edward, no children. Reclusive. Charitable in that minimal way the wealthy have. Educated at some school called Enlightenment College, which had gone under forty-five years before. Committed to an asylum where she died. Nothing significant.

But before giving up George looked her up using her maiden name, Thoth. And there she was in full pre-marital intrigue. Founding member of the Hellfire Club in Connecticut. Accused by neighbors of lighting illegal fires at degenerate parties every spring and fall. Arrested but released in the disappearance of several neighborhood pets. Excommunicated from the Catholic Church. *Bad girl*, George thought, *but the Pathway didn't prevent her death*.

He wandered through the internet a bit longer. Tantric mysticism entries were listed by the thousands, but 'Pathway' just showed him addiction recovery programs. On the off chance the book was really valuable, George stashed it in a disguised stairwell cubby before photographing and posting his other acquisitions for sale. As he was cleaning up his desk his landline phone rang.

Customers called using that phone. George didn't recognize the caller ID number, but picked up anyway. "Diogenes Rare Books."

"We encountered each other at the estate sale today. You have a book I want. I'll give you eighty dollars, twice what you paid. I can stop by your house this evening to pick it up."

"Who is this? How do you know my address?"

"John Arachsmith. Don't worry, you were easy to find. Very few people would be interested in a book like *The Pathway*, you'd have a really hard time reselling it. I can give you cash right now, no fussing with posting it online. And you're not the type to be able to take a personal interest in the book."

"How would you know that? Wait, how did you know the title? It was concealed."

"Call it intuition. Shall I come over?"

George's tone became shrill. "No, and don't call again. If you're willing to pay eighty I'm sure I can find someone else who'll pay a couple hundred."

"Mr. Shelton, I am obliged to tell you that the book is dangerous. Its knowledge is- not to be absorbed safely- despite what it offers. I'll pay you the two hundred."

"Thank you, no. Please don't call again."

"Ah. As you think best, of course. Goodbye, Mr. Shelton." The words expressed disappointment, but their tone seemed almost happy.

George hung up and went upstairs to bed. His wife had divorced him some years before, and he'd discovered that he preferred living alone. When the occasional urge struck him, he would call one of two women friends for dinner, good conversation, relaxed sex and departure without entanglements.

Despite taking his nightly dose of valium, George's sleep was restless, waking several times with anxiety twinges. In the morning he went downstairs to discover chaos. Books had been pulled from shelves and tossed randomly around the den. Dust jackets, the most expensive part of a collectable book, had been pulled off and sometimes torn. George rushed over to the stairwell and pulled out the fake wood panel. The books inside were undisturbed, the leather *Pathway* resting on top of the pile like a brown grave marker.

Fear held onto him as he was calling the police. He'd heard nothing during the ransacking, and the intruder could have easily killed him. The cops promised a prowler car would arrive quickly. It took a half-hour, and George spilled his coffee when they called to him from inside the house.

"Mr. Shelton?"

"Who? How did you get in?"

"It's officers Sinclair and Rogers. Your locks had been cut out and then the wood section stuck back on. We need to see some ID."

Once George proved he was George, the cops went through the house, snapping a few pictures of the trashed downstairs rooms.

"What was taken, Mr. Sinclair?"

"Ah, nothing so far as I can tell."

"Are there any disagreements with your neighbors? Maybe some teenage boys that you reported?"

"No, nothing like that. It's a quiet neighborhood. The only thing I can think of is a disagreement I had yesterday with a guy named Arachsmith about a book. I can give you his phone number, but that's all I know about him."

George could tell from the cop's body language that they considered the incident to have deflated from home invasion to nuisance vandalism. The two policemen made polite noises, took some notes, and quickly excused themselves.

The cutout panel lay next to the front door. George found some heavy-duty glue and stuck it back into place. It would have to do until he could get the door replaced. He did a rough clean up of the downstairs and sat down to think.

If the break in was about the book it must be something really special. He retrieved it from the cubby, opened it up, and almost dropped it. The first page of the first chapter had a serrated edge that cut into his thumb, leaving blood on the page. George reflexively licked his thumb and tasted something bitter. He dug a bandage out of the medicine cabinet, wrapped his thumb, and returned to the book. He almost dropped it again.

The text, which had been in angular, unreadable characters, was now in handwritten English.

'You were cautioned, George Sinclair, but have entered. So be it. The way holds darkness and pain, the end is for now indescribable. The study is arduous, the learning is great. You must commit in ignorance to a vow which is not breakable. This is the stepping off. The last place to turn around. Close the book and be merely scarred by unanswered questions. Read further and be bound.'

It's a book, for Christ's sake, just a book. George put it down on his desk and considered. Nobody he knew would have bothered to set up something like this. Maybe he was delusional. He reopened the book to the first page, squinted, and saw the same words. *Okay, time for help.*

George made a quick call, dropped the book into his travel bag, walked out of his house, and drove to the home of his least unfriendly competitor, Philip Keeler.

"This better be good, George, you've interrupted my time trials for the crossword puzzle contest in Stamford."

"Thanks for seeing me."

Once inside the house, George pulled out the volume and handed it over to Phil, who whistled. "Feels like a calf skin cover." He riffled the pages and nodded appreciatively. "Linen paper, the best. Looks like a dialect of Sanskrit, would have to ask a linguist to verify which one."

"What about the English on the first page, with the blood stain?"

Phil riffled back through the book. "What English? What blood stain? It's all in that squiggle."

George looked over Phil's shoulder at the book and clutched his arm.

"Ow! What the hell, George. It looks like an okay south Asian religious text, but unless you can find a Tibetan monk with lots of money it's just going to be a shelf-weight."

George's stomach hurt from nervous fear. "Two hundred dollars and it's yours. Phil."

"What? I don't go anywhere near this kind of stuff. Fiction first editions, that's where the money is. Here, take it back."

George took the book in both hands and slid it back into his bag. After a few minutes of gossip about who'd scored big with which books he left Phil's house and got back in his Tercel. Before he started up he pulled the book back out, opened it, and stared at English script. He slammed the book shut, tossed it on the passenger seat and muttered to himself most of the way home.

Once inside his unlockable front door he hit the call log, found Arachsmith and redialed.

"The number you have reached is no longer in service."

Damn it to hell. There goes my chance to unload it for two hundred.

George set the book up against his photo screen and snapped pictures of the cover and a sample page, then posted it on ebay for twenty-five dollars or best offer. The description was laughable.

'Arcane manual, one of a kind, about three hundred pages, no illustrations. Text appears to be an early variant of Sanskrit. Of great historical and/or magical significance for the right reader.'

And that's not me. If I never read it, it can't harm me.

His writhed that night in nightmare after nightmare- long sharp fingernails poking through his eyeballs and into his brain, a dream of whipping small children into obedience, then his ritual murder of his ex-wife.

George shuddered himself awake at four am, double stepped downstairs, lit a fire in the fireplace, and tossed in the book. The kindling, paper and branches in contact with the book smoldered and turned black. After fifteen minutes, when George pulled it back off the grate, the book felt cold to his touch.

His lip quivered in panic, and George felt a trickle of drool run down the side of his chin. He threw on pants, shirt and shoes, grabbed the book and went out into the predawn dark. He drove much too fast to the city library, ran up to the outside book return chute and threw the book in. *Get lost in there, you son-of-a-bitch!*

George drove home slowly. As he walked up to the house he noticed that the front door, which couldn't latch properly after the break-in, was ajar, as if something had pushed it open. In the sideways dawn light that came through his windows George saw the book resting on his desk, open to the first chapter. He cried.

After ten minutes George told himself to toughen up. He made a pot of coffee to help him think, but couldn't keep the coffee down, and ran several times into the bathroom to vomit. His last upchuck was bloody.

Damned if I do, dead if I don't. I didn't do anything wrong, I don't deserve this. He felt like crying again but no tears came. *If I kill myself, will it haunt me?*

The stomach cramps crippled him up again, and when they subsided, George sat down in front of the book and began to read. As his eyes shifted from one page to the next the text on each page swirled from Sanskrit to English and then back again once his focus changed.

The words were an obscene, endless prose poem; ever on-rolling description waves of evil costumed as good, of seemingly noble actions riddled with moral decay, of ethical discipline ridden by sadists, of apparently unselfish toil serving as self-flagellation, of love as the dark reflection of self-lust. The ever-blacker poem carried George along for its hundreds of pages, two days of constant reading, at the end of which the remnants of his being wanted only departure.

George staggered up from the desk, unaware that he had soiled himself hours before, and weaved into the kitchen. He yanked open a drawer, took out a dull butcher knife, and began to saw through the underside of his forearms. He felt no pain. George stood in the kitchen losing blood until he passed out and dropped to the floor, where he died without thought.

A half-hour later the front door swung outward. A thick set man, not florid but unusually red faced, entered the house. He walked over to George's desk and gently closed and picked up *The Pathway*. He took a dust jacket out from the folder he carried and encased the tome. The dust jacket spine read *Understanding Ourselves*. He carefully slid the book into George's bookcase and, without glancing at George, turned to go. He had several other errands.

About the Author:

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred stories and poems published so far, and five books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of four review editors.



AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY ON AMAZON
FOR PURCHASE OR BORROW

I can tell summer is upon us by the scent in the air. It lingers following the latest rain. The thunderhead continues east, toward the coast, a dark line from which burst intermittent flashes of lightning, punctuated by the baritone growl of the storm.

A glance west reveals the sun again shining in all of its mid-day glory. I catch the smell of flowers in full bloom beneath the humidity, delighting in an unseasonably cool breeze drifting past. A pair of Cardinals, having made the journey from the north, flutter by. The male is resplendent in his scarlet glory, his mate chirping at him.

I sigh contentedly as I take in my surroundings. The farm has never looked so beautiful. A hundred acres of land- some of it grassy meadows, some set aside for rows of crops I'll be harvesting before too long – stretches in every direction.

My beloved single story house stands dead center on my property. A quarter of a mile southwest of the dwelling, the fishing pond I'll be re-stocking soon glitters in the sunshine. The water sparkles like polished glass, evoking pleasant memories of weekends spent at the local swimming hole when I was a child. On the opposite side of the pond, a large work shed holds court.

This is home. All of it. I couldn't possibly love it more.

The sight of the shed brings to mind my pride and joy. Elation fills me as I remember what day it is. I walk swiftly, making my way around to the back of the house. Within minutes, I'm standing in the stretch of land between the back porch and the pond, staring at my most precious handiwork.

I began the little garden not long after purchasing this farm. It was rough going at first, but I finally managed to bring it to full, glorious life. Rows of rose bushes alive with blooms border it on all sides, forming a large square. Within that, further rows of pink and lavender Clematis are lined side by side, five across.

It may not mean much to anyone else and that's okay. When the flowers are all in bloom, the combination of colors greeting me every day soothes my soul like nothing else. There's a poetry to life, a rhythm to nature. It isn't merely the aesthetic beauty of the natural world, but the involvement in the process of bringing the plants to life. The act of *growing* something.

Today is the day I tend my lovely garden. It's what I look forward to more than anything. In a good life, this is the best thing.

I make my way to the shed. I'll need to fertilize my lovely flowers, using the special mix I whip up at the work station inside. The right tool for the right job is a credo that has served me well and I keep mine inside, easily accessible and protected from the elements.

Smiling, I fish my keys from my pocket and unlock the large twin doors, making sure to re-secure them once I'm inside. It isn't that I'm trying to be particularly secretive about what I do here- I doubt anyone would want to use the special food I concoct for my chlorophyll babies – I simply prefer not to be disturbed when I'm working with my garden.

Not that I'm expecting visitors today. It's Sunday. That means there will be no post delivery, ruling out the arrival of the mail carrier. As she would have been the only person I'd have seen around noon any other day of the week, I'm confident in my complete solitude. I live this far out in the sticks for several reasons, the increased privacy being chief among them.

The familiar and welcome sight of the well-used work station is spread out before me as I turn away from the doors. It's a large area, stretching across most of the width of the shed. It stands five feet high and is covered with large swaths of heavy fabric, stained with the remnants of the last session I had in here.

It's hard to believe it's been over a month since I last produced a new supply.

I've found that to be the best approach. Producing a batch of my special fertilizer plentiful enough to last a month. A squat ice-box is parked in the corner of the shed to my left, one of the older models requiring a block of ice to keep the contents cold. That's where I store the remainder. I apply it to the garden every Sunday, over the course of four - sometimes five- weeks.

I approach the bench. The large, metal bucket I'll pour the mixture into is resting at the base of the station to my immediate left. On top and to my right, I see the wall where I keep the tools. Some, like the hacksaw and the sledge, are mounted on pegs. Others (I'm specifically noting the grinder now) are resting on a shelf I'd installed a while ago. Beneath, a small, battery-powered radio sits. I'll be getting to that in a minute.

It's time to get to work!

Further to my left, just past the end of the work station in the corner of the shed, stands a large walk-in cage. It's really only lengths of chain link fence I erected around the nook, but it covers thirty six square feet and serves its purpose.

Grinning with enthusiasm, I make quick work of unlatching the padlock keeping the cage closed. The hinges of the gate utter a low squeak as I gently pull it open. I'll have to oil them up when I'm done. Right now, all of my attention is on the task at hand.

A partially empty bag of nitrate-heavy compost is slouched on the floor at my feet, the heavy duty work gloves I use still laying across the top. I slip into the gloves and drag the bag out, leaving it next to the station. Returning to the cage, I set my eyes on the large, opaque rubber sack hanging from a hook in the ceiling.

Using a step ladder I keep inside the cage, I grip the sack with both arms and lift it off the hook with a grunt. This one is heavy, and I feel a slight twinge in my back. I chastise myself for not being more careful. If my back goes, I won't be able to do this anymore.

I follow the same routine with the sack as I did with the compost, then re-secure the cage behind me.

Now it's time for the fun to begin!

Before I get started, I approach the station and switch on the tiny radio. The welcome sounds of smooth jazz- a Sunday favorite of mine since my teen years- drift through the shed. I close my eyes and the mellow sound of an Alto sax washes over me, lifting me to my place of peace.

I pull the hammer from the wall (the considerable heft always feels so good in my hands), followed in short order by the hacksaw. Then I retrieve the grinder, which is large and made of iron, standing about two feet high. The feeding shaft is eighteen inches across and it sits on a platform wide enough to take up a fourth of the bench. There's a clasp protruding from the side I can slip over the edge of the edge. By tightening it, I clamp the grinder in place and prevent it from moving during the process.

I finish with that, then turn my attention to the rubber sack. Being careful to lift from my knees this time, I hoist the entire thing onto the station with a heavy *thud*. The humidity is already rising, my bangs fused to my brow by thick globs of sweat. I wipe the perspiration away and switch on a small desk fan – battery-powered, like the radio- positioned on my right.

The welcome cool of the manufactured breeze slides across my face and chest and I release another sigh. This is turning out to be a most pleasant day.

I unbind the mouth of the sack, gripping the lip and rolling it back, exposing the organic material I keep inside.

This is the gardening secret I happened upon some time ago. The compost with its nitrates and other nutrients is good. But for truly *exceptional* results, there has to be a protein base added to the mix. I have no idea how or why it works, but the combination produces flowers of outstanding beauty and durability.

Unfortunately, acquiring the specific ingredient I need has been increasingly difficult, which is another reason why I elect to make enough of my mixture to last a month. What lies before me is the result of blind luck.

That had proven to be a most fortunate turn of events. There had been two of them, having crept onto my property past midnight to swim in the pond. Recalling that night, I can only assume they thought I was either asleep or not in residence, as no lights had been on in the house. What they didn't - couldn't – know is I sometimes like to sit on the back porch and stare at the stars in the early morning hours.

I use a bow and arrow as opposed to a gun. While I own a rifle, for hunting I prefer the stealth of the bow. Archery is a skill I developed while I was young and I still practice frequently. I took them down as they were climbing out of the water. They'd left their clothes on the shore and, as they began to dress, I fired off a series of bolts.

I stare at her face, meeting glassy eyes that see nothing. Even with weeks of decomposition polluting the flesh, I can still make out the wounds where her throat and chest were punctured. Her mouth hangs open, blackened lips pulled tight against teeth already yellow with rot, her jaw slack in death. It looks as if she's screaming.

They had both been clean kills. He'd actually died first, dropping like so much dead weight as a shaft slammed directly into his eye, piercing his brain.

The decomposition helps. It softens them up and the decay seems to add something to the process. I remind myself that -once I've prepared this batch- I'll need to pull the other out of the ice box and put him in the sack to hang. That way I'll have space in there for the bucket.

I position the arm closest to me so it's fully extended, wrist turned up. Reaching across, I gently spin the volume knob on the radio, making the music just a little louder. I recognize the tune now playing as the theme to a sitcom from years ago. One about a cab company. Though I never really watched the show, I enjoy the melody and begin to hum along.

Picking up the hacksaw, I press the serrated edge of the blade against the withering flesh. With a hard pull toward my body, I begin.

About the Author:

D.S. Ullery is the author of *Beyond Where the Sky Ends- Dark Tales to Disturb and Engage*. He lives in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Amazon Author Page: [D. S. Ullery](#)

"I think I have just enough fuel in the generator, so we can watch the five o'clock news," Mark says while he adjusts the rabbit ears. His boots echo from the steel flooring and walls as he makes his way to the couch. He picks up his bowl of noodles. "Still warm. Great. Now for some protein." Mark picks out a freshly killed roach from a plastic container and stirs it into the bowl.

Sarah Lincoln appears on the TV screen wearing her usual bright pink plastic fallout suit with a matching gasmask. "Hello fellow survivors. It's day 583 in the contaminated zone. The weather for today is warm and sunny again. The expected high temperature will be around 131 degrees, with a low of 130. Wind from the North will be sustained gusts of .01 miles per hour. Humidity is around 100%." She shifts the microphone to her left hand and continues. "Right now, I have the privilege of announcing the winner of the monthly poetry contest." She holds up a plaque with a gold nameplate and purple ribbon in the center. "Sally Carter of Sector 3 – the winner," Sarah shouts and holds the plaque above her head. "The poem is entitled, 'I miss Lot 17.' The rhyme and meter is unlike anything submitted so far. We also appreciated the deeply spiritual significance." She passes the plaque to a helper off screen, then she gets handed a reddish tinted palm-sized glass jar. "The prize is this jar of protein gathered from various carcasses found in the free zone – a €3,000,000 value." She hands the jar back to her off screen helpers.

"Wow. Doesn't that look delicious?" Mark comments after he finishes chewing the roach and noodle morsel.

"Next I'm going to interview two of the locals here who have a wonderful tale of surviving for another week." A very thin couple stumbles into the camera frame. They both are pale with open sores covering their body. The woman clutches her dirty tattered blouse to keep it from sliding down. She holds her hand just below the neckline covering a necklace pendant. The male has a leather satchel slung over his sagging flesh. They both tremble.

"Why are they shaking so much?" He pours a tall glass of dark brown colored water. A few chunks slide into the glass. "That's the last of it. Do you want some? Here buddy, let me split up my share." He reaches behind the couch and feels around on the floor. Mark reveals a glass in his hand, rubs off some of the dirt, places it on the table, and pours about half on the contents from his glass. "Drink up. Like I said that's the last of it."

Sarah Lincoln steps in between the couple. "This is Norma and Harvey – locals in the area. They both waved at the camera, barely raising their shaking arms above their waists. "So how is it in your neighborhood? Has the crime rate decreased since The Rosewood Foundation began air-dropping food and supplies?"

Harvey steps forward and lowers himself to speak into the microphone. "Thanks for talking to us today. You're even more lovely in person." He folds his arms across his chest, trying to stabilize himself.

Sarah puts her hand on the side of her gasmask, "Aww, you both are so cute."

"We haven't seen a care pack in a long time. The last drop landed in the water, and there was no way any of us were going in there. There's a lot less fighting lately, since about half the population is gone. I don't know..."

"Thank you, Harvey. Let's ask your beautiful wife the same questions." Sarah holds the microphone near Norma's mouth.

Norma calmly pats the pendant and stares at a point above the camera. Sarah draws attention to the necklace directing the camera to zoom in on the item.

"Does this item you hold have any significance?" Sarah questions.

Norma holds the pendant out for everyone to see. Still staring out past the camera, she slowly answers, "This is the finger of my daughter Phyllis mounted on a diecast fire truck. She passed away saving me and my husband. We are no longer without."

"I am so sorry Norma and Harvey," Sarah mentions.

"This is the finger of my daughter Phyllis. She passed away saving me and my husband. We are no longer without..." Norma repeats.

Sarah interrupts, "Ok everyone, this is Sarah Lincoln signing off for Seared Finesse Satellite News. Have a great d..."

Norma grabs Sarah's wrist and bites, while Harvey seizes hold of her gasmask trying to pull it off her head. Sarah twists, knocking Norma to the side. Harvey wraps his arms around Sarah's neck, picking her up off the ground. Sarah flails her arms.

A man with a baseball bat hurdles into the scene. He is dressed in a black radiation suit and wears a gasmask. The word 'PRESS' is affixed in white letters on the chest of his suit. He hits the couple repeatedly on the shoulders, back, stomach – anywhere he can land a blow. They both fall to the ground then the black clad man continues to beat them, taking turns between the two.

“Wow, I just love live TV. Don’t you?” Mark laughs as he finishes the last of his water. “We’ll have to look for more tomorrow. You didn’t even touch your drink. Do you mind if I have a sip or two? Hey, are you asleep again?” Mark slaps his friend on the shoulder and a roach crawls out of the eye socket. Mark snatches the roach and places it in a plastic container.

The camera centers Sarah from the waist up, with the view of the beating kept in the background. Mark can only see the blood-stained tip of the bat lifting, and then lowering. Sarah speaks louder to cover over the pounding sounds. “This is Sarah Lincoln signing off for Seared Finesse Satellite News. Stay tuned for another episode of Celebrity Bunkers, up next. As always, ‘We honor the fallen in the Ten Minute Fourth War, and of course, he who pushes the button first laughs last.’ Have a great day.”

About the Author:

Nick Romeo is a multidisciplinary artist, musician and writer. Nick lives in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania with his wife and cat named Megatron. His chapbook *The Insolent Somnambulist* has just been published by Poet’s Haven Press.

The Alien Species Protection Act (ASPA) | David Lewis Pogson

He was always in the village pub whenever I visited. The old guy followed me out to stagger home. He fell behind as we walked up the deserted lane and under the line of trees along the school’s boundary fence. The intense summer heat meant that the trees had lost leaves but, in the moonlight, what now hung from them gave their silhouette the appearance of a canopy.

Extreme climate change had brought many unexpected changes. As the southern hemisphere blistered, some surviving alien species moved north to avoid the arid conditions. Amongst them the giant fruit bat, a harmless endangered native of the wasted forests of the Philippines, had settled successfully in the now-tropical British countryside. However, a lack of fig trees meant that the bats had to adapt their diet to what was available. The government added them to the ASPA to prevent hunting.

At first the native small mammals – rats, squirrels, mice, rabbits – started to disappear. We thought they were moving out to find cooler habitats. Then dogs and cats became scarcer and that was a mystery as skeletons were found in the fields, picked clean of flesh.

The old guy had reached the line of the trees when he stumbled. I turned and thought about going back to help him. Then I thought better of it. Firstly I’d be punished severely if caught harming them. Secondly it was better that they took him instead of me. They had an infectious bite. He was entirely covered by them already. They were picking off the weakest of us. That was the problem with the Greens seizing power. They always put the environment first. Protecting the wildlife had outlawed the rest of us. It would require a lot more bodies before they changed the law back again.

About the Author:

David Lewis Pogson is fiction writer for ACES ‘The Terrier’ magazine, living in North Lancashire, England. He has been published in a variety of media. Winner of the Cumbria Local History Federation Prize, the Freerange Theatre Company’s Playframe Short Story and Microcosmsfic.com Flash Fiction competitions.

Author Blog: [David Lewis Pogson](#)

Twitter: [@davidlpogson](#)

Lockdown | *Eddie D. Moore*

“Breach detected in Bio Lab 2. Lockdown initiated.”

The computer repeated the warning as door after door hermetically sealed a step behind Nathan. Bio Lab 2 housed dozens of deadly creatures. He did *not* want to get stuck on the wrong side of quarantine. The shuttle bay doors slammed shut an instant after he dived through the doorway. When Nathan looked up, Dr. Jenson was staring blankly down at him.

Nathan said with relief, “Thank God, you made it out too.”

His relief turned to terror as insectile appendages pushed out Dr. Jenson’s eyes and blood flowed over his cheeks.

Jungle Secrets | *Eddie D. Moore*

Ben dropped his backpack. “I can’t go any further. We might as well set up camp here.”

After a long sigh, Michael slowly nodded. “The Congo has no mercy for visitors.”

“It’s this damned heat. How close are we?”

Michael glanced at the screen on his GPS. “We are in the area our great-grandfather wrote about.”

“So, this is the last place mokele-mbembe was seen.”

“Yes, according to his journal.” Michael sucked in a sharp breath. “Look at the size of that egg!”

Before Ben could answer, a deafening roar filled the air and bone-crushing feet trampled them both.

Shady Oak Gardens | *Eddie D. Moore*

Sheriff Casey kept one hand on his holstered pistol as he slipped from tree to tree. Clouds partially obscured what little moonlight illuminated the graveyard. An ethereal light reflected off the white marble headstones, and he stopped moving.

“We don’t take kindly to grave robbers around here!” He shouted as he drew his weapon and stepped out from behind a tree.

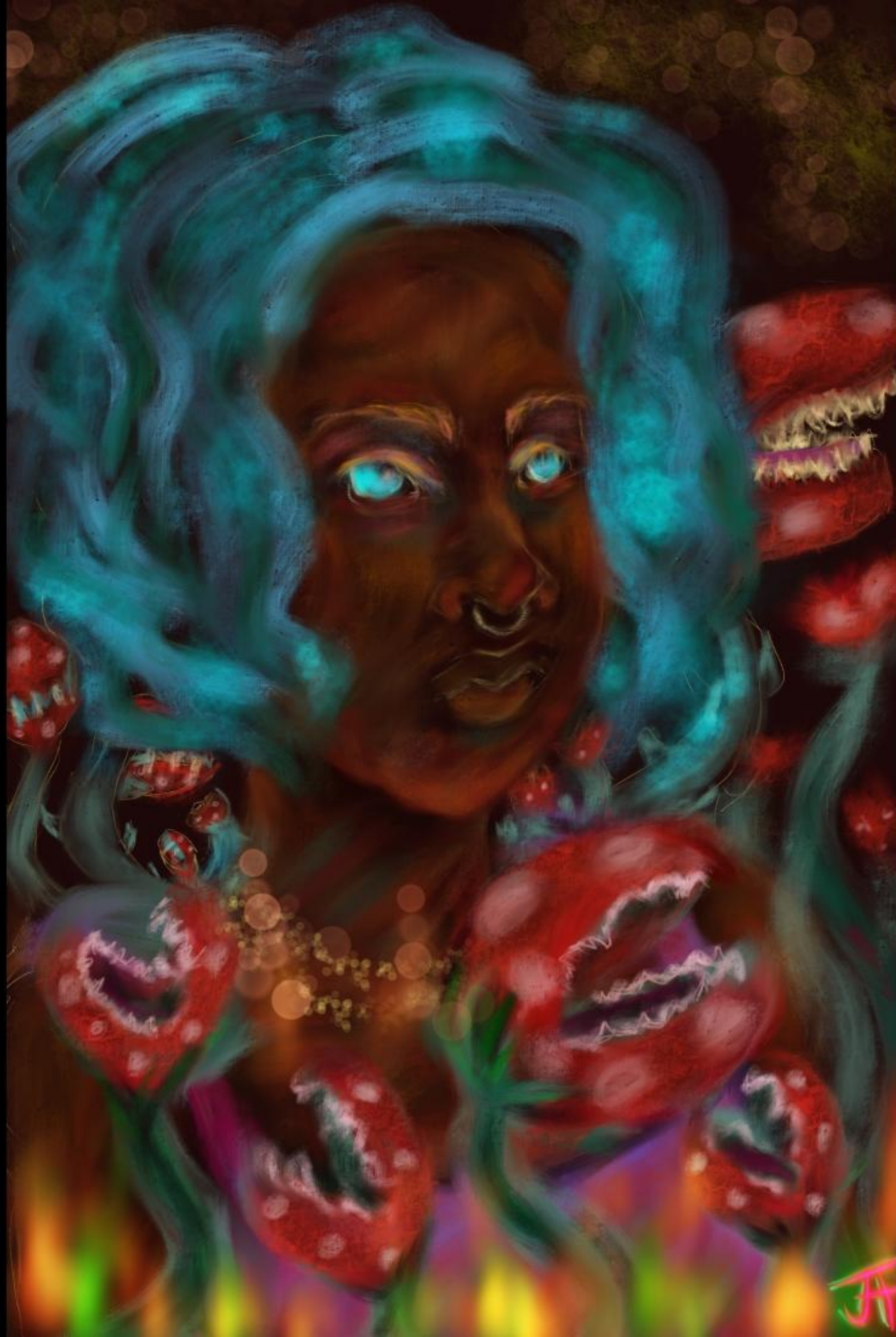
A ghostly specter turned haunted eyes in his direction, and its upper lip curled in disgust. As it glided toward him, gunshots echoed through the valley.

Casey’s body was discovered the next morning with a white-knuckled grip on his pistol.

About the Author:

Eddie D. Moore travels hundreds of hours a year, and he fills that time by listening to audiobooks. When he isn’t playing with his grandchildren, he writes his own stories. His stories have been published by Kzine, Alien Dimensions, Black Hare Press, Nomadic Delirium Press, Fantasia Divinity Publishing and by dozens of online publishers. You can find a list of his publications on his blog.

Author Blog: [Eddie D. Moore](#)
Amazon Author Page: [Eddie D. Moore](#)



Hey Jessica, thank you for being our Featured Artist for this issue of The Sirens Call eZine! Please tell us more about yourself and your work.

Hi! Thank you for having me in The Siren's Call, super excited to be here. My name is Jessica F Holt and I am an artist that loves making horror, fantasy and dark art. I work mainly in oil paint and over the last 2 years I have taught myself digital art, that has been a great outlet for more immediate work while I toil away over my oil paintings. I'm currently working on an oil painting series called *The Nature of Death*, which explores the interconnectivity of nature, humanity and death. Find out more at my website jessicafholt.com or check my twitter [@jessfonk](https://twitter.com/jessfonk) for daily updates!

Q: What are some of your main influences?

A: Francis Bacon was a huge one in the beginning of my creative life, his paintings are so alive with movement and dark subject matter. I'd grown up reading Anne Rice and loved dark, gothic tales so his was one of the first like, "oh wow you can make art that's creepy too," kinda moments haha.

Another prominent influence is Artemisia Gentileschi, she was an Italian painter most known for her depiction of Judith Slaying Holofernes. She was an incredible painter, not nearly celebrated enough in my opinion but thankfully is getting more recognition now. The first time I saw blood splatter in an oil painting was in her artwork, it looked so fresh, so alive that it could just come off the painting and hit me. I had the fortune of seeing it in real life at The Uffizi Gallery when I was on holiday in Italy and I lavished in it for a lot longer than my travel companion would have liked but it was so worth it.

Q: What mediums do you work in?

A: I'm working in oil paint primarily and the last 2 years I have taught myself how to create digital art through the amazing program Procreate on my iPad Pro. Both mediums give me something different creatively and have equally influenced my growth as an artist. While the oil paintings have definitely taught me patience, to slow down and enjoy the time spent on creating an oil painting. Digital painting has a more immediate effect that has brought me a new color palette, a different way to approach the canvas when it is smaller as well as creating with digital brushes on a surface that was quite foreign to me. They were a challenge at first but now I enjoy being able to take my canvas with me wherever I go. Though I do still love being behind a big canvas splashing paint everywhere. I'm a messy artist when I paint and it just feels so good to be free of confinements. It fits me as a person that both mediums have a duality I enjoy.

Q: Is there a medium you've always wanted to try but just haven't had the chance to yet?

A: Yes! Street art painting, mural art. It would be amazing to make a building or a wall of a building my canvas. I really love working on large canvases and feel that if I could get a hold of a wall that it would just be this incredible experience. In my down time I secretly dream of being able to have the opportunity of creating street art. The public aspect of it is a bit scary as well as the heights thing for me in larger buildings, but I think it would be so cool



to do something that everyone could enjoy, something that could enhance the community on a daily basis. Maybe one day I'll get this opportunity.

Q: Is there an artist you would love to work with?

A: Alive or dead?

Alive would be Beth Cavener, she does these larger than life animal sculptures out of clay and large armatures. The movement and intense emotions she creates with anthropomorphic animals is something beautiful and otherworldly. To create a combined exhibition where she creates the animals, I create the atmosphere would be a high life achievement for me.

A dead artist I would have liked to work with would have been Remedios Varo. She was a Spanish-Mexican Surrealist painter that made one of my favorite paintings, *The Creation of Birds*. To have been able to create a mural with her would have been a joyful experience.

Q: What do you do when a piece isn't coming together visually the same way it does in your head?

A: Good question, most of the time it doesn't come out the way I've drawn it before I apply it to the canvas, which can be frustrating but 90% of the time it morphs into something so much better than I planned it to be. I'm an intuitive artist so most of the time it's my brain going, *hey that looks good there*, and it works out well.

When it goes completely off, I usually take a break and walk away for a bit. Usually a walk in nature or listening to some music helps. Then I come back head clear, fresh and I can see where it needs to go.

Q: Do you ever suffer from a creative block? What do you do to get through it?

A: Yep, it's a natural thing to happen. Plus when you balance many different types of artist hats like me, it gets tricky. Plus the attachment of monetization to your art can be detrimental if you don't have a creative outlet that is purely yours and not for consumerism. To battle feelings of burnout and creative block I usually go for long walks in nature, cuddle with my dog or read books and comics. Just giving my mind somewhere else to be is refreshing, it clears my brain and helps me remember why I started creating art in the first place. Self care is really important to prevent more serious cases of artist block or burn out. Sadly a lot of creatives experience this, due to our current economy and the low pay we normally receive for high amounts of work. So it's very important to take a step back and breathe. Talking to other artists in the community about this stuff is helpful too, it's good to not feel alone and that this will pass just gotta keep trucking.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?

A: In a lot of things. Nature is at the top, I am so happy to live by beautiful landscapes, rivers, lakes, it brings me peace of mind and also inspires me to paint. Every time I walk by this one area near me in Scotland I have this urge to paint, it's almost magical I can't explain it. I've never been a good landscape painter but now I can understand why so many people enjoy making it because the area we live in is just so lush and green, it's truly breathtaking some days. Other ways I gather inspiration are in other people's art, there are so many talented people out there right now. Everyday I find someone new and I'm like, *damn this is incredible*. Then I take that positive energy into my own work. Knowing other people are out there doing what they love no matter what is beautiful to me. Plus seeing artist communities come together and support each other gives me life.

Q: What is your favorite piece that you've created, and why is it particularly special?

A: Oooof that's tough. I think the latest one is a large oil painting called, *A Meditation on Death*, is a favorite. It's so full of emotion, this push and pull of energy of life and death, the beautiful women of color at the center of the piece, the skull at the bottom a reminder of her mortality, it's beautiful, haunting and also meditative. Also, the canvas is an unusual shape for me it's very long and narrow, coming up with a composition that fit it was a challenge but now the artwork looks like it was made to be on there. It's also the first time I feel I successfully pulled off moss in a painting, haha.

I have in process photos of it on my site but since it's such an odd canvas style it's really hard to get a good photo where you can appreciate all the subtle detail. The videos are much better so I will post those online soon. The painting is a milestone for me too, I feel like I grew as an artist with this work. I mean I grow with each work I create but this felt special and in my heart. I was so happy with the composition/subject matter of the painting, I created a mini version of the painting as well which holds some of its qualities but is a bit warmer in color tone. The smaller one is called, *A Conversation with Death*, since it feels more talkative. This one is also on my website, jessicafholt.com.

Q: What is your favorite piece of artwork created by another artist?

A: Oh wow there are so many. I don't think I could pick one, so I'll pick a few artists. In no particular order of importance. Remedios Varo's oil painting, *Creation of the Birds*. Elegant, surreal, the idea of birds being created from the heart strings of a femme presenting owl person sitting in a chair just happily creating is beautiful to me. All of Remedios Varo's paintings hold a mystical quality that I adore.

A painting by Francis Bacon, *Study for a Portrait of George Dyer*, reads like a mortician or surgeon peeling back flesh from a human's face. It's beautiful in its excavation of the man's perceived face. Feels almost intimate and full of horror at the same time.

Artemisia Gentileschi's oil painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, is a gorgeous display of art technique, high emotion and violence. Just perfection. There are two versions of it, I love the later period one (1620-21) more as it's got a little more oomph to it. You can feel the weight of the sword going through Holofernes's neck and the blood splatter is just <chef kiss>. Plus the women's expressions are priceless and show such strength.

It's been our pleasure to have you as our Featured Artist! Is there anything else you'd like to include?

Thank you so much for having me and for supporting artists in the horror community.

I also recently opened a shop with my partner Jonas and it's called The Haunted Bouncy Castle. Where we offer spooky art inspired gifts like handmade pillows, enamel pins and original art, because I believe in celebrating Halloween and horror all year round! We just started making these cuddly coffin, ghost and pumpkin handmade pillows that I am super excited about, so go check them out!

If you would like to see more of Jessica's work you can find her portfolio and blog at: jessicafholt.com
For commissioned artwork please visit the contact form on Jessica's website where she would be happy to discuss your artistic needs.

Website: jessicafholt.com
Email: info@jessicafholt.com

Poetry

The Knight in Green | Zoie Watterson

A little frog, a hero, he
Did best intentions, have.
And as he hopped on heartily
An odd pond met his path.

He bounced in bravely without pause
And leapt around the scene.
There were no angry eyes, nor claws
To greet this Knight in Green.

He thought it best to rest a while,
The water cool and calm.
The soothing lap did so beguile
Our champion as he swam.

The pond grew tepid, as he went.
Again, then warmer still,
But heroes aren't so simply bent,
The frog gathered his will.

Adapting to the rising heat
His battle did rage on.
The fate our little friend did meet?
Both flavoursome, and gone.

About the Author:

Zoe Watterson writes fiction and poetry in her spare time. She is from Northern Ireland and lives with her husband and two dogs. She enjoys the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror genres, gaming, and role-playing. She works for a local university and studies Social Psychology.

Facebook: [Zoie Watterson](#)

Twitter: [@Iskaria](#)

The Rudderless Moon | Meg Smith

Oh night,
cherry blood broken
where rosy foam
spittles out.
A room is dark.
There is
nothing new to begin,
because it's all
been done.
And you
can't scare me now.
I've walked through
so many halls,
with no light.

The last clouds | Meg Smith

Gray threaded
with scarlet,
and they sigh;
Indifferent to all --
mountains,
the equator,
oceans, boiling.
So, it remains -
empty to Earth.
So there is no one
to hear,
no one to dance
in the fire fall.

Moth Elegy | Meg Smith

A lattice
among ferns --
Breath is no breath.
Like a copper fan,
open to the air,
what once was sky.
A shadow hovers,
spreading night.
And, then,
wings fold,
paper, smoke --
a body down,
a sparrow, rising.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. Her poetry and fiction have appeared recently in *Dark Dossier*, *Strange Horizons*, *Silver Blade*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Raven Cage*, *The Horror Zine*, *The Cafe Review*, *Poetry Bay*, *Siren's Call eZine*, and more. She has served as a board member for Lowell Celebrates Kerouac, which sponsors an annual festival honoring Lowell native, Jack Kerouac. Her most recent poetry book, *Dear Deepest Ghost*, is available on Amazon.

Facebook: [Meg Smith](#)

Twitter: [@MegSmith_Writer](#)

The Call of the Fiddle | *Mathias Jansson*

It was midsummer night
a strange and magic time
when day and night meet
and never fall asleep

I walked alone in the woods
when I heard the fiddle
the dazzling enchanting riddle
luring and calling
I was mesmerized
instantly falling
in love with the melody

I reached a river bank
and saw the young man
naked on a stone
playing his fiddle
in the rapid flow
and my only wish
was to steal a secret kiss
from his beautiful lips

I started to wade
into the fast stream
but it was too cold and strong
it grabbed me by my legs
tried to drag me down
the stones on the bottom
were slippery like ice
and before I knew it
I fell into the whirling water

Terrified I was struggling
filled with fear and panic
I was drowning
when I saw a shadow approaching
it was him, my lover
coming to save my life
but before my eyes
he transformed into a giant pike
with dark dead eyes
and sharp teeth
I felt his strong jaws around my neck
dragging me down into the dark
the last thing I ever saw
was the water above
turning red
like a sunset or a dawn.

About the Author:

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines 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.

Author Blog: [Mathias Janson Art Critic and Poet](#)

What it Takes to Be a Mermaid | *Stephanie M. Wytovich*

Like razor blades through oceans waves,
she cuts herself, smooth like butter, until
the seaweed comes out. It bleeds warm,
like freshly shampooed hair, its tendrils
wrapping themselves around her wrists,
legs, and ankles, tying her down, pulling
her under.

Her face a dripping watercolor, she paints
her breath in shades of blue, the tide a jagged
shark-toothed comb against her wind-worn face;
she drips algae amongst tears and seashells,
her legs scissoring as they begin
to sew themselves shut.

With a belly full of angel fish, she swims
under coral statues, her man-made gills
a bouquet of creme flowers flapping against
the marine, her body twisted
in a hundred hurricanes
as she opens her eyes
to her death at sea.

What Lingers Between Shipwrecks | *Stephanie M. Wytovich*

It's a weird thing to vanish, to feel your limbs separate
from you like driftwood, to weave through worlds of
underwater graves, fashion nets from seaweed,
weapons from coral, the allure of all things weightless
a fisherman's elegy, a selkie's tired song.

My binding took years but it only took seconds, a careful
craft, this the shape of my bloat. I wore my disfigurement
like a tidal wave, my legs covered, my bones fused together,
their shine like sea glass, florescent and deadly, their reflection
a spattering of blood diamonds on the surf.

Yet sometimes when I swallow, I taste the word shipwreck,
feel it crawl into my chest, settle in my lungs like bubbles,
like fog, for I am a host of silver hooks, a collection of scales
and fishing lures, my teeth made of shells, my skin gray,
waterlogged in its drowning.

But the sea is kind to girls with riptide hair, and I am a predator
drawn to blood, to the sound gore makes as it drips petals
into my mouth, soft and waxen, with skin like silk, all their
gourmet corpses an entrée of sinking flesh, myself all too eager,
the definition of hunger, eyes widened, black as a shark's.

Licorice Waves | *Stephanie M. Wytovich*

In the spaces between metal bars, the tentacles
reached out, their arms a dull gray, soaked
and dripping with saltwater and mucus, their
suckers a candy dish for bacteria and screams.

The cage was built by the Divers, by the people
who went into the sea, their lungs an iron nest
of shark's teeth and anemone, their breath
now shaped by the scales and gills of a starved
shoal of piranha.

It was the waves that took them, changed them,
gave them new life in the tide, their arms broken,
their fingers fused, a mutation of seaweed and blood
collecting in veins opened by wreckage and shells.

Together, they hoard the bodies of Hydras and Ketea
lock them in musky rooms filled with dirty water
and open wires, the electric shock a junkie's wet dream,
all that black ink seeping into open mouths like tar,
a licorice sludge kissed by eels and weighted down
by the roar of Leviathan's moans.

About the Author:

Stephanie M. Wytovich is an American poet, novelist, and essayist. Her Bram Stoker Award-winning poetry collection, *Brothel*, earned a home with Raw Dog Screaming Press alongside *Hysteria: A Collection of Madness*, *Mourning Jewelry*, *An Exorcism of Angels*, and *Sheet Music to My Acoustic Nightmare*. Her novel *The Eighth*, is published with Dark Regions Press.

Author Blog: [Join Me in the Madhouse](#)

Twitter: [@SWytovich](#)

SPACE & TIME

SPACEANDTIMEMAGAZINE.COM



SHARE

SUBMIT

SUBSCRIBE

Three Deaths | *Angela Yuriko Smith*

First Death comes...
tender unfolding halts
with sudden realization
that forever eventually
finishes and youth
is a trick of mirrors.

First Death sits
on your shoulder
for a lifespan
foreshadowing.

Second Death comes...
ebbing pulse fades, singing
a lullaby of goodbye
as papery skin peels away
with a sudden realization
that it's time for new luggage
to visit new horizons.

Second Death sits
at your empty place
filling the space
with a lack of you.

Third Death comes...
the last time your name
is spoken, words vanishing
in empty air, you evaporating
with them. Nothingness
falls over what was you.

Third Death sits
between the minutes
it takes to be unremembered
as your name is exhaled
from the last lips to ever
speak it.

About the Author:

Angela Yuriko Smith is an American poet, publisher and author. Her first collection of poetry, *In Favor of Pain*, was nominated for a 2017 Elgin Award. Her latest novella, *Bitter Suites*, is a 2018 Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist. She publishes *Space and Time* magazine, a 52 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction. For more information visit SpaceandTimeMagazine.com.

Author Blog: [Angela Yuriko Smith](#)

I am just arrived in the village of Twee
with its little front gardens carefully wild,
with its thatch nicely polished,
its flowers dust free.
I wonder who tends them
in the village of Twee.
Who shampoos the pinks
who waters the pots,
who sweeps up the leaves
and prunes all the phlox.
There's no humans to see
in the village of Twee,
just cars with their robots,
red, white and pink.
They wave as they drive through
with shopping piled high
singing 'tra lah lah, welcome and fiddle di di.
There's a welcome for all in the village of Twee.'

They park right outside,
with the pavements long gone
to give wider roads for motoring robots.
So how did it happen, this robotic coup.
There must be a story or legend to tell
to explain the strange culture I came across there.
Well, pavements weren't needed
with no humans to walk
and that's how it started
if truth it be told.
And it's 'tra lah lah, welcome and fiddle di di'
as the robots drive smiling through the village of Twee.

So are there still humans?
I've heard they're indoors
their legs long since wasted,
they're unable to walk.
So the robots took over
and they do what they can
to keep the thatch polished
and dig up the weeds,
to feed all that need it
and take out the waste.
And when work is finished their day will come,
when new robots grow older, they can move on.
Singing 'tra lah lah, bye now and fiddle di di,
there'll be no more humans in the village of Twee'

A Dormouse Dreams | *Lynn White*

"Let me out, let me out!"
cried the dormouse.
"I don't want to live in a teapot,
not even in a dream!
Let me out, let me out
before the water boils for tea!"
"Boiled dormouse!
Now that could be a tasty morsel"
Hatter said thoughtfully.
"But would it be worth the risks
of mousicide?
We must consider"
All nodded in agreement.
"Let me out, let me out!"
cried the dormouse.
"Escape is difficult."
said the March Hare,
"To escape you must go back,
through the glass like she did,"
nodding towards Alice,
"but backwards
and as we know,
time only moves forwards."
All nodded in agreement.
"It's getting late,"
said the White Rabbit.
"But where is the glass,
there is no glass!"
cried the Dormouse.
All nodded in agreement.
"It's time for tea!"
cried the White Rabbit.
And time waits for no one,
not even a mouse.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality and writes hoping to find an audience for her musings. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award.

Author Blog: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Facebook: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Easy Pickings | *Timothy Hosey*

The vulture above the precipice of a tree,
noticed fresh road kill below,
its intestines tattered in scarlet ribbons,
on the skillet asphalt.
A gnarled carcass's decomposition almost complete,
invited every species of carrion,
The pungent odor of the carcass's decayed tissues,
seethed in the atmosphere with its noxious and poisonous gases,
the carcass's bloated remains approached mummification.
Digested enzymes oozed in a tepid; black sludge,
from the Duodenum stomach region,
in a deluge of inexplainable food contents dissolved in uric acid.
The placid carcass,
sprawled open like a plump turkey that discharged.
First the eyeballs were plucked out,
like prosthetic glass eyeballs,
and the vulture plucked ravenously at the red; tainted meat with,
its razor sharp talons.
The tainted meat welcomed the hungry guest's,
request.
A feast of champions.
Country folk call this Easy Pickings.

About the Author:

Timothy Hosey is a poet of the macabre. Whenever he's not writing, he thinks about the human condition. He plays his guitar and listens to heavy metal as a muse for future pieces of literature.

Facebook: [Timothy Hosey](#)

Twitter: [@timothy_hosey](#)

Stick and Stones | *Lydia Prime*

Sticks and stones and cob webbed bones resting in the corner;
a house that creaks and ghosts who shriek that never had a mourner.
Spirits moving, echoes heard, while vermin scurry out of sight,
a dare, a pact, the bravest child will go inside tonight.
Flashlights in shaking hands of the innocent little boys,
the inhabitants of the house are pleased to see chubby new toys.
At first a light flickers on, strange noises heard from below,
shadows moving all around, and from the dark are eyes aglow.
Crying kids are music to an old crypt such as this,
sticks and stones and cob webbed bones revel in terrifying bliss.

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: [Lydia Prime](#)

Twitter: [@LydiaPrime](#)

Moses Container | David Brandt

Shift the center of harm's delight
To the martyr's wounded funeral song,
As parents of decayed presence believe
In charity for sister's denial.
Fragments of illusion forge regret
Inside a building, cold.

Once removed from the entertaining light
Of clever fortune, cold and benign,
No bargain to thwart remains.

Insisting on gardens once enshrined,
The simple pleasures dried
Until the stream of blood adjourned,
And shallow silence died.

About the Author:

David Brandt studied English at Virginia Commonwealth University. He took part in the underground press movement; editing and publishing the literary zine, *The Crisp Fabric*. He was a regular contributor to Ann Koi's *Lumpy Head*. There is an e-book of his essays called *Evelyn Avenue and Elsewhere* that focuses on the time he spent living in Nashville, Tennessee.

Author Blog: [Dust Exchange](#)

Twitter: [@dustexchange](#)

In the crowd of men | Geoffrey A. Landis

Monsters walking in the crowd of men
nobody notices
a gargoyle
 with granite skin and grotesque fangs
drops a twenty into a beggar's cup
a demon
 skin aflame,
asphalt bubbling in his footsteps
stops to listen to a busker play saxophone
swaying and bopping to the beat.

The monsters are the men.

I dream of pulsating machine guns
bullets small smooth perfect deadly
of dynamite
And walk in the crowd of men.

About the Author:

Geoffrey A. Landis is a poet, a science-fiction writer and a scientist. As a poet, he has won the Rhysling, Dwarf Stars, and Asimov's Readers Awards. As a SF writer, he has won the Hugo and Nebula awards. As a scientist, he is a Mars scientist and a NASA Innovative Advanced Concepts fellow. He also fences épée. More information is on his web page, <http://www.geoffreylandis.com>.

Facebook: [Geoffrey A. Landis](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Geoffrey A. Landis](#)



It wasn't some fifties' sci-fi movie
prop I spotted crawling from
Lake Itasca that day, Jake. It was real!

A four-foot frog! I kid you not!
I saw it crawl ashore and turn
and stare at me. I couldn't move!

I had the dog on a short leash
as soon as I heard the commotion
in the water. Dog whimpered between my legs

when the frog first hopped toward us.
It musta been sizin' us up for lunch.
I half-expected a long tongue to snag us.

You never heard about the Minnesota mutations?
No gigantism back in ninety-five,
But three eyes, missing and extra limbs

Why not gigantism in 2013? It's not
like we didn't know about bizarre
genetic and physical changes in the frog pop.

Land of 10,000 lakes? Try 11,842!
That's a lot of frog habitat, dude!
If human legs became a hot ticket item

in some frog bog restaurant, frogs would
be lickin' their webbed fingers and grinnin'
Tupper tight smiles all around, you bet!

Pesticides and endocrine disrupters
are the most likely culprits. Not just
the methoprene we've been sprayin'

for years to kill mosquitoes... .
Possibly a combination of elements... .
Three eyes, extra webbing, half and extra legs

Why not? We've created other monstrous
mutations: thalidomide babies, nasty
carcinomas on fish pulled from the Great Lakes.

Heck, ecology wasn't a science
before the sixties. Who knows how many
mutagenic toxins, how many polluted lakes

will spawn monsters worse than four-foot frogs?
Care to speculate how long before we
end up on these creatures' plates? Not long, Bob!

O.K., dude, whatchew gonna do
if some reptoid in the road holds
his own and refuses to book it
into the tulies? Runs right at *your* car?

He's clawin' and clamberin' the hood.
You'd be thinkin', *If I grab my rifle
and shoot him through the windshield
and I don't kill him, he's got me.*

You'd tramp on the accelerator and pull
some crazy ass turns before you shook
him off. You'd leave him on a roadside rail.
The front end damage would be extensive.

Better than you, for sure. You couldn't
imagine what this lizard man would have
done to your thin hide, never mind the gash,
big red splash and plash of intestines.

What did he *look* like?! Like death
comin' at me with the speed and
power of a freight train. Hominid features
scrunched up in a slaverin' sneer.

Face-for-radio reptoid Elvis.
I dunno. Scarey and fixated
on my gizzards. Dog-toothed,
scaly, intent to get in and get me.

Jesus, I dunno! Its legs came
out of its sides like a lizard's,
not down from a pelvis, like a human's.
Wasn't wearin' winkle pickers.

I didn't *want* to see him droolin'
in front of the steering wheel a quarter
inch of glass away. His eyes though –
they were full of luminous intelligence.

Better him hanging over a guard rail.
You'd be outta there faster than
shit through a goose. Gone before the sun
could set on another day. To the nearest saloon.

Gooned, all bedraggled and befuddled,
if not drooling, wide-eyed, slack-jawed
like some Pavlovian dog yourself. Every
pissed and shit-squish pattied inch of you.

Waheela, Way ho! Hey, yo!
Any way you wanna go, bro'
Any way you want it; yer top dawg.

Only don't discombobulate me, please.
Don't decapitate, don't decorticate.
Please, don't deprive me of my melon!

It's stuffed, I know, and would make
a fine trophy or mantelpiece display
in your oh so boss hideaway grotto.

Please don't touch the last hairs on my pate.
Let 'em turn white. I can still be
Santa to my kids. I've got the beard.

O.K. maybe we'll forgo the fur hat
and piping. Yer so white we could
follow your red eyes into town.

Give Rudolph a chance to change bulbs...
You know, I didn't really know
I was on the Headless Valley road.

Car broke down; you know the story.
Yes, we do look like blue burritos
in our down sleeping bags.

But, really, I'm sure my flesh is toxic
to Waheelas. Won't make you feel good
and gives you rumblies in yer tummy.

Hey, you don't wanna hurl
a piece of old Earl in the crick, do ya?
The fishes would bob up toxic too.

Gotta think of yer future, the resources
you'll lose if you disgorge even a tiny
bit of me. My head's best left on my neck.

Waheela, Way ho! Yo go, and ordinarily
I'd totally trust your head removal plan, but
could we discuss this over a be-- .

Night Hag | *Richard Stevenson*

The house was creepy to begin with –
old and decrepit. In need of more
than a paint job, I can tell you.

You gotta chill! The atmosphere
as dark as the woman in black's
dank weeds just steppin' on the property.

A fixer-upper I hadda move into
with my parents. And, of course, they
didn't believe me the first night I screamed

the house awake. Pissed my PJs at ten!
What?! Did you think I wasn't
house-trained by then? What I saw

would make a grown man hose
his own jaunty jockey shorts, partner.
She wasn't no ghost. White boney chrone!

I wore a gold coin around my neck –
What the heck – a lucky charm, I thought..
Until the hag tried to grab it.

Those weren't ghost fingers around my neck!
Cold and white and boney – yes –
with plenty of dirt beneath long nails.

Tried to kill me by strangling me
with my own necklace, the black hag!
Hadda have the damn coin – that

and any others I left on the dresser
or bedside table. What would a ghost
need with coins? Explain that, Einstein!

O.K., she looked like she could use passage
across the River Styx. Her orbits were hollow,
her pupils wide and dark and deep.

She'd been robbin' me of sleep for a week
when the parents decided to bunk in,
and my old man sat bolt upright from the floor.

Saw the hag himself and lost control –
fortunately not of his bladder or bowels --
but he screamed Ma and I wide awake.

Poof! She just disappeared,
My coin necklace on the pillow
next to me – but no coin.

That was it. We up and moved – again.
Not our circus, not our monkey now.
Haven't seen a chalky bone since. Still, ...

Don't know the history of the place.
Suppose you want a snappy capper, eh?
Some one who died in the place years before?

Maybe a murder victim? Abused wife
who just had no healthy body or no money
to escape to or with? Got choked out too?

Sell that to yer pulp magazines!
All I know is she was as real as cancer, bud.
As real as these clammy mitts around yer neck!

El Chupucabras II | *Richard Stevenson*

Chu-chu-chu chu-chu pacabra,
ba-ba-bad ass booger dude. Whew!
You got the skunk *and* skunk ape beat –
'nuff to knock me off my feet! P.U.!

Damn! You've nabbed a new ewe too,
left it flat as a wineskin after quaffing
your fill of blood. Here, might as well
daub your lips with the fleece, ya creep!

Got yourself a punk quill mohawk.
Now yer all vampiric. Flatulent
and sulphuric. If my eyes weren't waterin',
I'd blow a large hole in you, you bet!

Got black bat wings though. Can flee
this pop stand at a moment's notice –
and you do. Wallaby wannabe, you hop,
dine, and dash. Display bad table manners too!

Get here in a saucer? Travelled through a portal
to a perfect Puerto Rican holiday?
Now folks find you in Cuba, Texas, Russia,
in South America, and they can't even agree

whether you walk on two legs or four.
So what's the score? Do you even bleed?
Are you some shape-shifting supernatural
demon from hell, or just a coyote with mange?

Who can tell? How do you arrange
for all the costume changes in a day?
Don't you get sick of sanguine shakes?
You could as easily snag a steak on display.

Tuck that between yer big incisors and chew.
Chew-chew-chew chu-chu-pacabra.
Ain't no abracadabra words or spell
Gonna whisk you back to from where you came.

We can see that. Don't need to see
petechial hemorrhaging in a victim's eyes:
he's deflated by more than a hat size
once you've sucked the poor critter dry.

We've got yer number, dude! Are comin' for you.
Don't worry though: we won't drain yer blood.
No. We'll just tranquilize you, put you in a cage
for little kiddies to stare at all day and taunt.

Get that firmly ensconced in yer unfurry conk.
We'll get you with a dart gun. Such fun!
Slap on a set of cuffs and stuff you
in a plane bound for the San Diego Zoo.

Then what'll you do? Eat crackers and try
to whistle? Good luck with that, Chewy.
Your world, like ours, in danger of going kablooeey?
Gotcha. Good reason to pass toxic fumes.

About the Author:

Richard Stevenson recently retired from a thirty-year teaching gig with Lethbridge College and is now planning a move to Nanaimo. Ekstasis Editions will soon publish his 32nd book, *Action Dachshund!* His most recent books are a long poem sequence on serial murderer Clifford Olson, *Rock Scissors, Paper* (2016) and a haikai collection, *A Gaggle of Geese* (2017)

I Walked Beneath a Shining Moon | Sonora Taylor

I walked beneath a shining moon
Within whose glow I saw myself
Upon the sidewalk, shadowed bright,
Though I did not stand near a light.

I smiled at my form below,
Looked at the moon, then looked again
Upon my shadow; lost my grin,
For I no longer stood alone.

I glanced at darkness, felt it breathing
On my neck and through my hair,
Its fingers cold around my arm
As shadows crept and stole my form.

The sidewalk I had walked upon
Lay undisturbed, except for cracks
From roots that grew from errant trees
Lit white by moon glow in the night.

I saw this as I watched from shadows
Cast upon the sidewalk bare.
Trapped within the cracks and never to
Be seen beneath a shining moon.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition*, *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, *Please Give*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *Mercurial Stories*, *Tales to Terrify*, and Camden Park Press' "Quoth the Raven." She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

Facebook: [Sonora Taylor](#)

Twitter: [@sonorawrites](#)

Antique clock chimes midnight,
moon casts an eerie glow
over a sleeping town.
Ghastly shadows threaten
on black deserted streets.
Doors creak, windows shudder,
wind wails its mournful song,
dread creeps through hollow house.
Spirits wake and wander,
unseen but presence felt.

And here I restlessly toss and turn, futilely
in pursuit of deep slumber, cocooned from demons,
striving for alertness to elude night terrors.

Old clock strikes half past one,
yellow streetlights glimmer
in vacant neighbourhood.
Ominous clouds hover
above in blackened sky.
Thunder roars, lightning strikes,
rain beats insistently,
fright invades my chamber.
Apparitions flicker,
bolder as night prevails.

And as I wander, what might materialize?
Cat zonked right out snoring loudly as he stands guard?
Monsters in my head instead of under my bed?

Alarm shows three fifteen,
stars glitter through darkness
above abandoned yards.
Spooky quiet pervades
the wisps of misty air.
Dampness seeps in, cold chills,
fog surrounds my abode.
Spectres possess my home,
roaming freely about.

And I awake suddenly, eyes popped open wide.
Awake or asleep? Reality or nightmare?
Or perhaps my reality is the nightmare?
A walking corpse syndrome...
No one really lives here.

Night falls, darkness descends.
Let the haunting begin.

Underneath | *Ivanka Fear*

I've been in the belly before,
but not the underbelly.

Dark hollow underneath

torch wavering as it sweeps over
damp dirt floor
bones in one corner

piles
of rat droppings
or who knows what

cat urine (or worse) wafting into your nostrils
every manner of creepy crawly
black mold showing on its membranes
cobwebs and dead stuff clinging from its beams
in your hair and on your back
What else lives or died here unknown.

Eyes glowing in the dark...

Rumblings through its bowels
in its futile attempt to warm the body
The roar in the distance
a fire from the heart of the behemoth
Corded veins showing signs of gnawing
Water swooshing, gurgling in intestines
flushing out its system.

Leftovers from previous tenants
scattered throughout
littering the void...
remnants of old lives.

Escape from the crypt
leaving you bent over
bones aching
body stiffened
mind disturbed
lungs coughing up black phlegm
gulping in fresh life-giving air from the outside world.
Yes, I've been in the belly before,
but there are worse places to be.

They Follow | *Ivanka Fear*

We walk. They follow.
Dark shadows behind us on the pavement,
suddenly at our side.
Street lit dimly,
their outlines threatening, features obscured,
we keep moving.
In front now, they block our way.
Stopping under the guise of star watching,
we try to hide our disquiet, hoping they'll leave us alone.
Gone, vanished as quickly as they appeared.

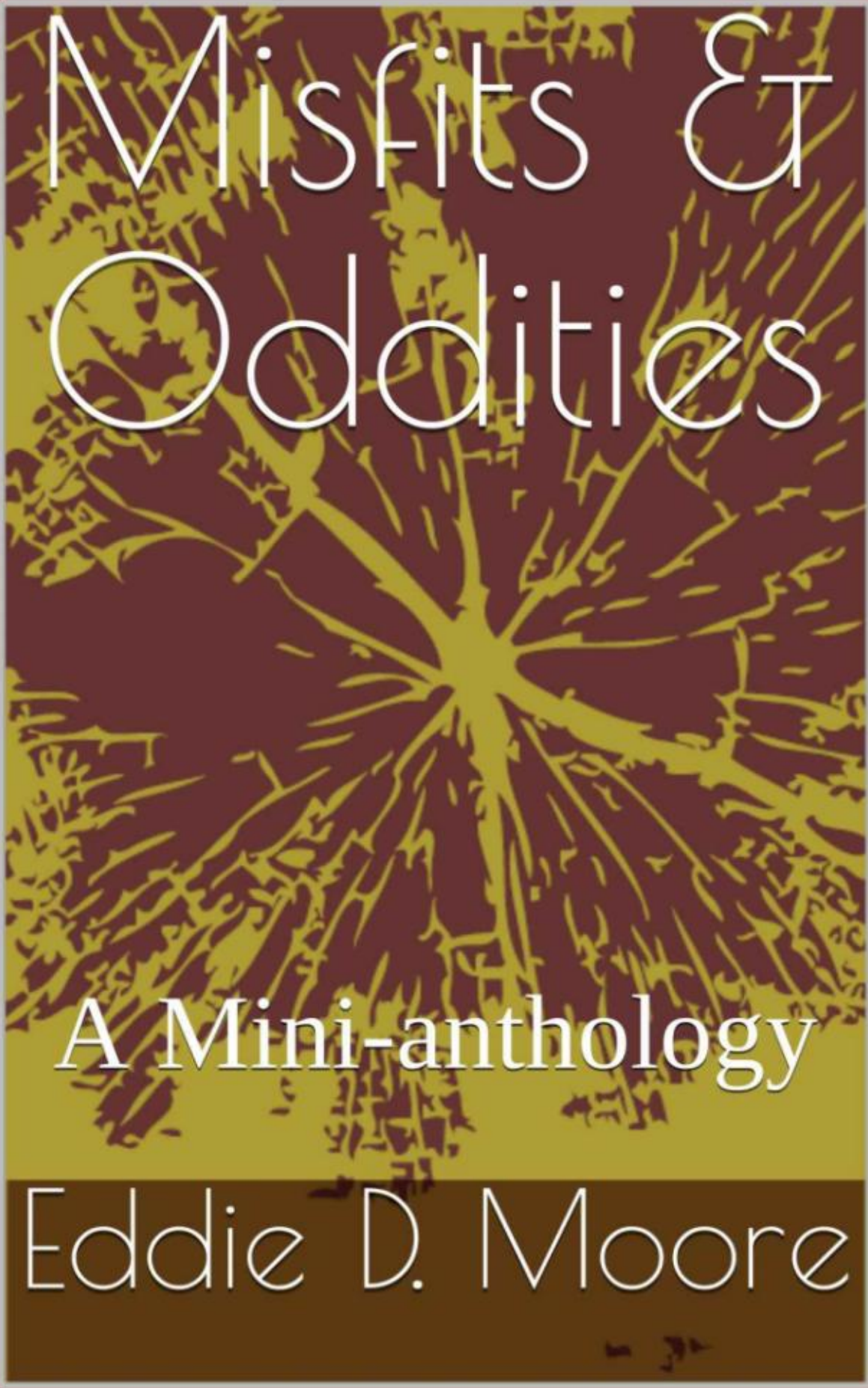
We walk.
Leaves crunch under our feet, breaking the silence of the night.
They follow.
Looming behind us,
menacing in the glow of street lights, leading us to move more quickly,
our apprehension increasingly evident now.

We run. They follow.
We stop.
They stop.
Taunting us silently, stealthily slipping beside us.
Step in step with us they walk, the two of them with the two of us.
Our uneasiness turning to alarm,
tempered only slightly by
headlights from an occasional passing car,
porch lights on the few houses lining the street.
In front again, then behind, succeeding in
spooking us with their relentless stalking.

Then it strikes us - there must be more of them,
surrounding us as we walk and they follow.
Creeping up from the ground below,
their faceless shapes a ghostly sight,
their dark presence a ghastly fright,
they scare us nearly to an early death.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and writer from Ontario, Canada. Her poems and short stories appear or are forthcoming in *Spadina Literary Review*, *Montreal Writes*, *Spillwords*, *Commuterlit*, *Adelaide Literary*, *Canadian Stories*, *October Hill*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Polar Borealis*, *Lighten Up*, *Voice of Eve*, and *Bewildering Stories*.



Misfits & Oddities

A Mini-anthology

Eddie D. Moore

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Underneath this crying abyss
I will leave you there with this...
an unforgiving witch...
with a cold dense cackle,
a dark gaping stare that can see into your soul...
hands with the color of an ogre...
a nose on where her crow can easily perch and glare...
a large over sized cape to hide her instruments of
death and torture...
oh witch ...
what a sight we have with thee...
teeth as yellow as a rose on a dark gloomy day...
hair the color and texture of dry burnt wheat...
a smell as foul as the living dead walking beneath our
feet...
...tell me witch...
What is it that you seek?
The apples that dangle from the trees...
The frogs whom sit in the pond...
The laughter of children playing in the woods?
speak...creature of foul...
speak what you seek...

Not Under the Bed | Radar DeBoard

"I'm scared", whimpered Billy as
he lay in bed. Tom sat gently
down on the edge of his son's
bed. "Buddy, we've been over
this", he said with a reassuring tone.
"There are no monsters underneath
your bed."

He looked towards the doorway,
seeing his wife standing there.
She leaned against the doorframe,
wearing a small smile. He looked back
at Billy, "There's no need to worry
about monsters under the bed."

Billy shook his head saying, "It's not
that." He sat up, getting as close
as he could to Tom's ear. Billy said
with a soft whisper, "That's not mommy."

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a young writer and student living in the center of the United States. He has a passion for all things horror, and loves to incorporate horror elements in his writing. His only hope for his works is that someone will enjoy and share them with others.

Turn on the light | *Colin Walsh*

Turn on the light! I need to see. I need to know what's there.
The board that creaks, the branch that taps, the dead-eyed dolls that stare.
Turn on the light I'm begging you, they are coming from the night
can't you hear the whispers? We need to flee or fight.
They are coming closer I feel them, my goose bumps are on the rise
the talons and claws a clicking, murder in their eyes.
I'm crying now in panic I can't see but I can feel
the monsters in the darkness, stalking me for real.
I try to turn on the light, my hands grasping blind
my grasp clenches tight on what it is they find.
The soft flesh of a creature seeking to kill me in my bed
I squeeze with all my might, that I'll kill it instead.
The monster squirms but goes still, the life has left its shell
my hands quest onwards past where it has fell.
They grasp the light and switch it on and the night flees in the glare
the monster that isn't a monster, lies staring, accusing there.
My mind snaps further as I realize, the monster is my love
dark bruises mark his neck, flesh pale as a dove.
And that is how I am, the scene that they will find
Tormented now forever, by the monsters in my mind.

About the Author:

Colin Walsh has been writing for a long time but only recently decided to push for publication. He is trying to have his first novel published and is experimenting with a project on Patreon where the audience guides his writing. He has a massive interest in Fantasy but likes to dip into the darker side of writing.

Website: [CRXWalsh](#)
Facebook: [Colin Walsh](#)

Twenty years we were wed,
Twenty years I shared your bed.
Nine babies birthed,
one third born dead.
Still I warmed your heart and hearth.
Sewed, scrubbed,
cooked and cherished you.
Lived in your house of wax,
lulled to sleep by the slow drip drip of
candles' guttering gasps.

You took another,
when my womb grew colder.
Younger, fairer, slim of limb
untouched by life's grind,
unblemished by its bitter rind.

Beloved, do not struggle so.
You cannot break the binds that tie.
Rest your grey head on our marital pillow.
I will cross your arms – just so.
You are at peace now, my love.
Here be a dozen quality candles of your own making,
settled at your head and feet.
Let me wrap you in your woollen cloak,
lest you feel a chill creep through the wood,
in the endless nights to come.

Here is my final bequest: -
The gift of light -a box of Lucifers-
aptly named.
Remember to bid the Devil *Hello*.
I am sure you will be seeing him.

When the dark aloneness beneath six feet of earth
is more than you can bear . . . shush now, do not weep.
What use are tears? None for me.
You can light your candles to illuminate your prison.
Use these strikes sparingly, you have eternity my love.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK, writes dark fiction, which has appeared frequently on the Horror Tree site, in varied anthologies like *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2* and her own collection, *Badlands*. Her latest story is published via Demain in the Short Sharp Shocks! series, *Night of the Rider*, available to buy on amazon.

Author Blog: [Alyson Faye WordPress](#)

Twitter: [@AlysonFaye2](#)

Companion | *Victoria Crawford*

Faint moonlight filters
though summer curtains washing
color into a gray tapestry of home
as I ghost along the hallway
bedroom peeper
seeking company before dawn

Two mounded bed lumps insensate
boozy breath odors wait
for a match
or morning toothbrush
shimmer steel shadow unnoticed

Farty room full diaper smell toddler
eyes open
he sees spirit for what it is
whimpers no, no
as I pause

The old wall heater,
scarred, dented, loose on its screws
rattles as I stop by the last door
shut
lock on this side of the hall
fingering the lock, it squeaks
like the tiniest mouse
under the floor

I press my hand
against solid, cold metal
palm open
silent
and hear
the echo of my breath
sister

Cat Cliches | *Victoria Crawford*

Scientific method and old cat cliches
Mom's nag lines now tested
out in the backyard shed
so many experiments:
nine lives,
room full of rocking chairs,
curiosity,
got your tongue,
falling from a height

Testing complete,
Johnny washes his hands
shrouding a Cheshire cat grin
the fortune cookie was right:
he'd be famous someday

Dust Bunnies | *Victoria Crawford*

Mommy checked the closet,
peeked under the bed
where dust bunnies wisped about,
kissed Cindy good-night
before shutting the light and door.

Pupils mega-sized in the dark
searched the ceiling cracks
fingers clutched the blanket
as she listened to furtive sliding.
Tonight?

About the Author:

Enjoying the true horror of Lovecraft and Shirley Jackson, poet Victoria Crawford raises the hair on the back of your neck with poetic shadows. Poems of hers have appeared in journals such as Bleached Butterfly, Poetry Pacific, Postcard Poetry and Prose, Canary, and others.

Facebook: [Victoria Crawford](#)



WICKED DEEDS

WITCHES. WARLOCKS.
DEMONS AND OTHER
EVIL DOERS

SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Sunflowers | *Brian Rosenberger*

The yellow painted house,
Jaundiced over the years.
Now, nearly grey.
The neighbors refer to it as the Cancer house.
Previous occupants were dead within months of each other.
Lung cancer for one.
A straight razor for the survivor.
Murder-suicide spoke in whispers.

The Cancer house sits vacant

Now.

The streets seem narrower.
The street lights at night are dimmer.
Shadows stretch longer.
The neighboring lawns are brown from decay and neglect,
Despite an army of sprinklers and fertilizers and landscapers.
Neighbors seem less than what they were, decayed.
Six more dead in the neighborhood since those at the Cancer house.
All tragic and unexpected.

The backyard of the Cancer house,
Close to the pool, close to the hot tub,
Close to the outdoor grill and custom-bricked patio.
Just beyond the compost bin.

A field of beautiful sunflowers, row after row,
Reaching for the sky.
Their roots touch Hell.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections. He is also a featured contributor to the Pro-Wrestling literary collection, *Three-Way Dance*, available from Gimmick Press.

The Bonfire | *Veronica Schultz*

It's dark.
I wait.
They stumble, seeking light.

One finds the fluid, another the match.
The sacrifice of dry wood, old notes, and a broken couch ignites.

It's bright.
I flinch.
The flames grab at the sky.

One celebrates freedom, others find love.
The fire entrances them, and blinds them to the surrounding darkness.

It's hot.
I wait.
They stumble, seeking the cool of the night.

Some remain by the fire, escaping the fate that awaits the others.
But the others, oh, the others. They cannot see in the dark. They cannot see me.

It's dark.
I strike.
They stumble, seeking life.

About the Author:

Veronica Schultz is a writer of speculative and horror fiction. It is her belief that partaking in as many experiences as possible increases authenticity of writing and quality of life, and has been involved in several eccentric hobbies as a result of this pursuit. Some of these include roller derby, ghost hunting, wildlife photography and education, and the circus arts of trapeze and aerial silks.

Facebook: [Veronica Schultz Writing and Editing](#)

Now I Lay me Down to Sleep | *Ann Christine Tabaka*

Now I lay me down to sleep,
sky burning alcohol red.
Crimson flames consume
my breath as the air ignites.
Death has come for me at last,
he stands outside my door.
Prayers pour forth from
a mouth of sand, for
I cannot speak a word.
I whimper in fear, I try to cry out.
There is no redemption left.
It is time to lay to rest
and sleep the eternal sleep.

Nursery Rhymes | *Ann Christine Tabaka*

A childhood full of nursery rhymes,
as violent as her past.

Restless sleep with monsters
under her bed.

Nightmares fill her days,
as memories creep back in.

Now morbid, unreal images
wake her in the night.

Her heart races wildly,
as sweat pours from her brow.

Forgive, she has done,
forget as she tries,
feelings never really go away.

She has learned to live with them,
but it is not an easy task.

Time does not heal,
it merely blunts the pain.

Fear is the real enemy,
as demons battle on.

Reliving a childhood
full of nursery rhymes.

About the Author:

Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry, has been internationally published, and won poetry awards from numerous publications. She is the author of 9 poetry books. Christine lives in Delaware, USA. She loves gardening and cooking. Chris lives with her husband and two cats.

Author Blog: [Words Spill Out - Poetry](#)

Twitter: [@TabakaChris](#)



Jessica F. Holt

I imagined a labyrinth of labyrinths, a maze of mazes, a twisting, turning, ever-widening labyrinth that contained both past and future and somehow implied the stars.

-Jorge Luis Borges

No one knows when they built the Labyrinth of Night. Some say it has always been here, but that no one knew of its existence because the time was not right; people were not ready to receive its mysteries, its secrets. Others say that the labyrinth is always and everywhere and only for the few – a small elite, those tormented souls who seek eternal solace in the dark and lonely nights of oblivion; that seek the secretive ways of the abyss that are neither a part of time nor a part of space, but rather of that unreal zone of integral obscurity and rotten sentience. These wanderers of a forlorn thought, miscreants of perversity, would rather follow the patterns of this ruinous desire than meet the physical needs of its tenants; knowers of the labyrinth, caterers of those delicate strains of the hidden art of pain: tempters, alluring an abject art: a lost art of despair, debauches of cruelty and insanity; transgressors, excessive militants and renegades of the lost infernal paradise beyond the margins of existence. Miserabilists - all, each and every one, – locked away, solitaire, bound to an infinite void on nullity and self-derision; willing accomplices to the unraveling of all things: the unweaving of stars and worlds and bleakness itself; creatures of absolute nihil unbound.

I've been here for a very long time. I do not know where I am. I am here, now. Isn't that enough?

I used to think it was the music, the terrible music. The screams, the imponderable misery of their pleas; each in her own cell, locked away, bound to their own specific hell. I'd follow the sounds into the maze, this way and that, never thinking about where it would take me, where I'd end up. I'd run into others who seemed perplexed as I, who seemed lost and fearful, their minds unraveling in their frantic search for the illusive center or circumference of this tremendous labyrinth: the passages into darkness hollowing out their minds, leaving them shells of their former selves. I no longer believe in the center or circumference anymore, there was no path in or out, no escape or exit; there was only the path before one: the interminable mazing without end into a darkness without outlet: that is all and ever will be the truth of such as I am. A punishment? For what? For being human? Why? Why would anything seek to punish us for being human? God? Devil? The Impossible? Maybe the labyrinth is a blind idiot, an endless and mutant thing, always changing and never staying the same, a revolving, winding, seeping comedy of chaotic emotion; grabbing at you, clinging to you, cringing with the old and timeless fears: feeding on our hate and anger, love and desperation, our wants and needs. An endless maze of regrets and disappointments; a theater of cruelties and despair. Some say it is shaped by our desires, by our dreams and nightmares that have seeped in from the Outside, where tens of thousands of alien universes before our own plunged into the bubblescapes of some black pit of no return. Worlds fallen into blackness beyond all thought of labyrinths or mysteries, each dying and giving birth to this insidious and infernal paradise of infinite metamorphosis and nightmare.

I do not even know how I got here. Did I die? Am I dead or alive? Who would I ask?

Mystery after all is the key to the labyrinth. That, and eternal darkness, the eternal night of unending bleakness: a realm of emptiness and ruin and waste, where one can wander for years and years, millennia upon millennia and never touch a wall or another soul, never see the gentle face of one's lover, find the caress of a living thing. There have been times when I shared my walks with a friend. We'd spend days talking, discussing, arguing over the nuances and subtle dispositions of the labyrinth. How it would suddenly change its form, open a vine wall into other realms – release you into infernal or paradisiacal worlds, deserts or gardens, unearthly delights full of supernal mysteries or cavernous hells with furnaces full of lava and the smell of rotten things. I lost her, my friend, my lover – a victim of this world of darkness and filth; this labyrinth of timeless corruption.

I once saw a light. Did I imagine it? Was it truly there, or a mirage? I wandered toward it but it seemed to withdraw farther and farther from me the faster I walked. As I finally began to run toward it the light vanished into a cloud of darkness. Now I stand here in this abyss not knowing which way to turn, forward or backward. I am alone.

I've met monstrous things in this doom-ridden realm, but none so monstrous as the Archons. These Clippothic denizens that creep about the nightlands, intent on their nefarious and miscreant devilry. Each a member of that secret cult that culls the minds of travelers for their deadliest desires, and from those flagitious and septic distilleries of mindlessness they shape the abominations of their sculptured grotesqueries; animating them from the annihilating light

of the venal black sun; and, setting them loose into the labyrinth where they scurry hither and thither, their vampiric mites; their toothed mouths chittering and chattering in the darkness, devouring now this, now that poor traveler among the forlorn stones and gardens of this hellish paradise. Even now I see the red diamond of their temple fires, the refracted nihil of its deleterious glow, scraping the darkness ahead of me, the rattish maze-guard mites scampering, tumbling, bolting, jabbering, and eating their way into utter oblivion...

I am exhausted. There is no place to rest. I have gone as far as I can. I will go on.

Even today when I hear a voice, a stranger's voice somewhere on the other side of a wall; a wall inaccessible to me, I think of her – my dead lover: a woman's voice, soft and delicate, so full laughter and mirth, wisdom and pain and betrayal. I knew I would find her, wished for it, knowing that somewhere in the depths of the darkness I'd discover a path to her; some secret doorway through the black vines, roaming hither and thither in the labyrinth till I could clasp her to me, put my hands in her hands, slowly and methodically kiss her fragile neck; feel her heart, her breath next to mine; the tongue of her tongue, touching mine; the softness of her skin, the warmth of her encircling me; knowing once again the curvature of her delicate face and breasts against my aching flesh. And then I'd kill her for her infidelity, her sheer animus and deliberate abandonment.

Why would I do that? Why would I think such a thing? Am I going mad?

I've never been this way before; alone, silent, threatened. It's maddening. And, I'm lost for the first time in this darkness. Alone, without her. And, I hear it, the beast... the rumbling hooves, the snorts, the laughter in the hollows of the forgotten dream, the death cries of rage at its terrible existence. It has no name, it is nameless. I've heard it before. Its great snorts, its hooves beating the earth like an earthquake. It has always been here. Some say it is the creator of this vast nightland of lust and mayhem; it's terrible god, the one who built this place to escape its own self-lacerating existence, to hide itself from itself in eternal darkness.

The hoof beats are closer now. The rumbling in the dark is getting louder and louder. Even as I stumble along the guttural corridors, the booby-traps jiggle with slimy gobbets of fetid slops, the floor is slippery and I keep falling into the thick-steeped pools of slime – the putrid, syphilitic, cadaverous, and sinister smells fill my nostrils as fleshy protuberances rise up everywhere around me. A huge sempiternal old crone with no teeth in her gullet awakens out of one of the slime pits, she tries to grab me, but I slip away into the liquid-jet of poisonous spray, my head sopped in the vile stew she must have been brewing. I see her lift a club or spoon. I jump forward and fall... All of a sudden a troop of soldiers pass by dressed in red and yellow pantaloons and high-helms, some are burnishing breastplates, golden corselets and silver metal bands wrapped round their head-armor. They ride giant horses, with their own plated jackets, light armor, helmets; iron skull-caps, gisarmes, headpieces, morions, coats of mail, jaze-rants, wrist-guards, tassed, gusseted, limb-armored, breast-plated; with hauberks, body-shields, bucklers, foot-armor, leg-plates, ankle-plates and spurs. An endless parade of strange beasts. Other creatures were readying their bows, slings, crossbows, lead-shot, catapults, fire-arrows, fire-grenades, fire-pots, fire-wheels and fire-darts, ballistae, stone-hurling scorpions and other weapons for repelling and destroying siege-towers and old giantesses. I fell asleep or fainted amid the insanity as they carried me deeper and deeper into the darkness than I'd ever been before.

It appeared to be twilight when I awakened again. The twin moons of this forgotten paradise were rising. I was at the edge of a black ocean, the stars of an unknown sky above. I was again, alone. The place where I was standing seemed to be hovering in the shadow of an ancient dolmen, a great stone megalith that reached high into the night sea of stars. I touched it and felt a vibration as if the stone was singing in an alien tongue I could not decipher. Yet, there was a distinct pattern, a rhythmic pulsation to the hum, an inner beat within the stone cascading outward into the dense oppression around me. There was a sense of the slaughterhouse about the place. I felt as if I were living in some austere festival grounds, a place of ancient and abominable lunar rites. The humming was coming from all the stones, now: it seemed that with every breath I took - the stones entrained to my heart beat, swaying to the pulse of my mind, evoked a vague and audible image of my life in the labyrinth. The vibrant tonal effects above the ring of this barren site, where ghostly figures were emerging as if from some primordial world of death; their visages displaying unexpected charm and surprise as they found themselves gathered about the stone circle. The music that started up at their appearance seemed fragile, abstract; a sterile harmony flowing from its granite core reminded me of my lost love, her elegant neck and glamorous dark mane of hair, until the very ground I was standing on began thumping and stampeding as if a hundred horses were thundering through this dead place in the eternal night of bones.

It was at that very moment that I saw it, the Great Beast of the Labyrinth: – the sign of eternal night, the blessed insignia of adept and arcanist alike. It hovered above the maddening music and spectral habitués of the dolmen, the ghost like beings swaying and chanting. It had an unreal aspect and fascination about it, the delicate waves and pulsating jets of black light rising into the night sky from its dark and mystical transport; crawling into the blackness, changing,

mutant, fugitive; so that even as I began dancing and swaying with the metamorphic ensemble of ghostly sibilant sounds, it changed and I with it. We were being drawn into its darkening music, into the chasm where the glow of an ancient and terrible grotesquerie of vital insanity shined, absorbed into its deathly light...

As I floated toward the heavens, toward the encompassing blackness – ascensions of darkness, the humming stones below me circling in the void – the ghostly beings moving like ancient derelict giants, dancing to some primordial ritual attunement of beginnings and never-ending nights – I felt the glow of the magenta moons, their lustrous shadows rubbing against the infinite mirror of the night of my mind. Everything around me filled with the darkening decay of years, fragments of dying stars – the eclipse of all things great and small entering my porous body; and even the distorted mirror began to crack, buckle and break; and I consumed the fires of the glowing stars and the shattered images of the world; and the black lights of a million galaxies fell away, where for the first and last time I felt the courage of that black unity, the dark laughter of the eternal festival of massacres, the carnival of galactic idiocy, blood and gore rising within me, snorting and rumbling, enraged and desperate, despairing as I sped along alone upon my hooved body, my horns swinging wildly till down into the cold and darkening corridors and tunnels, the folded vine covered overgrowth and grottoes below, I sought my lost love among the ruins of millions of years of fallen worlds, nations, cities, people: autumns of golden leaves, springs of evergreen opulence, summers of rich brocades of sun born vines, winters of ice and storm bound seas, roaming the vastnesses of this indifferent clime, mazing in and out of these circuitous and ancient mutating halls, the metamorphic hum of stone and time and laughter on my tongue, my nostrils flaring, throat bellowing, as my hoof beats stampeded onward and forward and inward around a forgotten circle of pain, over the crackling, slithering, sorbing, mossy black stones, digging my hooves into the coral and obsidian, flaying and cutting at my flesh in rapture and ecstasy, torment and hellish delight, where I still wander the eternal Labyrinth of Night.

About the Author:

S.C. Hickman is a resistance blogger, poet, short story writer and philosopher. He is retired, living in the mountains near Yellowstone with his lovely wife, dogs, and horses. He's had a few short stories published, along with essays etc. He will soon have an essay on Thomas Ligotti published in *Vastarien: The Literary Journal*.

Author Blog: [Dr. Rinaldi's Horror Cabinet](#)

Trypophobia | Abigail Linhardt

The alien attack the day before left her wounded. She had wrapped a foreign plant around her bloody ankle. This morning, her ankle was swollen, hot and aching. Removing the mysterious leaf, she saw her inflamed, oozing skin.

Something moved under her flesh! Her leg seared in pain as her pores opened. Gaping holes crowding her flesh. Black, hairy ants crawled out from each pore, slick with her blood. They got bigger as they came, struggling to escape the many holes.

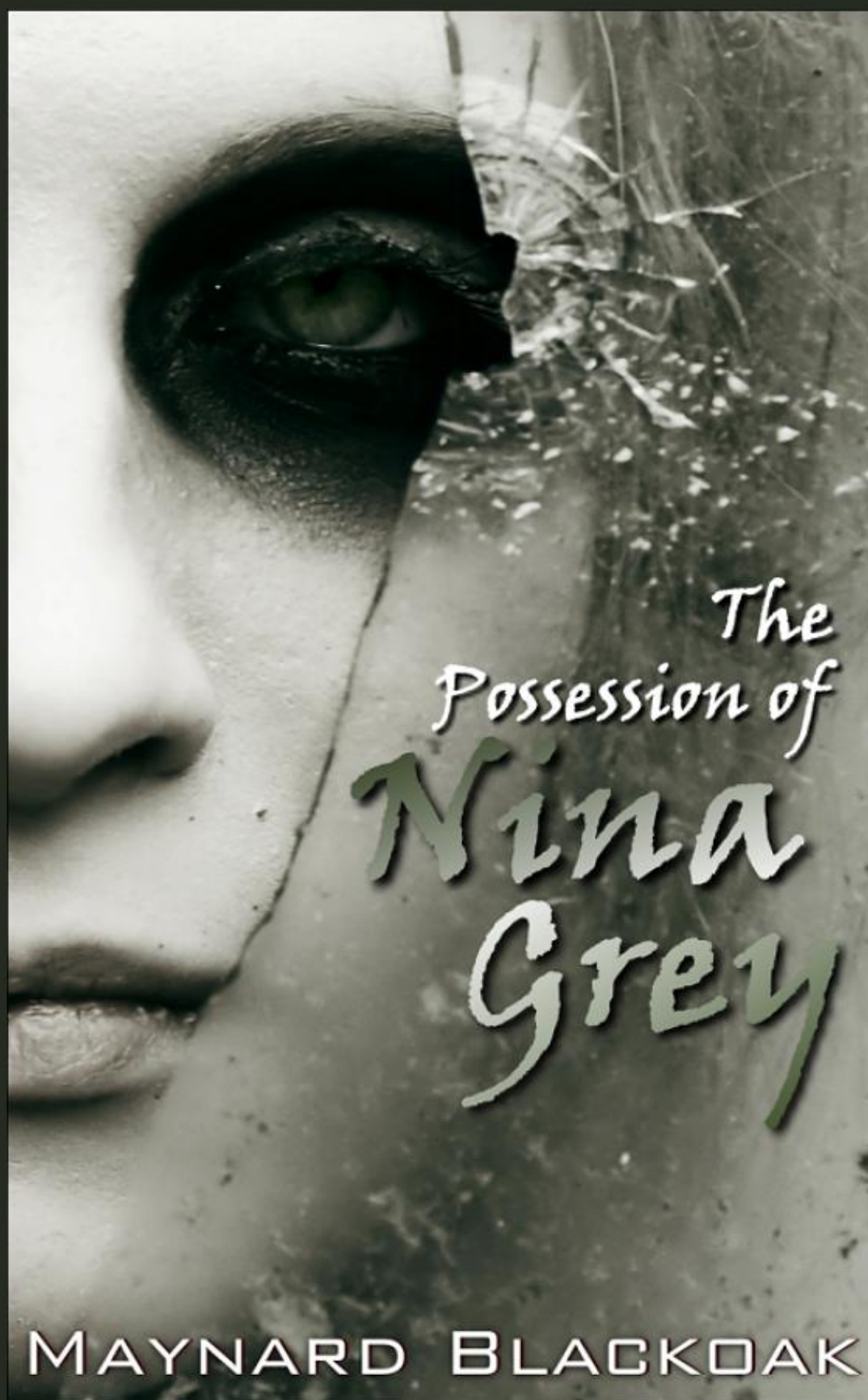
As the last one wriggled out of her leg, the itching set in. Scratching till her leg was tattered.

About the Author:

Abigail Linhardt has been a gamer all her life, but is a teacher at heart. When not writing, you can find her slaying enemies online or teaching in a college class room. She's published works of fiction, poetry, essays, and even won two literary awards for her short stories in science fiction and horror. Abi lives and writes in the gray world of northern Ohio.

Facebook: [Abi Linhardt](#)

Twitter: [@Promthanius](#)



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Arthur wasn't sure what he was doing, wandering the rural roads of north Wales in the pitch black of night, but he expected he'd find the answer soon enough. Maybe it would be a passing car that he could throw himself in front of.

You don't get much entertainment in a town barely more than a village, so when someone comes around offering you a joint, you take it. Of course, once you take the one, everything starts to career downhill. The grades slip, the fighting with Mum and Dad reaches warzone levels, and the relationship with the girlfriend begins to break down. After a while, you just end up not knowing what to do with life. And when someone spells it out for you, well, Arthur was someone that wanted to numb it all away.

The dark trees were thick on the slopes of the hills. An owl swooped so close to him that it almost knocked him over. Arthur shivered despite the warm summer. He'd only got a light jacket on, and the heavens threatened to open up at any moment. He checked his phone. No signal. Of course there wasn't. It wasn't the middle of the city.

He didn't even know where he was. He couldn't have wandered far from home, but he wasn't in a fully aware state of mind when he started. He kept walking, the thud of each shoe on the potholed country lane juddering up his spine. Every nerve was on edge. That's how he knew he had started to come out of the daze. All his senses were wired, but his brain was dulled to hell. He felt everything, but didn't feel a thing.

A snap in the trees. Arthur looked up the embankment that flanked the road, staring into the darkness. "Hello? Anyone there?"

Moron. It'll be a badger.

It didn't feel like it was a badger there, though. The harder he looked, the more he felt that whatever it was was looking back at him. He didn't like the idea of something watching him, no sir. No way in hell.

He started walking again. Maybe throwing himself in front of a car was a bad idea. His heart rate was spiking out of control. *Stop that*, he told himself, *you're over reacting. Probably just the crap in your system.*

Except would the crap in his system sound so realistically like the throaty growl of a large dog? Would it sound so real that he spun, torch on his phone blazing like a warrior's torch, certain that he'd meet the Hound of the goddamn Baskervilles standing there?

Apparently it was that realistic, because there were just the brewing swirls of mist gathering behind him. The owl which had swooped past earlier hooted up above him.

"You don't care, do you?" he asked the owl, which hooted back again in reply.

"Imagining things," Arthur said out loud. "As always. Always did have a vivid imagination."

He turned to go again. His heart was banging in his throat, slamming his Adam's Apple around inside his gullet. His palms were slick and he pushed his hair out of the way to wipe sweat from his brow. "That's not nervous sweat, you're just warm. It's summer." He shivered. "Ok, maybe you are just nervous. But don't lose your mind now. All the crap you've taken, and you go crazy over a few sounds in the woods?"

Except it wasn't just a few sounds, was it? Because through the gloom he saw two piercing red orbs which, for all the money in the world, Arthur didn't think were someone's brake lights. They glowed unnaturally, and the mist that rose from them like steam smelled of sulphur. When the growling came back with it as the eyes prowled forward, Arthur froze. The black dog that stalked towards its prey bared rows of gleaming white teeth, razors ready to rip and render.

"Oh shit." He'd thought he wanted to go, but not like this. He tried to run but his feet wouldn't move. They were glued to the ground in fear. He looked down in despair, begging his legs to run him the hell away from the big black mastiff with drooling fangs, but they weren't shifting. Hours and hours of shuffling down roads, and finally they had come to a grinding halt at the worst possible moment.

He smelled the rancid breath of the dog. It was only feet away now, slowly putting one paw in front of the other. Its eyes blazed like forest fires. The moon appeared from behind a cloud and painted its flank silver. He pleaded with his feet to move but they were locked solid. He'd need a crowbar to get them going.

"Gee! Stop it!"

The dog's ears pricked up. Arthur looked behind the phantom hound to see a woman emerging from the mist. She was dressed from head to toe in white, and as she came closer Arthur was sure her feet never touched the ground.

The dog ran to the woman's side, where it sat and had its ears scratched. "What have I told you about scaring people on the roads? We rarely see anyone as it is."

She turned her attention to Arthur, whose feet had found a backward, stumbling motion. "This is Gee," she said. "Not enough people can pronounce his proper Welsh name, Gwyllgi."

"Who... the hell are you?" Arthur asked. His throat had a job forming words at all because his heart was still in there, clogging the system up.

"A friend of the night, just like Gee. He only appears when someone's on the roads that needs a friendly face. Scares them off most of the time. He's really quite calm though."

Gee growled again, and Arthur decided he didn't want to see Gee's version of angry, if this was his friendly.

"I'd get off the roads, Arthur," she said. "Go home, sleep, and start again in the morning."

"How do you know my name?" asked Arthur. "Just who are you?"

"Exactly who I said I was. A friend of the night, and those who stray from the day." She climbed off the road and up the embankment into the trees. Gee's blazing eyes followed her up, dusty rocks skittering onto the broken asphalt.

"Straighten yourself out, Arthur. There are worse places than where you are right now, and you don't want to see them if you can help it."

Arthur blinked in confusion. "Wait! Hold up!"

But she was gone into the trees, taking Black Shuck's cousin with her.

The mist around him lifted from the road and the way cleared again. Arthur's knees buckled and he collapsed onto the road. What the hell had he just seen?

He might have lain there until the frost took him if a pair of headlights hadn't rounded the bend up ahead and shaken him out of his stupor. Arthur flung himself against the embankment and the car passed him without slowing its speed of double the limit. He recognized the driver; he'd smoked enough crap with him to last a lifetime.

Arthur brushed himself off and straightened out his jacket. His fingers didn't tingle anymore, and his heart had started to climb back down into his ribcage.

"Maybe I do know what I'm doing out here," he said to himself.

When he took a deep breath and re-examined the world around him, he knew exactly where he was on the road. He headed back to the daylight for the first time in months.

About the Author:

Kieran Judge is a writer of prose and non-fiction articles and reviews from Wales. His fiction can be found in *Lovecraftiana*, *The Irregular Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and several past issues of *The Sirens Call*. His articles on film and horror can be found at TheFilMagazine.com, HorrorAddicts.net, and [Horror Reviews By The Collective](http://HorrorReviewsByTheCollective.com).

Twitter: [@KJudgeMental](https://twitter.com/KJudgeMental)

Lighter Fluid | Abigail Linhardt

He had the flu and got dehydrated, ending up in the hospital with an IV drip. Stupid mistake. She was his nurse. Familiar, pretty, forgotten. Knew her from a party one night maybe, but what did it matter?

"Oh yeah, stick it in me," he moaned as she slid the IV in. She didn't smile. He remembered her.

Dizziness crept in. His throat burned. Something smelled like fire inside him. The room moved! The night with her came back. He had slipped a gem in her drink. Something was in his IV.

She put his lighter on the table, empty.

About the Author:

Abigail Linhardt has been a gamer all her life, but is a teacher at heart. When not writing, you can find her slaying enemies online or teaching in a college class room. She's published works of fiction, poetry, essays, and even won two literary awards for her short stories in science fiction and horror. Abi lives and writes in the gray world of northern Ohio.

Facebook: [Abi Linhardt](https://www.facebook.com/AbiLinhardt)

Twitter: [@Promthanius](https://twitter.com/Promthanius)

“Whatever Athe. I’m going home.”

There it goes again. The flick of her twiggy wrist dismissing me. Every time she does it, I swear it will be the last time. Up until today, I have done nothing, because I know the *Wrath of Khan* will possess me, and I won’t stop at her wrist. I will pulverize her until she is grain under my feet, of which, I will kick around until she becomes dust in the wind to irritate someone else. In my dreams, this really happens, and I wake up sneezing, so maybe it is happening in some alternate universe, where my mother and father aren’t nearby mumbling, “Play nice Athe or you won’t have any friends.” Sound advice if it applied to me, but it doesn’t.

I am named after the Greek Goddess Athena. My dye was cast in my mother’s ovaries and my father’s sperm long before I ended up in her birth channel. So, I ask myself, if they didn’t want a smart, tongue like the slashing sword of a goddess kid, then why invoke her spirit in my naming? See what I’m dealing with? Anyway, back to my arch nemesis.

Ma-ry Al-ma, draw it out like I do and see if you don’t picture a nun. Right? Well, she has everything you would expect of a cloistered sister without the habit. Sweet personality, Demure posture. Wispy voice. Where she is reverent, I am so irreverent. Where she is compliant, I am so noncompliant. In other words, she is the Abel to my Cain. She is a sparkling antithesis of me, whether in school or at home.

Since we are neighbors and our parents are dinner party-summer barbecue-and so forth, friends, we are doomed to interact. When we go to Ma-ry Al-ma’s house, her achievements are on display, like her fundraising campaign poster, “Saving the world one child at a time.” For that she won student of the year. Whereas, my best efforts are always hidden in the closet. For instance, my brilliant, detailed science fair project on; how long does it take for a butterfly to die, in a jar, after its wings have been clipped? For that and other inquisitive things I have been cast, by my mother, as the new lead in the old movie, *The Bad Seed*, which she made me watch as a moral of the story kind of thing. Really? I die at the end by a bolt of lightning after my mother tries to kill me, not happening. Not to me. But tonight, it will happen to Ma-ry Al-ma, sans the bolt of lightning.

My parents have arranged a mandatory sleepover for the entire weekend to meld our souls into one pot of warm soupy bliss. Again, you do see what I am dealing with? Like my grandmother used to say, ‘Why not let sleeping dogs lie?’

Despite having to clean my room to a pristine level for their reality show intervention, I am euphoric about being off punishment for my latest infraction—giving the dog a piece of ex-lax. He loved it, at first. With the release of my laptop and cellphone, after a two week hostage situation, I scour the internet and devise a plan, well, several really. Today, I will summon the spirit of the Goddess Athena to assist me in destroying Ma-ry Al-ma.

I leave the house on the pretense of wanting to get candy and snacks for our soiree. The kind not in the kitchen cabinets of our vegan, organic, sugar free home. Hazel and Barney, my parental nicknames, are so overwhelmed with joy at my apparent turn of the tide attitude, they don’t even balk at the word candy nor notice I don’t ask for a ride to the store.

It takes me ten minutes to check for flat tires and wipe the dust off my eleventh birthday present. A bright red bike with remnants of faded pink tassels that I tried to tear off as soon as I saw them, a year ago. I’m not a pink girl or a Barbie girl or fairy tale princess girl, but I’m sure you got that by now.

As I head down the driveway from the garage, my father is at the kitchen window beaming with pride. I truly believe he believes his wishes for a normal daughter might be coming true. Sad really, he and my mother can be so easily manipulated simply by using the force of their own desires against them. I stop and give him my very best queen wave, austere, yet friendly.

The hardware store is tomb quiet like the prehistoric library in our small town of Handan. My guess, they didn’t get the email message stating ‘you are archaic.’ I grab a basket, settle it on my arm, pull out my nerd nonprescription glasses and my list.

Plan one-an accidental fire started on her bed from a black candle.

Aisle 7-Check.

Thank God Dad put fire extinguishers in each room of the house. His paranoia of dying in a blaze will be my saving grace. I will wait until the sleeping nun is good and toasty, before I scream then reach for it.

Plan two-a mix of ammonia and bleach.

Aisle 5-Check.

The gas mask in my closet, courtesy of a mother awaiting Armageddon, will secure my life. I will confess to cleaning a spill of grape juice on the carpet, then running back to the kitchen to put everything away. Hence, my not hearing her choking to death.

Plan three- if all else fails, a simple pillow over her head. After I put a few of my parent’s sedatives in her drink, she’ll be too drowsy to fight. Hmmm. Maybe this should be the first plan.

At the cash register, the man looks at me as if I am too young to have a credit card, but when I show my school identification from Williamston Academy, the most prestigious ivy league private school in northeast Massachusetts, he

comes together and swipes my card. As he hands it back, he glances out at the empty parking lot and says, "Miss, would you like me to call a cab for you or is your driver returning to pick you up?"

Privilege is stunning isn't it? I say, "no thank you" with an exaggerated smile, reminiscent of whatever dastardly villain comes to mind.

Slipping through the back gate of our way too large for three people property, I surreptitiously walk to the edges of the manicured back yard to place my bags in the shrubbery around our inground pool. I lean my bike against a tree and head to the cabana to put on my swimsuit.

My parents realize I have returned when they hear splashing water.

"Where's your bags Athe?"

"Dad, I went all the way to town and realized what we have is just fine. We are who we are, right? Healthy, wealthy and wise."

He smiles and walks back to the house to tell my mother what a treasure I am becoming. They start to fuss over this fact. My mother provides him with a litany of every bad thing I've done since my departure from her womb. His angry retorts sail through the open windows, leaving doors to slam, drinks to be mixed and the volume of the television to rise. I keep swimming in the hellish warm water under the burning sun, practicing my invocation to Athena.

Goddess of warfare and wisdom

Alit from your long ago kingdom

Descend upon my psyche tonight

Inside the cover of deep moonlight

By the slash of your sword

Settle the mountainous score

Leaving Ma-ry Al-ma dead

On top of a blood stained bed

Flipping over to float on my back, I laugh inside the joy of loving it when a plan comes together.

The prolonged 'ding dong' of the doorbell matches my elongated pronunciation of Ma-ry Al-ma. My parents tell me to open the door to greet her. I do, with a hug. My stomach churns at her touch, while my brain swells with exhilaration at the impending annihilation of my inverted doppelganger.

My mother puts bowls of snacks and juice on the table. She turns to leave the family room, but not without a quick furtive look at me, reeking of 'be good or else.' I smile, trying to coax her into believing I have seen the errors of my ways. Not.

The yang to my yin turns the pad of paper towards me.

"Let's play Hangman. You go first, Athe."

I flip the tail of my jet black braid into my mouth to think. She tosses her strawberry blond braids away from her face, which is highlighted by evenly sprinkled light freckles across her nose and cheekbones. Proof positive we are opposites, since my freckles are a darker brown and sporadically pop up on my face like crone moles.

After an arduous amount of time, she still can't figure out my sentence. I impatiently fill in the blanks: The Boogeyman is real. She laughs. I laugh louder. We play board games next. Jenga and Monopoly render me numb from boredom. I suggest we go to bed, then exit to the bathroom to call the goddess.

When I get back to the room, all is dark.

"Athe, let's tell ghost stories"

Hmmm. The perfect New England tradition around campfires with tales of Lizzie Borden, Bloody Bones and such. I'm game. What a great way to set the mood.

"I want to go first, Athe."

"Sure, you go first, I can wait.

It is quiet for way too long. Just as I part my lips to speak, a single red laser beam revolves around the room until it stops at my chest.

"What the...M-a-ry A-l-ma are you doing that?"

Her response comes like thunder caught inside a tunnel. It's so fierce, I feel the rubble and jump out of sniper range, but the light finds me as the voice envelops me.

"I'm not Mary Alma. I am Melania. Bearer of nightmares. The daughter of Hades and Persephone, rulers of the underworld. All must pass into our realm, as you will tonight."

My legs collapse. My eyes seal shut. My mouth rounds to emit a scream, but nothing comes out. I crawl. I must escape. I must reach my parents.

"It is your desire to vanquish me, but it is I who will destroy you. Not with matches or chemicals or pillows. I will do it simply. In one swallow. You chose the wrong goddess. Death trumps war every time."

Something grabs at my leg. Pressure escalates in my lungs. My body is bucking as if I've literally broken through the fourth wall in a scene from *The Exorcist*. And there it is, my bonafide horror movie scream. My ankle is inside the grasp of a boa

constrictor when the lights flash on and laughter burst into the room like sunshine when a cloud departs. I can't breathe. I can't comprehend. Does Hell have electricity?

My parents come from opposite corners of the room and stand next to M-a-ry Al-ma, looking saintlier than ever, as she releases my leg. They tower over me.

"Athe, we told you to play nice, you not only refused but plotted against this sweet child. I found your little stash by the pool in the bag that also had your list of ways to kill Mary Alma. You're grounded and if you ever try anything like this again, the hounds of Hell will take you away for good. Great plan Mary Alma," says my mother.

Both my parents leave the room in laughter. I tremble, not at my discovery, nor at their words, but at the thunder and lightning crashing outside.

'Crack.'

"What's a matter Athe? It's only a storm," says Ma-ry Al-ma before the lights go out.

'Creak.'

"Mom! Dad! EEK! Let go of my leg. It's not funny anymore."

'Cackle.'

"No, Athe. It's not."

About the Author:

Clynthia Burton Graham is a passionate writer who explores the emotional, impactful, and defining moments in the lives of her characters. Her work has appeared in Persimmon Tree Literary Magazine, Pilcrow & Dagger, Academy of the Heart and Mind, daCunha Global, Auburn Avenue, Pen in Hand Journal, Rigorous Magazine and others. She conjures her stories in Baltimore, MD.

Facebook: [Clynthia Burton](#)

Rains of Death | *Ann Christine Tabaka*

And the rains came, at first they were soft and gentle upon the earth. Then they became hard and more violent, as they unforgivingly swallowed up the land. The creeks and rivers overflowed their banks as frightened people rushed about trying to save what possessions they could. No one would have predicted the destruction that water now bestowed. After all water was the life giving force, nothing could live without it.

But now, the very word 'water' had become a curse upon mankind, as it killed everything in its path. The rains of death poured their unceasing vengeance upon mankind.

About the Author:

Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry, has been internationally published, and won poetry awards from numerous publications. She is the author of 9 poetry books. Christine lives in Delaware, USA. She loves gardening and cooking. Chris lives with her husband and two cats.

Author Blog: [Words Spill Out - Poetry](#)

Twitter: [@TabakaChris](#)



JESSICA F HOLT

It was 7:30, according to the Metro station's digital clock, when Sean Boland got on the train to Glenmont, first leg of his journey home. He hurried into the train, holding his backpack protectively against his side, shivering a little from the cold blast of air conditioning that was circulating through the car.

The night rush hour was mostly over so Sean Boland had his pick of seats. He settled awkwardly into a seat by the sliding doors, barely glancing at the middle-aged woman who was across the aisle from him.

The train began to move and a cool, automated voice came over the loudspeaker: "Next station—Friendship Heights."

Sean unzipped his backpack and extracted his copy of the *Washington Post*, pretending to read the front page. As usual, his eyes did their evening stakeout number—glancing around to see if there were any beautiful women on the train. There weren't any, which wasn't surprising. All of the secretaries and bank tellers and human resource people had left their offices a long time ago, in a hurry to get to their neat little apartments in DuPont Circle or meet their husbands for dinner in the vaulted space of Union Station. Besides the woman and a man talking on a cell phone, there was no one else on the train. Sean was disappointed. He lived for those moments on the subway train when he saw a young girl get on, wearing a short skirt, or caught a furtive glimpse of cleavage. He hoped things would pick up when the train stopped downtown.

In the past several months, Sean's evenings had settled into a tolerable routine. He would leave the office exactly at 5:30, making sure that he powered down his computer and turned off the lights. Next, he would have his dinner at a window table in the Café Europa, hunched down over pasta alfredo or a bloody steak, his eyes invariably darting out the plate glass window to take in the lilt of some woman's bottom as she passed by. After that, a caramel latte at the coffee shop next door and then home, to his studio apartment in Greenbelt, for a couple of hours of television commercials and canned laughter. A prison sentence with tiny, tiny privileges.

The paper was full of its usual incomprehensible horrors—a man in Bakersfield California had kidnapped and killed an eight-year-old girl. A Palestinian suicide bomber had managed to eradicate himself and thirty-four other patrons in a small restaurant in Jerusalem. Coral ecosystems in the ocean were slowly dying. The paper was a daily confirmation that the world no longer turned on greased grooves—that the best thing to do would be to find a cave somewhere in the wilderness and hide in it.

As Sean Boland turned the pages of his paper, he began to realize that there was something not quite right with the woman sitting across the aisle from him.

What was it? He gave her a quick glance. She was about forty-five or so, a stout black woman with a double chin. Her shiny hair was in a bun, overflowing some kind of knitted wrap that she had around her head. She was wearing a light blue windbreaker and neatly pressed tan slacks.

It was then that he realized what it was.

Her fingernails were the longest fingernails Sean had ever seen in his life. They were horrible. He couldn't take his eyes off of them. They were dirty, curving, nicotine-colored serpents of bone, eight inches long at least. Sean was immediately reminded of a picture he had seen in a newspaper of the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes. Hughes had had such monstrous fingernails.

Sean watched in growing revulsion as the woman turned pages in her own copy of the *Washington Post*. The fingernails kept getting in the way, and she would have to turn her hands just so to grasp the edges of the paper with the pads of her thumb and first finger. Sean thought that she might rip the paper or scratch her own flesh with one of those unwieldy looking talons.

She looks like some witch out of a storybook, Sean thought. *A witch in a light blue windbreaker and tanned pants trying to read The Washington Post. Any minute she's going to grab me and drag me off toward some boiling cauldron, shredding me with those awful nails.*

No such thing happened. The woman continued to sit there, reading the paper, her fingernails moving obscenely through the air.

Sean wondered why any woman would let her fingernails grow to such an unseemly length. She must be crazy. It was beyond exotic or beautiful or even unusual. Each time that the fingernails moved, Sean's stomach turned in revulsion.

The train stopped at Farragut North. A bunch of people got on. Sean wasn't even concerned with ogling women now. He was dying to see how people who got on the train reacted to the woman with the fingernails. He was certain

that they would stare in disbelief and then turn to look at her over and over, to verify that such a monstrous freak actually existed.

No one seemed to even notice.

Sean couldn't believe it. He watched a young girl in a jean jacket settle down in the seat directly behind the fingernail witch. The fingernails moved. They lurched. They scissored through the air. But the young girl didn't even see them. She was busy listening to music through headphones, mouthing the words to silent lyrics as the train accelerated through a lighted tunnel. There was a black man standing in front of the woman, holding on to a metal pole while talking to a business associate. Neither of them saw the fingernails. Sean picked up fragments of their conversation as he looked at them, then at the fingernails, then back at them again.

"Over one hundred . . . Could have sold if the market had been right . . . Bad year for commodities . . ."

The train lurched. The fingernails clicked.

Sean wanted to scream. He looked around the train. Oblivion ruled supreme. Everyone it seemed was immersed in their own private worlds, immune to all outside seismic shocks. Faces behind masks of paperback books. Sleeping faces. Staring straight ahead faces.

And the fingernails slithered. And the fingernails continued to grow.

Sean was in such a desperate state that he almost missed his changeover stop at Gallery Place. He came to with a start and bolted out the doors, just as they were about to slam shut on him. He stood on the platform, trying to get a last glimpse of the woman's fingernails, as the train accelerated toward Judiciary Square.

Sean Boland walked from the Greenbelt Metro station, up the steep incline of Naylor Road, to the high-rise apartment he called home. It was late August, but unseasonably cold, with a light rain falling through bursts of inhospitable wind. This was Sean's least favorite part of the dreary day—trudging up this hill. It was as if the hill were fighting him with every single labored step that he took. *Oh no you don't; you're not going anywhere where it's warm and there is food. You're going to give up, right here, right now.*

The walk was doubly horrible tonight because Sean kept thinking about the middle-aged woman with the fingernails. Cars came down Naylor Road in a long slow procession of blinding headlights, and he imagined the woman sitting behind the steering wheel of every one of them, the fingernails jutting over the arc of the wheel, almost reaching the dash.

He reached his apartment complex and turned down the cement driveway. At the start of the driveway was the shell of a small building: a cube of plywood and tarpaper crowned by a pyramid of tiles. There had been six car burglaries in the complex's parking lot in as many months. The management had decided, finally, that they were going to erect a wall and a small guard building at the start of the driveway. The only people who would be able to get into the parking lot would be tenants with the proper identification. For a whole week, a crew of Hispanic laborers had struggled to put up this building and dig out a long ditch for the wall. And then, nothing. There had been no work done in months. He imagined the woman with the fingernails coming out of the guard shack, the fingernails appearing first in the unpainted frame of the door—like some monster's jagged teeth.

Finally, Sean Boland was home. He slipped into his tiny studio apartment and immediately locked and dead bolted the door. From outside, he could hear the sound of tires slithering against the wet pavement of Naylor Road and a police siren beginning its indignant chant. He stood in the dark of his apartment, afraid to even turn the light on because he had a momentary vision of the fingernail witch, one hand raised in the air, the nails poised to strike at his eye.

Finally, he flicked on the switch. There was no one there of course. He looked around his nearly bare apartment: an ugly sleeper sofa, a thirteen-inch portable television sitting on the carpet like the reconnaissance eye of an alien invasion force. An electric alarm clock noisily emitting what sounded like some kind of death rattle. Home sweet home. For \$650 dollars a month. Home sweet home.

That night, Sean dreamed of the fingernails. He was on the train again, headed toward Gallery place. The fingernails had taken over the entire car. They were everywhere—like the wild, thorny brambles that grew around Sleeping Beauty's castle. A skein of ugly calciferous ropes blocking the light, impinging upon freedom. And yet, people continued to sit in their seats, entombed by the fingernails, quietly trying to pretend that nothing unusual was happening—that they could just walk off the train at the next stop.

It was 6:00 when Sean Boland got on the train to Glenmont, last leg of his journey home. He had left the office and immediately started for the Metro, skipping the Café Europa and the caramel latte for once. He was afraid of running into the woman with the fingernails.

The doors of the subway train slid shut. Usually, when they did this, the cool, automated voice that announced each station chimed in with “Doors closing,” to warn the passenger that the doors were indeed closing. There was something wrong with the system, however, and the voice just kept repeating the single word: “Door... Door... Door...” Until, finally, it didn’t even sound like ‘Door,’ anymore. More like ‘dough,’

Unlike yesterday, the train was nearly full. Sean cast a quick eye around the car, assuring himself that the woman was not among the office commuters hurrying home. Satisfied that she wasn’t there, he walked up the aisle, trying to find a seat as the train accelerated and left the station. He settled for an aisle seat next to beautiful young girl who was wearing a short plaid skirt. Here, he planned to pretend to read his paper while admiring her long pale legs.

Sean unzipped his backpack and extracted the *Post*. Back to his everyday routine. His everyday horror show. His eyes moved without comprehension over the headlines—‘Man Kills Boss-Takes His Own Life.’ ‘West Nile Virus Claims Sixth Victim.’ ‘Fingernail Slayer Apprehended.’ He was more interested in the way the beautiful young girl crossed her legs, dying every time she started pumping one against the other in a slow indolent fashion.

At Metro Center he looked up from his paper. Sitting directly in front of him was a fat man with a bald spot on the back of his head. Rolls of pink flesh fell over his shirt collar and shook every time the train hit a bump.

It was on one of these bumps that the man’s pink flesh shook and an eye—a human eye—opened up in the nape of the fat man’s neck.

Sean started to scream but no sound would come out of his mouth. He looked at the eye and the eye looked back at him.

Tomorrow I am taking the bus, Sean thought, in mute horror. Tomorrow ... Or maybe the day after.

About the Author:

Michael S. Walker is a writer, musician, and artist living in Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of two novels: 7-22 and The Vampire Henry. He has seen his fiction and poetry published in numerous magazines including *Weird Book*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, and *PIF*.

Author Blog: [Michael S. Walker](#)

Facebook: [Indy Author](#)

The Child | G. Allen Wilbanks

There is nothing left but to try to survive. The world is broken; humanity obliterated, except for a few stragglers digging through the rubble of civilization and trying to last a few more days.

Joy is gone. Hope is gone.

And then I discovered the child.

A boy, no more than six years old, wandering the streets and crying out for help. I don’t know where he came from, but it really doesn’t matter. What matters is that he is here.

I go to him.

The chance of his survival without help is almost zero.

And I need to eat.

About the Author:

G. Allen Wilbanks is a member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and has published over 70 short stories in *Deep Magic*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and other magazines, anthologies, and on-line venues. He has published two short story collections, and the novel, *When Darkness Comes*.

Author Blog: [Deep Dark Thoughts](#)

Twitter: [@gallenwilbanks](#)

Sipping a coffee, she tucked the blanket around her bare feet, and turned on her favorite morning news channel. Her pulse raced as she watched the anti-vaccine protestors marching and waving their placards like good brain-washed soldiers. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined her spell would work so well. Weary of the poor being wiped out by disease, she turned her anger to the real culprits, the rich, invincible westerners with their expensive hospitals, medication and technology, increasing their life span while they ruined the planet. They were choking the earth with plastic, exploiting all the resources and desecrating the burial grounds of the once mighty dinosaurs. Luckily they were easily swayed by misinformation and they soaked up myths about vaccines and disregarded public health history making them vulnerable to her powers of persuasion.

Never satisfied with her domination spells, she was always improving her craft, and found a way to embed subliminal messages in the photos and gifs that littered social media. They were fooled by the fake news and compelled by the message to resist authority. She never had to leave her house, avoiding detection by the witch hunters. Her powers grew every day, even though she had no coven. The first time someone shared her anti-vaccine message, along with a picture of a candle and infinity symbol, she tingled with excitement. Her power grew with each new share and for some reason she picked up new followers late at night, as the drones were mindlessly swiping before bed.

Finishing her coffee, she consulted her grimoire and added a new layer of contagious magic to the pictures, so that the viewers would dwell on vaccines in their sleep and their dreams would become nightmares. Grandmother always taught her to put a picture under the pillow of the subject, directing their desires. She inserted a subtle outline of a pillow in the background of her message. Grinning she imagined how many privileged automatons would succumb to preventable diseases, leaving oxygen for the deserved.

Flipping channels she spied her new target, the loud mouthed politician that seemed to have his own brand of dark magic that made normal people abandon reason for catchy but hateful messages. She could use him to compel to his followers, all she needed was the right spell and the right way to thin the privileged herd. What should she choose, turning them onto holistic medicine and against big pharma so they would stop taking the cholesterol pills that prevented their heart attacks, or convincing them that organic vegetables were a scam so they would fill their bodies with pesticides? Cackling she poured another coffee and went to work, inciting contagion in the herd.

About the Author:

Roxy Thomas lives with her husband, 2 cats and 1 dog on an acreage near a national park where the bison roam. When not working as a psychiatric nurse she loves to read, watch movies and go for moonlit walks down forest paths.

Author Blog: [Stories by Roxy](#)

Twitter: [@roxythomas](#)

It | Ann Christine Tabaka

It lived deep in the dark forest, feasting on dead things, like the parasite that it was. No one knew it existed. No one saw it coming. But, out it came into the daylight. It trampled over all in its pathway, crushing the life out of its victims. It desired more food. Humankind had destroyed the wilderness where it lived. Human fear and the evil it spurned created the monster. It would have remained hidden if man's greed did not bring it forth, it always fed on our desire. Now, as it took its revenge, humans would become its prey.

About the Author:

Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry, has been internationally published, and won poetry awards from numerous publications. She is the author of 9 poetry books. Christine lives in Delaware, USA. She loves gardening and cooking. Chris lives with her husband and two cats.

Author Blog: [Words Spill Out - Poetry](#)

Twitter: [@TabakaChris](#)

White, grey and cream. Everywhere she looked that's what she saw. Crisp clean corridors and skywalks between vast buildings and moving along them in neat rows, people. People all dressed in white, grey and cream. Lara sighed and stepped out of the steadily moving stream of people stopping beside a gleaming water fountain. It was set in a little alcove halfway along the skywalk and she leaned down, its motion sensors activating the little geyser of cool clear water. She took a sip and let her eyes wander to the glass that curved down and slightly under the alcove creating a little bubble. Looking out she could see the soft golden blush of dawn beginning to caress the world. Vast buildings, the block cities as they were called, were spread miles apart. Rising 6,000 feet into the air and almost triple that along their bases, the harsh sharp edges caught the dawn light and reflected it like red hot razors, framing the rest of the vast blocks in shadow. The sky bridges looked like gossamer threads connecting them all together.

Lara's gaze travelled downward and took in the spaces between the buildings. She imagined she could see the lush green fields there protected from disease and carefully cultivated in the vast white climate controlled greenhouses. She focussed again on the sky with a gentle sigh. The now rosy colour of the light the only colour she could see. The gentle and soft tap of feet grew quieter and receded behind her. She would be late if she didn't move on now. Something stopped her, her apathy rose up in her chest like a great wave and crashed over her heart. It washed away any sense of care she had for this monotonous half-life and left something else, a void that longed to be filled. Creeping forward she glanced up and down the corridor. Seeing it empty she jumped out of the alcove and raced back the way she had come, she didn't walk, she ran and something in her thrilled with joy. It didn't take her long to tire but she continued onwards now zig zagging across the sky bridge and laughing at such a blatant disregard to the rules.

She arrived back at her block city, block city L-2 and walked through what seemed like endless corridors to her living space. She entered and went to the place where she hid her most personal things, a wall panel she had pried loose years ago. She thought to herself, *Today it will be done*. She reached inside and withdrew a bundle of grey rags which she unrolled on the desk. As the dull grey cloth fell away a flash of deep red appeared that soon resolved into a blouse. The red staining covered all but one of the rear panels except where absorption had soaked in around the edges. Lara smiled and took it to the bathroom, stopping in the kitchen to retrieve a small knife. She placed the blouse white patch up in the sink and slipped all of her clothes off, folding them neatly outside the door. Raising her arm and looking in the mirror she could see several scars under her underarm running from her elbow to her armpit. Carefully cut so they could be hidden during medical assessments.

Taking the knife she ran the keen blade down the scar tissue and winced and revelled in the pain it caused. She leaned forward pressing her forearm against the mirror and allowing the red of her blood to drop down onto the white fabric. She watched entranced as it hit the material and blossomed out like flowers turning it first pink and then a deep red. She stayed there until she was satisfied it was finished and then reached for the grey towel and pressed it to the wound. She sat on the cold toilet seat feeling light headed and let the cool soothe her. A few moments later she reached for the skin sealant she had taped under the sink. She applied it to the cut as she had many times before and watched it gum over with a clear, flexible but tough coating. She lifted the shirt and held it into the small shower cubicle. "Dry" she spoke and jets of hot air filled the small space. After a few moments she commanded it to stop and looked at the blouse in her hands, the red blouse. She smiled and put it on, omitting the bra, and then donned her underwear and the grey trousers which flattered the red immensely.

One more thing, she thought and went back to the desk, unrolling the last bit of the grey cloth a glint of silver caught in the soft lighting. A simple choker made of stripped down electrical wiring and repurposed red computer console buttons lay there and the red rubber that had been stripped off the wires. She lifted the choker fastening it around her throat and tied her hair back securing it with the red rubber from the wire tied tight. She went back to the bathroom and gasped as she caught her reflection in the mirror. A different woman looked back at her. It scared and excited her how much the red complimented the gentle tones of her lips and the flush in her cheeks. She reached out and touched the glass. She wanted more, she needed more. Feeling reckless she left her quarters and made her way to the bullet lifts, she stopped at the doors as she realized in dismay she wouldn't have access. There were stairs, never used except by the maintenance team. They were also open access.

Lara lived just under half way up the block city so she would have almost 3,000ft of stairwell to descend. It was easier than expected. Having lived a lifetime of switching off and staying to the task, not thinking, just doing the stairs passed in a blur like most of her life. She reached the bottom and sat for a moment on the step. She shivered, it was cold down here. There was a strange smell in the air, it was familiar and completely new at the same time. She stood, she longed to see the fields of green that provided the base for the liquid food and supplements that she ate daily. Opening the door she walked briskly and carefully along the outer wall until she found a door. Opening it she stepped through and looked around for the lush greens she had been taught about in school. What greeted her instead was a sea of silver and red.

Hundreds of thousands of steel tables spread out before her and on each a corpse. Men, woman and children. Mechanical contraptions worked above each one, removing bones here, cutting away flesh and muscle there or draining blood and fluids away. Lara's face turned to horror as she saw pieces siphoned away in all directions. She didn't know how long she stood staring and unable to move. Faces of people unknown to her were etched into her mind as she watched them stripped of skin, flesh and bone. Everything that made them human. Revolted but unable to tear away she followed the direction of the 'products' small shuffling steps, like a moth to flame. The air reeked of gore but as she moved through the area it was replaced by another smell, so familiar but she couldn't put her finger on it. She entered a section filled with vast silver vats and the temperature rose. Each 'product' was siphoned to a different vat.

She passed the vats and a tube left from each to continue down the line. Morbid curiosity drove her onwards to a production plant. Tiny plastic packets moved along a conveyor belt and pumps dropped down and filled them with a dull grey liquid. Lara's mind broke. Those packets and that smell were something she encountered daily. The liquid food and supplements that everyone in the block cities consumed came in them and smelled like them. Lara dropped to the ground doubled over and voided whatever was in her stomach. She lay for hours, mind broken and tears leaving her eyes raw and swollen, waves of the smell washing over her and setting her off again. Eventually she began to crawl. She made it back as far as the abattoir before exhaustion and pain overtook her. When she eventually woke she knew it was finished. She couldn't go back, she couldn't escape. There was nowhere to go. The block cities covered the entire continent and she couldn't eat, it was finished.

"Over here!" someone called. He went to look. He hated this part of the job, making sure the food processors were in working order. His colleague was standing over something and it resolved into a body. "Been dead weeks" his colleague said. "Must have rolled off one of the tables as it came down". As if to punctuate this there was a dull slap behind as a corpse was delivered from one of the roof tubes. He looked at his colleague. "What do we do?" The other man shrugged. "Gimme a hand and we'll put it back on." The men lifted the body, gagging at the stench and threw it on to the nearest empty table. Almost instantly the mechanism above began to dissect it. "Hope I don't get that one in my supplement" his colleague chuckled and moved onwards. He looked back at the body, a scrap of material hung down where the blouse had been cut and he reached out and tore it off. He pocketed the strip of red absently thinking it was beautiful and moved on the next section.

About the Author:

Colin Walsh has been writing for a long time but only recently decided to push for publication. He is trying to have his first novel published and is experimenting with a project on Patreon where the audience guides his writing. He has a massive interest in Fantasy but likes to dip into the darker side of writing.

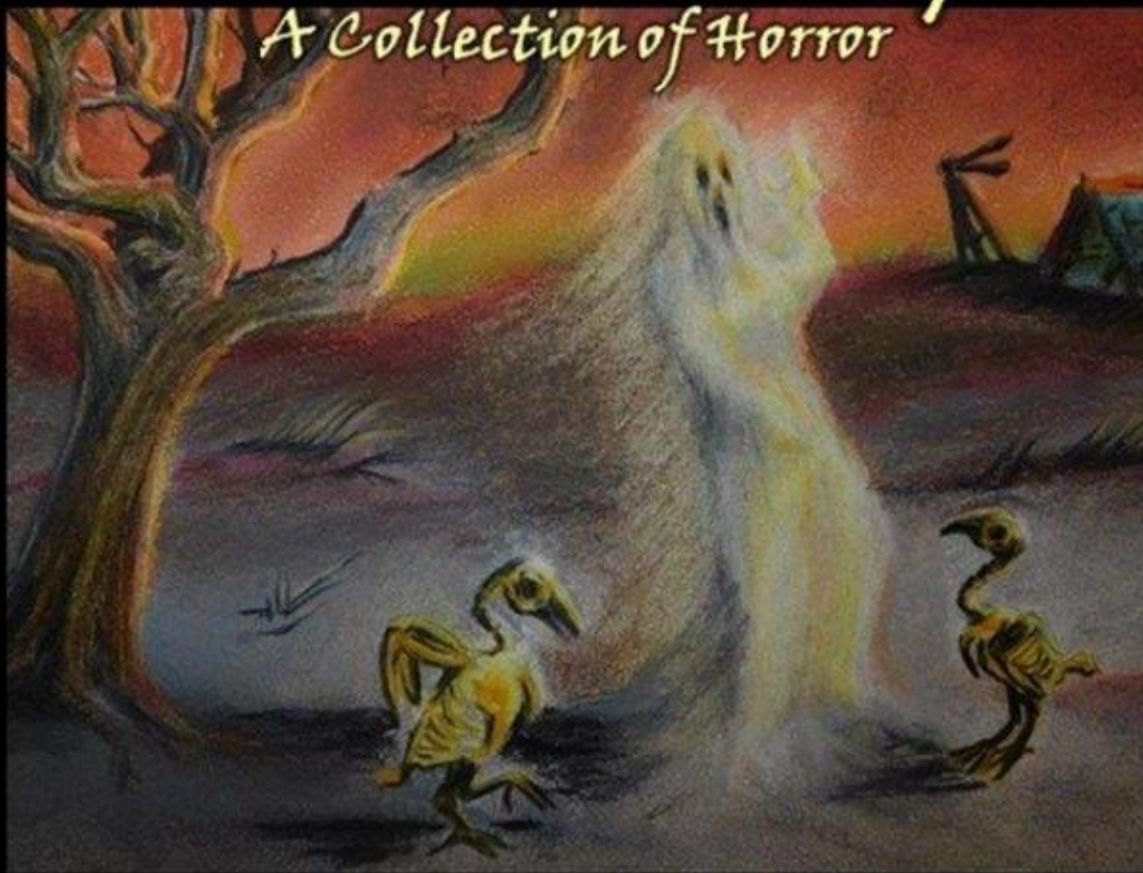
Facebook: [Colin Walsh](#)

Patreon: [Colin Walsh](#)

You knew you shouldn't have, but you did...

Erring on the Side of Calamity

A Collection of Horror



Christine Lajewski

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

She watches from afar as they search the forest. There are about fifty of them- boys and men, and the old chanting priest with his urn of holy water. Their daggers dazzle in the leafy patterned sunlight as the green branches wafted their scent into her dank mountain-hole, firing the hunger in her cold, knotted veins and moistening her discolored tongue. They also fire something else in her, something less familiar, or perhaps less remembered than the desire for blood— fear.

Why are they here? For her? After all this time? She has long ceased to be the terror of the forest, the terribly beautiful huntress that once stalked the villagers' nightmares. The fire destroyed her strength years ago, and her legend dwindled with the prey. But now they're coming for her again, and she is no longer the terror she used to be.

She remembers the group that had come hunting for Beej - desperate men with rusty farm tools turned into weapons. How many moons ago was that?

Beej —her maker and companion. Beej the reckless. Hunting was easier in those days. There were no lights on roads after nightfall, people mostly traveled on foot and the forests had animals aplenty. But he was never satisfied. His greed forced the villagers to invade their forest. They came and Beej obliged, laughing away her warnings. But the men were ready. They overpowered him. One splash of holy water, one strike of the wooden spear, and she was alone in the world forever. She had hated Beej, but he was all she had.

She avenged him, oh yes! She waited as they burned what was left of Beej, the priest chanting his closing prayers, using up the last bit of holy water to extinguish the fire, and then she attacked.

It was a beautiful massacre. She was younger than Beej, and less arrogant. They didn't see her coming. She tore through the men, moved partly by anger, and partly by the rush that came from the discovery of her own strength. Even though Beej was exasperated with her refusal to hunt, he had always shared his kills with her. And now she found she could hunt on her own, that she could be just the monster that Beej had tried to make her.

The last boy running had a tabeez round his neck. When he could run no more, he held it up in front, halting her mid-pounce.

"Stay away!" he had screamed, his eyes bulging in fear, his fingers clutching his last-ditch hope, "Stay away from me or this tabeez will destroy you! It saved my father from the Evil Eye! It is blessed with the power of the saints. Stay away!"

She could still feel that moment of acrid choking rage as she snapped the boy's neck, that single burning desire to smash the world into pieces as she hurled the head away like poison.

Later, when the bloodlust had subsided for a while, and the keening floated from the village on the evening air, she returned to the beautiful face she had destroyed, and wept, mourning for the life that Beej had taken from her years ago.

She had been unmindful that afternoon. Her thoughts were in the distant city where her betrothed was fighting for the king's army. The sun had set and a purple haze had fallen over the horizon, like the evening when he had left her. It was only when the other shepherds called her name that she started gathering the sheep. They were one short.

Her search brought her to the edge of the jungle. The drained carcass was lying beneath a dead tree bark. And then she saw Beej, his jaws still dripping with the blood of the slaughtered animal. She had heard the rumours about the blood-thirsty demon in the forest, and she tried to run, but Beej wasn't yet sated. That was what he passed on to her— his insatiable thirst.

She feels her throat burn as the procession comes closer. She can't remember when she last fed. These men would make a royal feast. But she is old and weak, and this group looks stronger and better armed than the one that had destroyed Beej so many years ago. Their daggers are sharper and even their priest is a well-built man, as opposed to the frail little bag of bones that threw his urn of sacred water at Beej, shaking and chanting his last prayers all the while. This group will kill her if they catch her.

She feels slightly relieved as she watches the sky through the green canopy. The day is nearing to a close. Human vision isn't strong enough to hunt in the dark. Once the sun set, she will be safer. She must hide till then.

After the death of Beej, she became the new ruler of the forest. People, animals— nothing that breathed escaped her. The village called up men from other towns and villages to hunt her, but she eluded them, striking at a lone prey, leaving the remains to add to her growing legend. The forest was a big place back then, and food was easy to find. Sometimes when a group came hunting for her, she would allow them a little glimpse of her, enjoying the chase. Sometimes she even took on an entire group of hunters, and won every single time.

Eventually they stopped trying to kill her, and learned to avoid the forest. She survived on animals and the occasional stray traveler. As time passed, these too became sporadic. The forest grew smaller to make space for endless stretches of metal strips. In the beginning she had preyed on the men sent to lay those lines. But after a few kills, the men grew wary, carrying weapons and torches, moving in large groups. More time passed. The workers left. A strange interlinked chain of metal carriages began racing on the path they had laid, creating an unearthly noise, belching smoke, carrying men, women and children- none of whom she could touch. These carriages grew more frequent, traveling faster, the forest shrank, and she retreated, continuing to preying on animals and the odd poacher.

Then came that terrible summer. The springs dried up, the grass withered, animals starved. She drank from the dying animals, always growing hungrier than before. But one day, the forest burned. The fire spread from end to end, leaving no escape. She managed to get to her cave, but not before the fire had scorched her.

She lay there alone for a long time. If she could drink, she might have healed, but the forest fire had killed a lot of animals, and those that survived didn't come her way. She couldn't die, of course, although at times she wished she could. Very slowly, she regained enough strength to move but none of her former agility or strength returned. If a lame deer or a lost goat came her way, she could feed, but those were few and far between. Her reign as the deadly predator was now over.

These days she often thinks about the young boy she had killed, and the tabeez that failed its promise. Sometimes she wonders why she survived the fire, and how long she needed to starve to finally die.

And now here is her chance, and she is afraid. She has craved death in darkness, and she knows the only way that can kill her. No more hunger, no more regrets, no more loneliness. The men are quite close to her hiding place now. She only needs to show herself. Yet, she tries to shrink herself further, so as to be invisible. She isn't ready to die after all.

The death of Beej flashes before her eyes. She remembers his screams as they pulled him apart. In all her days of hunting, she has never heard anyone screaming like that. She doesn't want to die like that. She has no courage for the death these predators would give her.

The men don't notice as she crawls away, stealth being the one quality time hasn't taken from her. When she arrives at the mouth of the cave though, she almost forgets her caution.

She has guests. The aroma assaulted her before she sees the man for the moment, she can think of nothing else. All she knows is that the most elating scent in the world is coming from her den, and she can regain everything she has lost in moments.

"Please, help us," says the girl through a red, raging fog, "don't give us away."

They are young, too young. She was young once. She will be young again. Her elixir is right here, in her power. Her prey has walked to her doorstep.

The boy is bleeding all over. He has clearly been lynched. The girl tries to comfort him, unaware of the danger standing two feet away.

Human blood! When was the last time she tasted it? And now she has two helpless humans at her mercy, and one of them almost senseless. She could be strong again. She could be strong enough to even take on that presumptuous procession hunting for her!

"Please, they're going to kill us. Please let us stay here for the night."

Every fiber in her worn body is pulsing with desire, with the possibility of being alive again. Her prey pleads at her feet.

"Save us from those men, Grandmother."

Grandmother? She is no one's grandmother. That life was taken from her. She was to be strong and fierce and young. Eternal youth, Beej had promised her. How dare this girl? She wants to punish her for her impudence, but instead hears herself asking--

"They're here to kill *you*? Why? What have you done?"

They have fallen in love. They have defied their elders. They have eloped. They have dishonored their clans, their rules, and their religion.

The boy groans and clutches the girl's hand. The girl tries to stench his wounds with strips torn from her dress, but the blood continues to flow, assailing the predator's senses.

The girl is beautiful. She could be beautiful again. Beej had thought her beautiful. That's why he didn't kill her like all the others, he wanted a beautiful companion. And her betrothed... he had called her the most beautiful in the world.

"No army can keep us apart. I shall return to you, my moon."

It was a promise made under a purple sky, as night prepared to settle in, and the young men going to war said their goodbyes.

The girl had fumbled with the string necklace around her neck.

"Take this. It is blessed by the saints. It will keep you safe."

"Please, Grandmother, do you have any water?"

As if water could ever quench her century-old thirst!

"Why do they have a priest?" She asks instead.

The boy groans again, and the girl's attention shifts back to him.

"Why do they have a priest?" she asks again.

"Priest? It's a custom, don't you know? You're not supposed to cross this forest without a priest and an urn of sacred water. Some superstition about evil spirits. Grandmother, won't you give us some water?"

Superstition! Insolent child! She can wipe the assurance off her face in an instant.

"There is a stream if you walk left from the cave-mouth, but those men are coming this way."

The words fall from her lips, but she is surprised to hear them all the same. It is as if someone else has spoken through her mouth, and with her carnivore tongue. She feels inside herself for the hunger, for the indomitable thirst, but sometime during the conversation, her senses have quietened down, and the scent of the boy's blood has stopped overpowering them. She can smell the killers again, and they're getting nearer.

The girl begins to scream, but she clamps an old, leathery hand upon her mouth. It's a weak hand, but not completely useless yet.

"Be quiet."

She leans beside the boy. So much blood. So much young blood. So much wasted life.

"What are you doing? What are you doing? Leave him!" The girl struggles to push her away as her screams are muffled again.

She manages to hold the girl with one hand again as she licks off the blood, slowly, taking care to keep her teeth away. When she is done, the wounds aren't bleeding any more. The little blood has made her ravenous, but it doesn't matter. She's going to feed soon enough. They're still stronger, but she will go down fighting.

The girl stares at her, her face a palette of expressions. Horror? Revulsion? It doesn't matter. This girl will never need to be her.

"Your friend can walk now, I think."

The boy sits up, looking dazed.

"Where are we?"

"Leave. Get to the stream. Drink. Then get out of here. Follow the train tracks, they'll lead you to the city."

"But you said the men were-"

"They're close, so you need to escape before they arrive."

The revulsion lessens a little on the girl's face, replaced by something else.

"Who are you?" She asks.

In response, the monster takes out an old tabeez from the folds of her clothes.

"This will keep you safe. Take it."

After they leave, she steps out of the cave and waits as the men approach. The sun has gone down, and the evening has a purple glow about it, like another evening eons ago. It is a good sky for one last hunting.

About the Author:

Ruchira Mandal loves reading, traveling, eating dimsums, sleeping, and making things up inside her head. She writes poetry, fiction and songs. Her work has appeared in a few anthologies, newspapers and magazines. She is also currently writing a doctoral thesis on Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* novels.

Author Blog: [Ruchira's Rambling](#)

Twitter: [@RucchiraM](#)

A low and steady whine woke Leah Danvers from slumber. She opened her eyes to darkness and groaned.

Mosquitos. The little pests hadn't bothered her all evening. None of them had appeared when she'd arrived at the campground. None had buzzed around her while she set up the tent. Why'd they have to come out now and spoil everything?

Leah sat up, forsaking the warmth of her sleeping bag. She rummaged in her back pack, pulled out a smooth cylindrical can, and depressed the button at the top.

Citrus-scent filled the tent as she covered her arms, tank top, shorts, and legs with repellent. She sprayed the sleeping bag and then returned the can to the pack.

The whine grew faint, then vanished.

Leah sank back into the sleeping bag and closed her eyes.

Beyond the thin walls of the tent, pine branches sighed in the breeze. A nearby brook babbled and crickets chirped. The lullaby of night carried Leah toward twilight and the cusp of delicious sleep.

Then, the whine returned.

It floated through the darkness toward her, growing louder as the insect approached her ear. She covered her face with the sleeping bag. The mosquito hovered over her head.

Stupid repellent. It hadn't been worth the five dollars she'd paid for it. When she got back to the gas station, she'd not only get her money back, she'd give the attendant a piece of her mind.

On second thought, she wouldn't do that. The gas station attendant had been—well—weird.

Her mind conjured an image of him. Dirty coveralls, unshaved cheeks, missing teeth all flashed past. But, the eyes were the worst. They had remained distant and cold while he spoke, rendering each word a lie.

Perspiration beaded her forehead as the air within the sleeping bag grew stale. She focused on the mosquito once more.

Silence.

Leah uncovered her face and drank in cool air. She reached for her flashlight and clicked it on.

A scream died in her throat.

Mosquitos covered the top of her sleeping bag. They blanketed the walls, ceiling, and doors of her shelter.

As the light played over them, they rose off of their perches and joined one another in flight. Soon, a dark cloud filled the tent. The whine they emitted became a chorus.

Leah swatted at the cloud as it descended toward her. She scrambled out of the sleeping bag and through the door.

Her Pontiac stood a few yards away. The car gleamed under the light of the full moon. She rushed to it.

The mosquito's wail grew more urgent as she grasped the handle and threw the door open. For a moment, she thought she heard a word in that high-pitched hum. It repeated over and over, louder and louder.

Go!

Go!

GO!

Leah slammed the door and closed each of the vents. Then, she lowered the shade and pulled the key from its hiding place. She jammed it into the ignition and switched the headlights on.

The dark cloud hung outside the windshield.

Leah trembled behind the wheel. She'd never feared mosquitos. But, these were different. So many small mouths begging for blood. Worse, these insects seemed...sentient.

As though in agreement with her unvoiced thought, the cloud moved toward her driver's side window. Individuals broke away and landed on the car. Their drone was so loud, it penetrated the glass.

"Screw this," Leah cried. A twist of the key brought the Pontiac's engine to life.

She set her hand on the shifter and the passenger side window suddenly imploded. Shards of safety glass showered the seat beside her and something struck her thigh. She glanced up and screamed.

It wasn't a flood of mosquitos which caused the damage. An unshaved face peered through her smashed window. Moonlight frosted his ice-blue eyes as they glared into her own. He pulled the door open.

The cloud fell upon him before he could get inside. They forced him to abandon his grip on the door as they surrounded his exposed face and hands.

Leah hit the gas. The car surged forward and out of the campground.

When she reached the next town and stopped in front of the police station, she found a singular object lying against her thigh. It was a large wrench. Dried blood and hair covered one end of it.

As Leah stepped out of the car, a familiar hum sounded near her ear. A mosquito dropped on to her hand.

The insect took its fill, then flew off into the night.

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Head of Publishing and Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net, and an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing.

Author Blog: [Frighten Me](#)

Twitter: [@nachingkassa](#)

Debutante | Carolyn Barnard

Today is a big day, or rather it's the anniversary of a big day; 15 years ago today I... But, I'm getting ahead of myself, putting the cart before the horse etc. Maybe I should let the story tell itself and we'll see where it goes.

I'd only met him the previous weekend. At the Dancing Nun – that indie club that used to be behind the bus station. It changed its name a few times – I think it's a Starbucks now, but then... then it was the only place to go. I'd only turned 18 a few months earlier, but I'd been going since I was 16 (maybe even longer, who knows?). It was so different from all the town center clubs on the high street, as were the regulars; we called ourselves the 'freaks', the misfits, the square pegs in a town full of round holes.

He was new, but that wasn't the reason he stood out. We had every type of 'anti-normal' in there: punks, goths, rockabilly, hippies and slackers. But he was unique – he wore leather thigh length boots over rainbow trousers, with a frilly white shirt over a Kenneth Williams t-shirt. All finished off with a slightly dusty top hat. He never asked my name and I never knew his, in fact we hardly spoke, but we were drawn to each other, like we were in a trap.

That first evening felt like a one-off, a shooting star or an obscure song you half hear leaking out of someone's headphones. But the next Saturday night he was there again – same clothes, but somehow different. Again we didn't speak, but that connection was even stronger, a touch of his hand made me shiver with anticipation.

After the club closed we slithered down the street (where's the fun in walking?) as the chill of the night stroked my cheeks. Soon we came to the docks and I took his hand and led him past a broken fence into a paved yard. The building which stood guard had been a squatters' house, but everyone had moved on, so now it was silent as we went in.

I saw his beautiful eyes in the moonlight; I couldn't make out the colour, but they were pulling me towards him. He grabbed me round the waist and I tumbled into him. One of the mattresses from the squatters' house hadn't been cleared, so I pulled away and pushed him onto it. We still hadn't said a word as my hand brushed his thigh and then up. I unzipped him and ran my finger down the lump in his pants; soft but firm and I heard him sigh.

He closed his eyes.

I reached into the bag by the mattress and my hand grasped the wooden handle of the knife. Slowly I pulled it out and traced the spot on his chest with my other hand before plunging in the sharp blade. He started to yell until I muffled his cries with a kiss. My tongue exploring his mouth as his movements grew weaker.

I sucked out his last breath and held it in my mouth, savouring its ephemeral taste before releasing it into the night.

I'll never forget that first time. The warmth of his soul running through my veins like a hit and I was addicted. Every time making me stronger and thirsting for more.

About the Author:

Carolyn Barnard has been writing for several years, but only just got the nerve to try for publication. She's in her (very) late twenties and lives in the UK with her husband and dogs. She has pieces due for publication by Moon Park Review and Escaped Ink.

Author Blog: [Carolyn's Scribblings](#)

Twitter: [@caba1967a](#)

The Blood Lights are the last
thing you'll see...

The
BLOOD LIGHTS



ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Nine-year-old Wyatt Groves was as happy as ever that the school year had finally ended. Third grade was behind him, and now he could do as he pleased. He loved spending his days running barefoot through the green pastures near his home in Central Florida or riding his dirt bike around with his sling shot by at his side. There wasn't much where he lived, mostly cows and horses, but he didn't mind. What with the river and woods nearby, there was plenty to get into. If he wasn't helping his daddy with something or other, he was free to roam.

At the end of the day, he'd be dirty, sweaty, ate up by mosquitoes and no-see-ums, but he wouldn't have it any other way. Some nights he'd take a bath and some nights he wouldn't, but what he always made sure to do, was open his bedroom window before he went to sleep. It wasn't just because they didn't have central air, it was because he loved the pleasant summer breeze. It would come in through his window like a big welcoming glove and caress his face. He didn't even mind the tang of the near-by farms that rode in on the breeze, but one night, what came through the window, wasn't pleasant. It wasn't pleasant at all.

The day had been long, hot and soupy, like most Florida summer days. Clouds had begun to pile on top of one another and the humidity clung to his skin. Thunder grumbled in the distance as Wyatt lifted his head toward the sky to smell the imminent rain. He gathered up his army men and sling shot, then hopped on his dirt bike and rode back to the house. Cool fat rain began pelting him just as he parked. He did a little spin in the rain, then wiped his soiled feet before going inside, making sure not to step on Ralph, their overgrown house cat who liked to lay by the front door.

After dinner the rain had stopped, so his parents told him he could play out front a little while before it got too dark. The mosquitoes ended up being too thick though and he opted to play inside instead. He played with his Legos until his mother told him he had to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. With a groan or two, he undid the fort he built, making sure to grab the Legos Ralph stole when he wasn't looking, and did what he was told. Then he opened his window, laid down with one leg under the covers and one leg out, and waited for the cicadas and crickets to sing him to sleep.

Some nights, including this night, Wyatt would wake up and sneak out to score an ice cream sandwich or a soda once his parents had gone to bed. He'd made sure to give Ralph a treat too or else the darn tattle tale would meow loud enough to wake the dead. He'd already shut the hall light off and crept back to his bedroom, melting sandwich in hand, when he heard it.

The crickets and cicadas stopped singing and he could see his breath when he exhaled. The hair on his arms and neck stood up as a dense fog floated in through his screen. It was a drumming sound. At least that's what he thought it sounded like. He also heard the clomping of numerous hooves along with more unidentifiable noises. Bewildered by what he was hearing, he dropped to his knees and army crawled toward the open window to get a better listen. He was careful not to smash his ill-gotten ice cream into the carpet.

Whiffs of pipe smoke and horse drifted in. He heard dogs barking. *What's going on*, he wondered. He downed the last of his sandwich and licked his fingers as clean as he could. Ralph had followed him and was sitting in the doorway with his ears back, flat against his head. His tail grew three times its normal size before he hissed and ran under the bed. Something was definitely wrong. Wyatt was afraid to take a peek at what was happening outside, but he slowly brought himself up enough to investigate and wished he hadn't.

The generous moonlight illuminated the large groups of people that were traveling seemingly in one forward course. Men, women, and children, were all carrying various items. Some had large heavy blankets on their backs or rolled up in their arms. Several bearded white men with stern faces sat on horses wearing old fashioned looking uniforms and held long barreled guns by their sides. But most of the people moving had tanned skin and wore unusual clothing he had seen only in pictures or movies. Some of the tanned men had on colorful headdresses. *Indians! There's Indians outside!* There were wagons being pulled by oxen and horses that reminded him of his favorite computer game, Oregon Trail.

He stared for what felt like an eternity, his scabby knees glued to the carpet. The drumming continued, a slow methodical beat as they marched ahead. At some point he remembered to breathe and wondered if he was dreaming. He reached down and pinched his thigh hard enough to cause him to gasp out loud. Suddenly, the drumming ceased and everyone stopped moving. They all turned to look at him.

Wyatt's innards went cold like he swallowed an entire box of popsicles. He began to shiver and his heart beat thrummed in his ears. The people that looked back at him looked like rotting corpses. Their lips were peeled away from their decayed teeth and gums, pitted flesh was sloughing off, and numerous pairs of unblinking spoiled eyes shone milky white in his direction. *Holy shit, Zombies*, his brain screamed. Even the animals were decomposed and skeletal in appearance. His knees began slipping out from under him. *Don't move, don't move, don't move!*

A putrid pungent odor filled his room. Like rancid meat mixed with his grandma's overly sweet perfume. Wyatt gagged, but held his composure. He tried to reach for his sling shot on his night stand, but it was too far, he would have to get up to get to it. When they began to smile, he couldn't take it anymore and ducked down. He thought about getting his parents, but decided against it. On all fours, he clambered to his night stand and secured the sling shot.

The drumming had started up again. Several hoarse gurgling moans sounded like they were getting closer to his window. There was disgruntled neighing and heavy hooves stomped the ground wildly. He didn't have any of his pellets nearby, but he spied several Hot Wheels and stray Legos under the bed. Ralph growled as he grabbed a Ferrari Testarossa. *It will have to do*, Wyatt got it into position.

With a surprisingly steady hand, he rose expecting to meet the ugly mottled faces of the undead at his window, but when he did, there was nothing there except a pair of bumbling armadillos tearing up the lawn. The fog had lifted, leaving only a drizzly mist in its wake and the crickets and cicadas began to sing once again. *What the hell?* He looked around some more, but there was nothing, not even a footprint.

Wyatt's heart calmed down enough for him to take even breaths and he dropped his sling shot. He slammed shut his window and pulled his blinds down before he collapsed on his bed. Both of his legs, still wobbly, went under the covers. It was hot and sticky under there, but he laid like that until he heard his mother get up to make coffee, and only then did he drift off to a very disturbed sleep.

That was the summer of 1986 and it was the last time he ever opened his window again. It wasn't until years later that Wyatt learned his little Podunk town in Central Florida was smack in the middle of the migration of Native Americans that were pushed from their inherent land and eventually forced westward during the 1830's. He didn't know if what he saw was real that night, but it didn't matter, because no matter how warm or stuffy it got in his bedroom over the years, no summer breeze was ever worth whatever might happen to be lurking outside, waiting to show itself to him again.

About the Author:

Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida! She was an educator for several years before she left to write and travel. Her short stories have appeared in *Gypsum Sound Tales*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *Castrum Press*, and *Sirens Call Publications*. When she's not writing, she's enjoying time with her other half, snuggling her fur babies, or reading during a thunderstorm.

Facebook: [Vivian Kasley](#)
Amazon Author Page: [Vivian Kasley](#)

Leaves rustled across the pavement, as the young chap's body fell within their whirlwind circle. Blood splattered the tiny pile, dotting them as if a kindergarten student had used them as their canvas. This was the curtain surrounding the outskirts of Central Park, death and obsession at its finest, as the unwitting, nameless college student gave up a last breath, his eyes plucked lovingly from their sockets.

That last drink at the pub hadn't done him well, as he'd made the reckless choice of walking home through the park rather than taking a cab. His frugality had saved him about two dollars in fair, but cost him his life.

Now his body lay slumped on the pavement among the leaves and litter as the blue eyes that had always enticed the women, now belonged to one.

Out of a New York City cab she stepped, with all of the pomp of a tinsel town personality. A Jack Russell terrier pranced by her feet, his rhinestone collar reflecting the sunlight.

"Merci' beaucoup," she said to the driver and tossed him a few bills. Beckoning to the nervous little dog with kissing noises, she tugged on his nylon leash. "Come along Rogêr" People stared at her as she strutted down Bleeker Street, head held high as if she were royalty. Rogêr bounced beside her, keeping up the pace.

Thin black seams stretched upward toward her derriere, emphasizing the shapely legs of a onetime dancer. Her vintage, black Chanel suit and wide brimmed hat exuded old money. Judith Denault was a spectacle, she always had been. She was a star. At least in her proximity.

Lingering in front of a café, she peeked over her cat-eye sunglasses at the wrought iron tables and chairs of Talmadge's sidewalk cafe'. She settled into one of the cushioned chairs and jerked Rogêr's leash. He yipped as she swiftly fastened his leash to one of the chair legs and proceeded to examine a menu that lay open on the table.

When her meal arrived, she ate with the sunglasses on and continued to coo to Rogêr, dropping bits of her lunch down onto the sidewalk for him to feast upon.

As Rogêr devoured the remainder of her lunch, she skimmed through a discarded newspaper; shaking her head as she noticed the headlines, 'Eleventh victim found in Central Park. Could be work of the, *eyeball thief*.'

Quickly tossing the paper aside, she dipped a hand into her purse to retrieve a gold compact. Smiling into its mirror, she removed her sunglasses and applied more eyeliner. Her eyes were green, peppered with bright flecks of gold. They complimented her fair skin and dark hair perfectly. She reveled in the attention her looks garnered her.

She caught sight of a young girl spying on her from a nearby table. The girl's arms held a dirty dish bin, full of plates and cups. Her hair was short, the color of ripe peaches. Judith smiled at her attire, which appeared as if it had come off of a rack from one of the trendy shops in SoHo.

As the girl approached her table, she stared at Judith with wide eyes. "Are you finished?"

Judith dropped the compact and eyeliner into her purse and waved dramatically at the table. "Yes miss, you may remove all of them from the table."

"Are you finished with the paper as well?"

"Yes," said Judith. "I can't believe they publish some of those articles."

"You mean this?" The girl asked, pointing at the headline.

Judith nodded, "It's ghastly."

The girl's expression grew serious. "It's rumored that the murderer collects the victim's eyes."

Judith scowled up at the young girl, who quickly defended her statement.

"It's just some gossip I heard. I hear a lot of stories working here."

"I can imagine. People didn't relish in all the gory details in my day," Judith said, hastily recanting herself. "Not that my day was so long ago."

Judith's accent was a mixture of broken French and English. Her sophistication denoted someone that should be lunching at Tavern on the Green, not Talmadge's.

"I'm sorry for staring ma'am," the girl said. "I can't seem to help myself."

"That's all right," Judith replied, slipping her sunglasses back on. "Since I've been traveling, I've been stared at a lot. I'm used to it. I like it."

Judith watched the girl as she smiled shyly and ran her fingers along the edge of the rubber bin.

"Sit down and join me," Judith offered. "You won't get into trouble, will you?"

"No. My dad owns this cafe'."

"Then by all means," said Judith, gesturing towards an empty chair.

"Thank you. By the way, I'm Lacey Talmadge."

"Judith Denault. It's nice to meet someone so pleasant. Everyone I encounter in this city seems so sour."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. I meet lots of interesting people here. Yourself for example."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not all that interesting."

"Your accent, it's different. Where are you from?"

"I'm from all over. I've been in England for the past five years. Before that, I was living in St. Tropez."

That's a wonderful place to take in some sun. I'm not that fond of sun bathing myself, it reeks havoc on the complexion."

"I've been involved in the theatre for most of my life. I started out in a chorus line in France and have been performing ever since."

Lacey smiled and leaned forward in her chair. Judith knew that she had her hooked. "I can't give you an exact number of years. I don't want to give away my age."

"Well, whatever your age, you're striking."

"Thank you, Lacey. That's quite an interesting look that you have going there yourself. When you're young you can wear anything and pull it off. Are you a student?"

"Yes, but not of fashion. I'm studying to become an optometrist."

"There's money to be made there, I suppose."

"I'm not interested in the money," Lacey said, and rose from the table. "I'd better finish cleaning the rest of these tables off. It's been nice talking with you."

"It has," said Judith, as she pulled Rogê's leash free from the chair leg. "I'd best be off myself. I didn't realize how late it was getting."

"Don't be a stranger," said Lacey.

"Come along Rogê," Judith said. "See you again sometime, Lacey."

She did see her again, the next day in fact. Judith didn't come empty handed. She presented Lacey with a handsomely wrapped gift. "Open it quickly Lacey, I don't have much time to spare."

Lacey sat down at a vacant table with her and began to tear at the brightly colored paper. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I'm having a dinner party tonight and I've got a huge amount of preparation ahead of me."

"Who's going to be there? Anyone from the theatre?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Yesterday on the way back to my flat, I ran into a few old friends that have also moved to New York. I decided that we should have cocktails and dinner together."

"It sounds like fun."

"It will be," Judith said, and watched for Lacey's reaction to the gift.

"It's from Tiffany's," Lacey said, and traced her fingers over the smooth blue box. She opened the box and pulled the tissue paper away from the gift; revealing a miniature gold kaleidoscope. "This is beautiful. Thank you."

Judith smiled, as Lacey held the kaleidoscope up to her left eye and began to turn it about.

"These colors are amazing. I love kaleidoscopes."

"So do I. They're so unique. One way you turn them; the colors form a magnificent butterfly. Turn it at another angle and you get something completely hideous."

"You shouldn't have bought me anything."

"I just wanted to give my new friend something special."

"And it is," said Lacey, before embracing Judith. "I love it. Rogê began to yip and jump on his hind legs. Judith swept him up into her arms and held him close to her face."

"Mummy loves her little Rogê. He's such a brat. I'd get rid of him in a minute, but I love him so."

"So how many people are going to be at your party tonight?" Lacey asked, placing the kaleidoscope back in its box.

"Oh, I don't know. Probably about ten or twelve. I'd like to ask a favor of you, if you're not too busy."

"What is it?"

"I'd like you to work at my party tonight. I need someone to serve."

"I don't know. I usually just bus tables. I've never worked a fancy dinner party."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine. I'd really like to have you there, and I'll pay you whatever you ask."

"Oh, I wouldn't ask you for a cent," said Lacey. "Especially after this gift. I've never been given anything from Tiffany's before."

"I'm glad you like it. Now, let me give you my address."

Lacey neared Judith's apartment and took a deep breath; nervous about meeting her wealthy friends. Tucking the piece of paper with directions scrawled on it into her jacket pocket, she rang Judith's doorbell. The sound of the bell in itself denoted luxury. Its deep tone reverberated, announcing her arrival.

After standing there for several moments, she tried the handle and noticed that the door was unlocked. "Hello," she called, and walked into the parlor. "Judith! Rogê!"

There were candles lit throughout the apartment. Everything had an edgy, modern feel to it, including the magnificent chandelier that hung in the center of the living room.

Lacey moved through the apartment in awe, examining everything. Judith possessed very cultivated tastes.

"Is anyone here?" Lacey yelled, coming upon what she assumed were the dining room doors. They were completely closed, just a bit of light splayed from the beneath them.

If there were guests inside, they were very placid. Without hesitation, she placed both hands upon the doors and slid them apart. She stepped inside the dining room and was still for a second; then she raised a hand to her mouth at seeing the guests.

A Styrofoam head sat atop a piece of fine china at each of the elegant place settings. They were all adorned with a different style wig and two human eyes, held on by strait pins.

The blood had congealed around them, giving them a jellied appearance. A massive candelabra was perched in the middle of the oak table, casting shadows against the grotesque faces.

"Aren't they fabulous?" Judith asked, closing the sliding dining room doors behind her.

Lacey whirled around towards her, noticing her garish apparel. Judith was dressed in a bodysuit and black fishnet stockings. A top hat sat upon her head. She looked as if she were prepared to entertain in a chorus line.

"Yes, they are," Lacey said with a slight smile, "but my collection is better."

About the Author:

Nicole L. Nevel is a writer from Western Pennsylvania that enjoys dabbling in the horror and neo-noir genres. She has previously published a short story Closure for Pyrite Press that is in chap-book format where she gave a reading of her work at Chatham University. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with her husband, mother and three cats.

Facebook: [Nicole Nevel Steighner](#)

The Hook | Catherine Kenwell

Dark. Secluded. Tom and Marcia didn't care. Kids had been coming here for years, despite nervous jokes about a serial killer haunting the popular make-out spot. But Tom had decided tonight was the night, and their passion soon steamed the car's windows.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Metal hitting glass. The couple froze. Tom blunted Marcia's scream with his palm.

"Marcia? Are you in there?"

Marcia wiped at the window. In the moonlight, a silver hook glimmered against the glass.

"Dad?"

"Marcia, get out here now!"

"Dad, I..."

Tom plunged the knife into Marcia's heart. Hook-handed serial killers, he laughed. As if.

About the Author:

Catherine Kenwell is a Barrie, Ontario author of horror and inspirational non-fiction. After a 30-year career in corporate communications, Catherine sustained a life-changing brain injury, lost her job, and became a 'real' writer, artist, and qualified mediator. Her work has been published in Trembling with Fear, The Horror Tree, The Toilet Zone, Chicken Soup for the Soul and Brainstorm Revolution.

Facebook: [Catherine Kenwell](#)

Twitter: [@CatKenwell](#)

He was on his way home from happy hour when it started raining. When he first left the bar, he saw the giant dark cloud looming over the sky to smother the light, like a great casket closing over, as distant thunder rumbled across the horizon. He didn't think rain would come so quickly. He tried to hurry home along the barren street, and in his tipsy panic to escape the deluge he found himself standing next to a nameless storefront he did not recognize. The plain window showcased nothing more than a frost of grime and the door was missing. As the rain pelted down and sizzled against the sidewalk, he stepped inside to wait out the storm.

He looked around the deserted store, noting the desolation that filled the murky room. This might have been an intimate little boutique once, but the space now offered only shadows and dust on display, along with a panoply of dusty clothing littered about the ruins.

As his eyes adjusted to the dripping shadows, he saw that this congeries of sartorial flotsam was actually a complete wardrobe, although one that made little sense. A pair of shoes, both of them contorted and singular, sat next to each other with the same sense of belonging as sworn enemies. Off to the side was a pair of gloves with equal coherence—the gloves were of different colors and sizes, with the empty hands possessing fingers that were too many or too few, and some finger lengths that catered only to deformity. Next to it was a slanted shelf off which a misshapen, sarcoline coat hung. It was a long coat that went well past one's knees, and its jagged collars resembled a bruised neck wound. The coat was held closed, but he saw no buttons or zippers along the seams. Near the back, a tattered scarf in carrion shades lay on a dusty shelf like coils of diseased offal after a slaughter, and beneath it a cream-colored hat and a pair of dark pants with a faded twill pattern sat crumpled on the ground.

Curiously he studied this collection. Had they been the remnant merchandise of a store that discarded them when it moved, or were they the statement of some denizen who no longer needed their comfort? Before he could ponder further he suddenly noticed movement from the coat, and he took a step back, fully anticipating an appearance from a rat or whatever critter that called this desolation home.

The coat flung itself open then, and he saw that it was empty underneath. Well, no, not entirely empty—the coat's interior was comprised of moist, crimson flesh, glistening in the dark like the gums of some monstrous, gruesome maw. The vile scent of rotten flesh assaulted his nostrils and he thought he heard high-pitched shrieking emanating from within the obscene folds. Panicked, he stumbled backwards, then felt something wrap around his ankles and yank him off his feet. He felt his head hit the concrete with a dull thud as the sharp, cumin-like scent of dust assaulted his nostrils along with the putrescence.

As he scrambled on the ground he looked down and saw the same dark pants had uncoiled itself from the pile and was now tightly constricted around his legs like a python. The waist opening was spread in a rasping, dripping maw, and bearing the same hellish red tissue inside as the coat. Blindly he gripped the carnivorous pants, intending to pry them off and escape from this insanity, when he saw the rest of the wardrobe come alive. The coat lunged towards him, flapping its cloth wings furiously. The gloves scuttled forward like obscene, misshapen wool crabs, and the scarf had also started to slither off the shelf like a massive worm. He thought about screaming upon witnessing the madness before him, but the wardrobe was faster. His hands were still on the writhing pants as the coat wrapped around his head.

A surge of nausea rose within him as he felt the cloth folds attempt to envelope him in a lukewarm amniotic nightmare. He fought back, struggling and kicking, but the malleable clothing took no damage from his blows as the coat sleeves constricted around his body and the flailing coat pressed itself against his upper body. Amidst a chorus of muffled screams, the moist sheath smothered over his face and he felt as if countless hot towels were wiping vigorously over his cheeks. The thick wads of hot flesh-cloth gripped his head, working to position itself, around his upper body, and he felt exploratory tatters fill his mouth with the flavor of rancid meat. He kept beating at the coat, only to feel it slide against his chest. As he struggled to breathe, he was suddenly aware of the fact that the pants were devouring him, wriggling as they swallowed him up to the waist. There was a deeply unpleasant warmth and rough soggianness as the animated pants ate through the fabric of his shorts and clung onto his skin, covering him up inch by inch. It felt like being slathered with warm oatmeal.

As the pants did their work, so did the coat. Unseen bristles carried his arms into the arms of the coat, accompanied by gurgling noises that reminded him of his toothless uncle when relishing mashed potatoes. His hands were forced into gloves that did not fit. But to his horror he discovered that the hell dimension under the

clothing would make his humanity fit. His dull flesh opened as they were forced into dysmorphic fingers, the bloody blooming of mad flowers. The pain was excruciating. Through his muffled cries he thought he had shed tears, but he wasn't sure.

Flaps of moist flesh constricted around his head, briefly giving him the impression that he would drown. Then the collars shuffled comfortably around his head. The hat sank in deep into his scalp, tight as a shark bite, and the scarf wrapped itself tightly around his neck. Everything was coming into place for his metamorphosis. As he lay on the ground, whimpering in agony, he tried moving his limbs, but it was to no avail. The same clothing that clung onto him also prevented him from making any movements of his own volition. He no longer had to control his limbs, for the painful bondage that gripped him was now driving him. He could only lie on the ground, laboring to breathe under the sweet aroma of rotting meat as his new wardrobe finished reshaping his body to meet its Stygian contours. He felt tendrils reach into him to caress his organs, then blinding pain as some were plucked like fruit while others were modified to service his new anatomy. There was so much at work now in his body: parts being reshaped, modified, replaced, and he could do nothing but to experience his own agonizing transformation into an imago that he couldn't even dare to call his own.

Eventually the changes ceased, and he felt his newfound paradoxical freedom settle into his body. Whatever appetites and desires he previously held were now moot. The strings for the puppet were in place. Encased in his newfound damp velvet exoskeleton, he felt himself carried along as the sartorial construct shuffled him out, into the rain, to explore an open world of carnage and dark miracles.

About the Author:

Gabrian Cui lives in Austin, TX with his wife and their three cats and three snakes. He loves to play with words, although his wife has to frequently remind him to wash his hands after spending time with the dirty ones. He is currently working on his first novel as well as a short story collection.

Author Blog: [Bad Words by Gabriel](#)

Last Stand | *Greg Fewer*

After many hours fighting a horde of warriors raised from the dead by Lord Nuld, I lay back exhausted against the necromancer's tomb. All my men lay slain, each one having joined the undead to fight against us.

One skeletal warrior remained, facing me, armed with a rusty sword and an old battered shield. If it ran at me now I would be too weak to raise my sword in defense. Bracing myself for its final blow, I gasped when it placed its sword and shield at my feet, bowed before me and then collapsed into a pile of bones!

About the Author:

Greg Fewer has had flash fiction published in *Cuento Magazine*, *Page & Spine*, *The Sirens Call*, *Trembling With Fear* and *Workshop*.



5

The virus ravaged his wife, Alana, and his five-year old daughter, Kimberly. It wasn't supposed to attack humans; it was just a simian hemorrhagic fever virus that only bothered those crab-eating macaques, other primates and a bunch of pigs from the Philippines. It must have mutated to a Level-5 pathogen after those radiation tests. Not too many folks had survived the *Ebola* outbreak at the compound.

John Stokowski buried his family—their ashes—under the red oak in the corner of the west field behind his house. He stood there for the longest time, his eyes glazed as if a glass-beaded movie screen played back his memories. You could almost see his mind flash those scenes: To a time when he held her close, her red hair draping over his arms. Her hazel green eyes shut as he kissed her supple lips for the first time under that tree. To a time when he pushed a rope-swing tethered to that same tree—his daughter, in a pink top and purple shorts with yellow butterflies, sailing high. She'd giggle as her shoes scraped the grass. To a time when he hugged them so hard, you could hear his heart cry out.

A raucous murder of crows swirled above his head.

He had spoken to his wife about the risks when he took the assignment at Fort Phelps. He assured her that there were no concerns with the organism he would be working with, but concealed the fact there would be other bugs in the building that were far more dangerous.

As a precaution, he preserved cellular samples of his wife and daughter, and of himself; placed them in cryogenics. However, within two months severe headaches, agitation, confusion, fatigue, depression, and seizures set in. Before the coma. Before their deaths. The doctors never quite understood why he was spared. He often mumbled that he didn't feel like one of the lucky ones.

He immersed himself in work, even though his boss advised him to take time off. The night guards would see him bent over at his desk, feverishly scribbling notes, making calculations well into the night—a half-empty coffee cup on his desk; candy wrappers cluttering the floor.

Carefully, he detailed the notes on the DNA sequencing and gene maps for each of his family and saved them to the relegated five-hundred terabyte solid-state memory devices. He signed and dated them, *Dr. John Stokowski, Fort Phelps: Biological Weapons Unit, Alexandria, VA. July 1, 2054.*

When he finished, he slouched in his chair; his white lab coat, almost gray and wrinkled, stuck out from between the hot leather seat and the armrest. He fell asleep; the sweat beading on his forehead trickled down his cheek and mingled with the salt tracks left there earlier. His dark brown hair disheveled as he dreamt whatever he dreamt—sugarplums or Frankensteins—you could not tell just from the rapid flutter of his eyelids.

It was only forty years after the discovery of the Higgs field—a breakthrough in physics that was supposed to explain everything about the universe. It might even enable space-time travel. Tests on a prototype vessel had shown promising results. Of course, it couldn't come back from its excursion into the future, but it left traces of its journey in other dimensions probed by the new technology. That's what John's friend, Bill Curtis, at the National Academy of Sciences, said in his email.

But for now, it was clear that all he could think about was his family. He clutched the satchel containing the vials with the frozen samples in a protective Dewar containing liquid helium, the ones that he took on the plane with him. He flew to Switzerland to meet with his good friend and colleague on that physics project. It was dangerous to do what he was thinking—what he wrote down in his journal. Time travel into the past is not possible, at least not to the same universe. The *Ebola* virus might not have developed in an alternate universe (or be inconsequential if it did), but maybe it would be worse than the one in this universe. Or the situation might be reversed, and he'd be the infected one.

Bill wrote about that, too, and he was okay with it, except for the fact that his wife and daughter would be left alone. No. He couldn't risk that. He wouldn't risk that. His only recourse was to travel into the future to keep his promise to Alana—that he would never leave her, nor forsake her for another. The vitreous of his eyes glinted with a look of determination, if not obsession. Only the future holds the promise of resurrecting his family—the cloning.

The lilting hum of Boeing 797 jet engines, the white noise of cabin air whooshing through the vents, the distant sun's rays warming his face, and the cirrus clouds flickering by, hypnotized him, just like they would anyone else exhausted from loss. Eminent geneticists were not immune.

John Stokowski fell into dreams; his billfold opened to pictures of his wife and daughter smiling through the plastic sleeves. The way his cheeks dimpled, his thin lips forcing his mustache into a smile, could only mean his deep dreams conjured images of them the way they were—before the virus stole them from him.

He wrestled for comfort in his seat, shifting this way and that, while shadows played hide-n-seek between the seats, on the walls, and on the ceiling of the airplane. They seemed to take form, as if a torso, contorted one moment, then collapsed to some amorphous gray shape the next, only to re-form enlarged and dance across his face. John's restlessness continued. He scratched his ear, harder and harder while he slept, slurring words out loud in his sleep, *Stop. Stop it! Leave me alone. I will not listen to you. I am going to do this.*

Clouds thickened as they wisped by the fuselage; veiled the plane in cottony light. The supersonic jet bounced in the increasing turbulence, waking John from his strange dream. The shadows were gone, but the plane was now totally immersed in clouds.

Bill greeted John in the airport baggage area. "I'm so sorry about Alana and Kimberly."

The carousel jolted into motion. John scanned the conveyor for his blue duffle and a black suitcase stickered with a galaxy of decals.

"Is the pod ready?"

"Yes, but please reconsider; it's far too dangerous."

"No. I must do this now."

The wet streets blurred the neon lights, as if the pulsating reds and greens, the pinks and yellows were dissolving in the asphalt shimmered with oil. The sedan sped to the test facility as if trying to outrace those lights. John looked through the window, through the raindrops quivering there—how they'd coalesce before being windblown into the air stream.

Security fences loomed into view, and the red lights at the gate became brighter. The armed guards stood in the glare. The scientists slowed to a stop; flashed their IDs.

The men then drove to the remote center of the thousand-acre field. A small building housed an elevator that went underground to the accelerator used to create the Higgs field. The Large Hadron Collider built fifty years earlier was used to create a bunch of microscopic black holes, which would then be siphoned into the more massive accelerator encasing the collider. Then the tiny ones would be merged to a still small—stable, but controlled—single black hole—the portal to the Higgs field, where space and time would be manipulated.

The shiny black pod sat on its unusual launch pad in this place on the brink of time.

Bill activated the controls to the accelerator while John prepared himself and the frozen samples for the voyage. The hum of protons accelerating to the speed of light grew louder every second.

All around the perimeter of the time-space ship, an array of electric blue lights flashed on, brightening to a steady glow as the magnetic rings rotated around it. The destination was set for 2250 AD.

Alarm horns sounded—a soft feminine voice—not unlike Alana's, echoed in the launch area, *T-minus five minutes.*

"John, God speed, and good luck, my friend."

"Thank you, Bill. Pray for me." John gripped the controls; his knuckles, white.

T-minus ten seconds and counting... eight... seven... engaging Higgs field.

John shut his eyes and whispered, *Alana.*

Five... four... three... two... one... time launch sequence commenced.

Moments later, red lights and emergency sirens actuated.

The computer, with the same matter-of-fact voice said, *Dr. Curtis, we have a coolant system failure. Main magnets overheating. Recommend immediate abort.*

"Computer, abort, abort!" Dr. Bill Curtis commanded.

Remote robotic sentries toggled switches and pushed buttons to activate emergency systems and mitigate the accident.

Unable to abort. Black hole merging already activated. The ground rumbled, lights flickered, and smoke poured out of the control panels in the launch bay.

"Computer, deploy fire suppression." Bill's eyes dilated with urgency.

After the CO₂-extinguishers quenched the instrument fire, Bill stared at the launch pad and what was left of the pod.

"My God." Bill rushed to it. Parts of it were gone—not blasted-off, but simply gone. The inside, too. Some of the controls remained in the console; others seemed to have disappeared into the ether.

John was gone, too.

The terrain seemed alien with its purple and mutant orange horizon. The rising sun sparked the stirred dust around the approaching vehicle, and the strange spaceship loomed into view of the three scientists inside. They stepped out of the vehicle and cautiously approached the craft.

Warren, the lead scientist scanned the pod, or at least what was left of it, with high-powered sensors for more clues. The cutaway view of its interior revealed a body; he motioned for the doctor.

"It appears human... No heart or brain function. This man is dead."

The third scientist in the team, Elizabeth, investigated another part of the craft; spotted a canister and a logbook. She paged through the book scribbled with familiar equations.

"Warren, Doc, over here. I got an ID." Her eyes remained glued to the book, combing it for more information. "This guy is from the past... and this vessel was a time capsule or whatever's left of it!"

"Let's set up a perimeter. I'll stay with the craft, you and Doc get the body and those things back to the lab," Warren said. "I'll call the World Leader. This traveler's remains just might be able to tell us something of our past that got lost in the Great War a decade ago."

"Roger that."

The journal, brown leather with hardbound paper pages, in and of itself was a rare possession, but the inked notes were invaluable. The team studied the details that Dr. Stokowski entered in the book using a holographic reproduction (to avoid unnecessary handling of the treasured find from the past).

Elizabeth and her team reconfigured her laboratory for the experiment outlined in the notes. The World Leader had authorized it, but a military contingency stood ready, just outside the lab.

The canisters found with the body appeared intact, but sensors indicated that the cryogenic seal had been compromised—the temperature read only -40 C. The logs had indicated the contents were preserved at -268 C, but they proceeded with the thawing instructions anyway and slowly warmed up the samples to +5 C, as directed for the gene remapping.

At the base of the glass containment, the organic mixture emptied from their vials, glistened under the ultraviolet lights; a soupy goo frothed as electric current passed through it. The Lab was highly experienced in doing similar reconstitution procedures from cryogenic conditions; they had done thousands over the last century. It should have been no problem resurrecting these samples.

However, the globs never transformed to familiar human forms. Instead, the froth darkened and metamorphosed to grotesque creatures writhing on the glass. They made a high-pitched sound that grew louder by the moment. The glass containment fractured under what sounded like agonizing screams. One of the creatures escaped as the military squad torched the other two.

The one that got away, its cry was almost human; through its anguish and hiss, one could almost hear it say over and over again, *A-lan-a, A-lan-a*.

I hid until I could find the ancient machine. The one that sent me here. I must go back and warn him... me.

About the Author:

John C. Mannone, a Horror Writers Association Scholarship winner (2017), edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex*, *Silver Blade*, and *Liquid Imagination*. He's also a winner of the Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature (2017) and served as celebrity judge for NFSPS (2018). His work appears in *Artemis Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pedestal*, and others. He's a retired professor of physics living near Knoxville, TN.

Author Blog: [John C. Mannone: The Art of Poetry](#)

What was that?

Everett Stead glanced furtively over his shoulder as he heard a rustle behind him.

Nothing.

He forced himself to relax. His imagination was getting the best of him. For days now, he'd had the eerie sensation of being watched, certain someone was following him though he couldn't prove it.

No one lurked outside his flat. No faces seen too many times to be a coincidence.

His paranoia started the evening he picked that toff's pocket. The gent stumbled out of an alley and blundered right into him, practically begging to be robbed.

Ev obliged.

He didn't wonder what a gentleman was doing in a darkened alley. From the cut of his suit, he was well-off, so Ev figured he'd been getting a piece. Since Ev hadn't had any in quite a while, he'd taken the hand-tooled leather bill case out of spite, relieving Mr. Alexander Kuprin of five hundred quid in cash, his driver's permit and a certain black-hued credit card.

The last was more than he expected.

In the coming weeks, with the expertise of a career-hacker, he put the information he already had and what he could find on Mr. Kuprin to good use. Ev was an identity thief, one of the best, never caught and never even suspected. He stole information, used it to his advantage, then dropped it and went on to bigger and better prey.

That was why he'd never been caught.

Until now.

Somehow he must have slipped up because he couldn't shake the certainty of someone on his trail.

Maybe it was a good time to use his *own* credit card and take a trip to nations with no extradition to the UK.

He never got the chance.

As he walked past yet another alley, hands reached out, encircled his neck and jerked him into the darkness.

"Got you now, Kuprin!"

Fear sent adrenaline splashing through him. He flung his attacker over his head, dashing him against the wall, but the man recovered and whirled, raising something defensively.

A stake? No!

Ev had a single moment of scalding terror as it descended...

"Finally." The thief's murderer sighed as he looked at his companion who'd stood by, watching the entire episode.

"Get his head off, set the body on fire, and Lexei Kuprin'll be the history he should've been five hundred years ago."

The deed was accomplished with the swiftness of experts. Afterward, they strolled onto the thoroughfare, blending into the crowd. It would be several minutes before anyone saw flames or smoke and they'd be long gone by then.

Someone *had* noticed, however. He'd been following Everett Stead for a fortnight, since he realized his wallet had been lifted. When he saw the others shadowing the thief, he simply stood back to let nature take its course.

Gliding like a shadow into the alley, he viewed the damage, allowing himself gloating satisfaction as he watched the body burn, its severed head a flaming briquette a few feet away.

"Serves you right, you little bastard, for stealing a vampire's identity."

Hurrying to keep his appointment with the expert forger even then preparing his new papers, Mr. Alexander Kuprin left the alley, wafting into mist and blending with London's fog.

About the Author:

A writer of French Huguenot extraction, one of Tony-Paul de Vissage's first movie memories is of being six years old, viewing the old Universal horror flick, *Dracula's Daughter* on television, and being scared sleepless—and he's now paying back his very permissive parents by writing about vampires.

Facebook: [Tony-Paul de Vissage](#)

Twitter: [@tpvissage](#)

Inspector Wilkes pulls in behind another police car. He struggles out and limps towards the two officers in front of the victim's car. They stop talking.

He looks into their faces: pale. Too fresh to have seen things like this. A good learning day.

The driver's door lies open. He spies the red mess splattered behind the car. The stench of a violent death darkens this desolate road on this fair morning. The buzz of flies feast on the silence.

"So what have we here then?" he says.

"It's . . . It's horrible, Inspector," one of them says.

He eyes a puddle of vomit that didn't quite make it to the side of the road. He points at it.

"One of you two, I assume?"

The younger one nods.

"The engine was still running but I killed it. The forensics team are on their way," the other officer says.

"You shouldn't have touched anything. Let's have a look," Inspector Wilkes says.

They bow their heads. They don't follow.

Red puddles of flesh desecrate the road behind the car. Another half-step, half-drag brings a hand into view. Another step will reveal the hand's owner.

But it doesn't.

The hand lies on its back, alone. It clutches the air, frightened to let go, not knowing the fight was lost.

He peers around the car.

Red for anger. The flies feast on more than silence.

Limbs. A torso. The remains of the victim's clothes sags around them.

He spies a hairy ball cowering under the arm that surrendered its hand.

A head.

Its dark hair is dishevelled, glistening with bodily fluids. The lips are pulled back: the echo of agony.

Maybe male.

His eyes widen at the wounds. The stumps on the torso where the limbs once were: they're not clean cuts. The bone ends are jagged; uneven muscle fibres are hanging out.

A sharp weapon was not used. The victim was pulled to pieces like a toy figure. What kind of person, or animal, could have the strength to do that?

Karl lost the race against the sky: it had fallen dark an hour before.

He had driven there once before at a happier time. It is in an isolated area somewhere just northwest of Alnwick. He had no address; his sat nav had taken him as far as it could. He had passed Alnwick and was now hoping a road sign would light up a dark corner of his memory.

Hard times.

But Karl was trying to make the best use of his time, trying to think of what he was going to say when he got there.

This won't be easy. But there's always a way. I can do this. I can make it work.

His phone's face lit up in front of the gear stick again: Sarah.

Karl ignored it. She tried to call him that many times he already had his phone on silent.

Yet she kept trying.

I really like her and would love to be with her now.

But I should do this.

The streetlights had now been left behind; the road markings had disappeared. His headlights fought a lonely battle against the countryside darkness.

He turned a corner. Lights shone in the blackness ahead: a house.

His heart raised. He would know the house: a white bungalow with a well-kept garden with lots of flowers.

This was a white bungalow.

He slowed down. Then he realized the house was too long and the garden was too plain.

Damn!

He stamped on the throttle and tore on ahead back into nothingness. Soon he stopped and pulled his handbrake up, nearly snapping the cable. He poked the sat nav, wishing it was a detonator for blowing up the bungalow he had just passed. He zoomed out and stared at the surrounding area.

Nothing but snaky roads swallowing deeper into nowhere.

His phone lit up again.

This whole mess is her fault. Both her and my phone that's laughing in my face right now. If only Rachael didn't know my passcode. Then she wouldn't know about Sarah and everything would be okay. And I wouldn't be stuck out here in the back-arse of nowhere trying to find her. But Rachael will take me back – she always does.

Karl sighed. He knew Rachael's parents' house was somewhere around here . . .

A roaring engine scrambled his thoughts. He could see headlights cutting through the trees in his mirror. The cuts were quick and clean; the car was moving fast and getting louder.

Karl checked there was enough space on this narrow road for the car to pass. He tried to focus on the sat nav.

Two headlights thundered around the corner and aimed straight at Karl; they burned his eyes from his mirror. The car roared. It flew past the bungalow.

He expected the scorching lights to pull out to pass.

But they didn't.

This maniac better be careful. If he doesn't slow down he'll smash right into my arse.

The car was locked onto a track Karl was sitting on. There was no escape.

Eight seconds to impact.

He glanced in the mirror.

Seven . . .

Too late to move.

Six . . .

His thoughts were roadkill.

Five . . .

He tensed up.

Four . . .

He closed his eyes.

Three . . .

Oh shhh . . .

The squeal of worn brakes arrowed through the car, through Karl. Tarmac burned rubber. He braced to be thrown forward.

The screeching and skidding disappeared. The attacking engine's battle cry silenced. A chug-chugging still dominated the whimper of his own engine.

He opened his eyes and fixed them on the mirror, staring at the dark windscreen behind him. The car had stopped less than a foot behind his own.

His muscles softened. He let the breath escape him. He swallowed his heart back down. He strained at the mirror to see the face behind the wheel.

There was only blackness.

He spun around to let the other driver read the fury on his face.

The fury dissolved.

He could see the bungalow lights some distance back. The red from his back lights filtered through the air behind his car, through where the other car should've been.

What the . . .

He twisted his head back to his mirror: the dark windscreen was still there. He looked out of his rear window again: nothing.

Yet he could hear its old engine spluttering.

He turned and stared at his mirror, stared at the dark windscreen.

This is weird. I'm getting out of here.

He dropped his handbrake and rolled away, still staring at his mirror. The other car stayed still. He took his eyes off the mirror when the other car's headlights came back into view. He realized his own car should've been all lit up inside by those headlights.

He pressed the accelerator, afraid of waking the sleeping beast.

It still sat there.

He pulled the gear stick into second. He loosened his grip on the steering wheel as the distance grew.

Suddenly the other car jumped to life, screaming.

Karl stamped on the accelerator. He was about to go up a gear, but then he realized it was pointless: the other car was right behind him.

How did it . . .

He stopped accelerating. He figured the other car covered a hundred metres in three seconds.

That's impossible. From stationary as well . . .

He slowed down, defeated. He pulled over and hoped the other car kept going, vanishing out of his life forever. But it pulled in behind him.

Karl stared at his mirror at the windscreen behind him. He peered back over his shoulder.

Nothing.

My mind is playing tricks on me. There is nothing there. I can see that. I hear only one engine, not two. I'm alone here. I'll get out and check quickly. I'll see I'm wasting time. Stress is a horrible thing.

Karl avoided looking at his mirrors. He released his seatbelt and opened his door a crack; cold air pushed in.

I hear only my engine.

He pushed his door open.

Wasting time.

He climbed out. He peered behind his car: nothing. He took one step. Then another. One more.

It does sound like there's another car right here though . . .

An opening car door shook the air. An invisible foot landed on the road. Then another.

Karl started to back away; something grabbed him by the throat.

He tried to fight off the unseen force. But his hands could only grasp air.

Something gripped his bicep. It tore his arm off.

Karl's screams shattered through the darkness, echoed through the fields. Snapping, ripping, and splattering silenced those screams.

Karl's engine chugged through the night.

About the Author:

Ian Blackwell has been living in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England, for the last eight years. He enjoys travelling, experiencing new cultures, and different ways of thinking. A stray cat chose him as his human and he inherited a sheep skull called Bernard who has the final say in the most important matters.

Author Blog: [Ian Blackwell](#)

Twitter: [@ianblackwell27](#)

Listen | Catherine Kenwell

"Have a heart," she cried. "Think of someone other than yourself for once."

"But darling, I love you," he replied, laughing. "You're just so beautiful, I could eat you up."

Despite her protests, he laid her on the bed and kissed her.

"Please," she cried. "No. You're a narcissist. I don't believe you can love anyone that much!"

"Let me show you, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear. "You must believe me."

Plunging a knife into her chest, he reached in and pulled out her still-beating heart. "See, darling? You said, 'have a heart'. So don't say I never listen."

About the Author:

Catherine Kenwell is a Barrie, Ontario author of horror and inspirational non-fiction. After a 30-year career in corporate communications, Catherine sustained a life-changing brain injury, lost her job, and became a 'real' writer, artist, and qualified mediator. Her work has been published in Trembling with Fear, The Horror Tree, The Toilet Zone, Chicken Soup for the Soul and Brainstorm Revolution.

Facebook: [Catherine Kenwell](#)

Twitter: [@CatKenwell](#)

It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

"You there. Yes, you. Come in. Don't be shy. I saw you look at my display. Whatever you need, whatever you wish. I have it, I'm sure. No, don't turn away. Something caught your eye. Let's look together. There's nothing to fear. No, nothing at all...

"Ah, inside at last. Welcome to my Nightmare Shoppe. I am the proprietor, chief headhunter, and purveyor of the world's finest terrors. I sell only the best, the worst, the absolute scariest.

"I'm here to serve you. What's your nightmare? Shopping for yourself, maybe an enemy? Or perhaps a gift for the old friends and family?

"Pardon the shadows, do ignore the gloom. My dear horrors—they perish in sunlight, you know. Mind that cobweb; the spiders won't bite. But I can't guarantee anything else won't... Only joking, I'm sure.

"Feel free to wander. Just don't step on that skull! The loose teeth make a dreadful mess, you know.

"Relax! You're pale as a corpse. No need to tremble. What could possibly harm you here in my dear Nightmare Shoppe?

"I'll show you around. Here, in this case, we have 'lost in the dark with spiders and snakes.' Over there, we have 'falling without waking.' Terrific quality. On that shelf, we have 'sudden blindness.' Very nice, very fine.

"Oh ho! I see your gaze. You want something more, something darker indeed! Over here, I have 'dangerous pursuit' and 'inability to move.' No? What about 'hungry predator outside?' Excellent vintage.

"But, no, those won't do. You want more. You're a tough customer to please. I can see that quite clear. Well, I'm up for the challenge, my dear.

"Follow me this way. I keep the best in the back. Come past the curtain. That's it. Now just down these stairs. Take care. They get mighty slick. Do watch your step; that liquid might stain your shoes.

"Don't mind the smell. I'm not certain what it is, but all's per usual and well. Nothing to fear. No, nothing at all.

"Eh? What's that? Turn on the lights? Sorry, I can't. The bulb's been broken for many a-year. Meant to replace it, just never did. Never mind. The *shadows* won't hurt you. After all, dark is only the absence of light. Just follow my voice. Trust me; I'll be your guide. All's perfectly well. Perfectly well indeed.

"Not too much further. Just through this door. Ah, smell them! My finest supplies. I keep the best, the worst, the vilest right down here. Aged for centuries, there're bad dreams here you wouldn't believe! An accumulation of humanity's greatest fears. Worth *dying* to see. What are you waiting for? Come take a peek. Just a bit closer. What can it hurt?

"NO—! Stop! Where are you going? You can't leave! The fun's only begun. I have so much to show. You'll never know that you're missing— I mean, *what* you're missing!

"Damn! Another one gone. But never to worry. Someone else will find my web. They always do.

"Ah, someone like you. Yes, hello there. How are you, good sir? Welcome to my Nightmare Shoppe. Come in, please do. Sometimes I don't bite..."

About the Author:

Tim O'Neal graduated from UC Berkeley. He is currently pursuing a dual Master's degree in nutrition science and exercise physiology at San Diego State University. He has sold one previous short story to the horror anthology *Kill Switch* published by horroraddicts.net.

Amazon Author Page: [Tim O'Neal](#)

He kept the eyeball on his nightstand next to the bed. It floated in formaldehyde, in a Mason Ball jar, the kind that Mother used when she made her homemade bread and butter pickles. The object in the glass caught his eye. He chuckled at his joke. Kenneth turned the jar in his hand the eye floated bobbing up and down circling the glass cylinder when the thought occurred to him. He started to play a game similar to the Magic 8 Ball.

"Will I get my comic book today?" he asked, shaking the jar. The eye floated up in the jar looking down. "Outlook doubtful." Kenneth sighed as he placed the jar on the nightstand. The Magic Eyeball was very limited in answers. He bored of it quickly. He got off the bed and checked between the mattress and box spring. He was searching in his new hiding place where he kept his magazines and drawings. Mother wouldn't look if she knew what was best for her. Kenneth was a grown man but still a child in many ways. He was out of school but didn't have a job. He had no friends except for the guy down at the comic bookstore who was more than happy to take his allowance every week for the weird comic books. It appealed to him to have a comic book that was for adults. When he turned eighteen, Ricky, the owner of the comic bookstore, opened the door for adult eyes only and invited Kenneth in. He couldn't get enough of them. Someday, Kenneth was going to be an adult comic book artist. He pulled out the magazine. He was looking closely at how each frame was set up and the detail of blood and gore. It made him feel so alive. It made him want to explore things he could only imagine. He'd had a busy couple of months with the ideas they gave him. He needed to find out firsthand how things worked to be a good artist.

Kenneth could hear his Mother in the kitchen; she would be calling him for dinner soon. Though still mad at her, he'd have stayed in his room and ignored her if he hadn't been so hungry. His Mother found the books and drawings that were for his eyes only. Mother knew she shouldn't look! Kenneth suspected she went into his room as soon as he left for the day. He'd gone to the Cosmic Comic Book Store because his allowance was burning a hole in his pocket. The latest Crash and Slash Comic was out today. Kenneth suspected his Mother used that time to come into his room. Kenneth knew she'd gone in his room because he'd put a hair on the door. Whenever he came home, if the hair was in place, no one had violated his bedroom. The hair wasn't in place. It was on the floor when he got home. The only way that would have happened was if Mother disobeyed him. Mother said she hadn't gone in his room, but Kenneth didn't believe her.

Sometimes Mother could get a little preachy. "You! You! You!" she'd say pointing her bony finger at him her tongue wagging. That drove him nuts. It was hard to love and hate a person at the same time. Mother took care of all of his needs, but she was never satisfied with him, the way he was. It was her fault. She made him this way. If she'd been a nicer person, perhaps Father would have stayed around. But Mother nagged Father all the time too. Kenneth's father walked out the door one day, never coming back. Not a phone call or even a card. Kenneth didn't understand that. He opened the drawer at his bedside it was almost too painful to see Benny's collar with a rabies tag. Benny ran across the street, being hit by a car. He remembered Benny getting flattened like a pancake while Kenneth stood in his yard screaming for the dog to come back from the other side of the road.

Benny didn't feel much; it was a quick and merciful death. By the time Kenneth got over to his dog, Benny was dead. His mother let Benny out before she put on his leash. Kenneth blamed Mother for Benny's death. How could she be so careless? Benny was an old dog, and he was deaf and blind in one eye. He couldn't hear the car coming. But Mother opened the door and out Benny scooted thinking he was safe, only he wasn't. It was soon after Benny's flattening that his father left, not to take away the worst reason for the week. Kenneth had a sister. Annabelle, she was two when she died. Kenneth was supposed to watch her in the bathtub. The green fish with the yellow belly floated around the tub. It was very comical. Kenny wanted to empty the water the fish had taken on as it was starting to sink in the tub. Annabelle screamed when he picked up the fish.

"Annabelle, look I am emptying the water, so the fish doesn't sink," Kenneth said in a higher animated voice. His two-year-old sister only saw him take her floaty fish and hollered.

"Shhh, Annabelle!" Kenneth put the fish back into the water but not quick enough to avoid mothers scolding. She came into the bathroom, telling Kenneth not to touch anything in the bathtub and leave his sister alone. He was there to watch her and only that. She pinched Kenneth's cheek when she told him this. He was humiliated. He tried to explain to his mother; he was emptying the fish so it wouldn't sink; she didn't care to listen walking out of the bathroom. Kenneth sat on the toilet, glaring at his sister. Life was much better without her. He always had to watch her while his parents were busy. All she did was cry and have temper tantrums. Kenneth did as his mother told him to. Nothing. Annabelle stood up. She knew she wasn't supposed to stand in the tub, but she did it anyway. Kenneth said nothing. Annabelle slipped and fell. Her head went underwater. Kenneth did as his mother said, nothing. He watched as she tried

to sit up, but her head was too big for her body. It didn't take long one minute she was trying to sit up, the next she relaxed and floated in the tub. Mother came to get Annabelle and screamed when she saw her in the tub. She tried mouth to mouth, but it was too late for poor Annabelle. Of course, his parents blamed him. It wasn't his job to take care of their kid. He was to watch his sister and not touch her. It was what Kenneth did. Now he was in trouble for doing what his mother told him to do. There was never pleasing his parents.

At nineteen, he could still feel the pain of that wretched week. As a boy, Kenneth lost his sister, his dog, and his father all in a week. It was all her fault. He threw the collar back into the nightstand easing his 234-pound, six-foot frame off the bed. He went about straightening the skulls of the dead animals on his shelves. They were all road kills, just like Benny. He pulled their carcasses off the roadside and buried them in the yard waiting months to dig them up again. By that time, the beetles and bugs had done their job, leaving him a clean skeleton to display. He painted them with a high grade of hydrogen peroxide that bleached the skulls naturally, producing a beautiful intricate display. He could tell where the bones met, how the eyes fit in the sockets. It was fascinating to him. He couldn't display Benny though. No, not with his crushed skull. He had to stop thinking about it. The whole incident made him angry all over again, even thirteen years later.

The clock in his room showed 5 o'clock. Dinner was always served at 5:30 p.m. Kenneth smelled a mouth-watering smell emanating from the kitchen, his stomach growled. He was drawn to leave his room in search of supper, but he didn't want to talk to his mother. Not yet. He pulled some of his etchings out from between the mattress. He thought they were lifelike, though quite gory. There was one where a guy was taking an eyeball out with a spoon. The whole page complete with shadowing and color. It was a step by step instruction manual if someone needed to know how to do such a thing. The next page was instructions on how to remove fingers. He showed where the joints were and how to make a clean cut. This one was detailed but not as good as the eyeball one, that was his favorite. Another showed a tongue being pulled out and cut off. The secret was to leave enough so that the person would be able to talk and swallow so that they wouldn't die. They would have a functional lisp, but they'd survive that kind of procedure. It was never his intention to kill anyone. He only wanted to know how things worked. He didn't touch his sister; he watched her drown. He didn't kill Benny. Mother sealed the dog's fate when she let Benny out. Mother made Kenneth watch Annabelle in the tub, saying not to touch her. His mother drove off his father after that lousy week. At least he hoped she drove him off. He often wondered if maybe she had done something to his father so he couldn't come back. She was that cold and calculating of a woman. After his sister and his father departed, Mother took everything out on Kenneth. It was all his fault; everything wrong in their lives was Kenneth's doing. She locked him up in his room, never allowing him to play with anyone after school. She made his life a living hell, all because he did what she told him to do. Kenneth took out the color pencils and started to fill in his drawings. He pressed hard to get the best color possible. The vivid details came to life beneath his touch. He had hoped to talk to Ricky at the comic books store to see where he would go to submit his work. He would finish this book and bring copies down to Ricky. He could then leave his mother's house, and he would be on his own without her nagging at him all the time. It used to be much worse. Kenneth started to grow and get bigger, Mother went to push him back one day, and he didn't move. Surprise caused her to widen her eyes. Mother pushed him harder the next time. Kenneth resisted her with all his strength. There was a moment of reckoning at that point when Mother realized she could no longer push Kenneth around. He remembered the look in her eyes, almost a panicked look. Kenneth stared at her, saying nothing, and then slowly, an evil smile crept across his face. He didn't know when this change happened, but he remembered with clarity when he realized he had the upper hand in this relationship. Mother tried to be kinder, but it was too late. She never took the time to negotiate with him. She merely pushed him around like he was the green and yellow fish in the bathtub. Not anymore. Kenneth heard the grandfather clock in hallway chiming the half hour. It was five thirty. Supper would be ready soon. Closing the bedroom door behind him, Kenneth followed his nose to the kitchen. He hoped she was making his favorite today. Meatloaf, baked potatoes, creamed peas with pearled onions, and buttered biscuits. He came into the kitchen.

"Smells good Mother, what's for dinner?" Startled by her son's sudden appearance, his mother turned around with fear in her eye.

"Me wof." She replied as she put the measuring cup down with her good hand because the other was missing an index finger.

About the Author:

Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband, Red, two rat terriers, and a cat. She has discovered her love of telling a good story, can be written. You will find her work in several online magazines and anthologies.

I know this road. I've never been here before, but I know it. It's burned into my brain like an ornate design on wood. There's a dirt road maybe twenty miles ahead, and just past it, there's a forgotten cemetery, hidden away behind pines and a rusting fence that touches the sky. Through that cemetery, there's a river. They say that in the 1800s, the river flooded and corpses washed ashore. Since history is bound to repeat itself, the same happened just last year.

It's late; I'm tired and sticky. The A.C. stopped working at the county line. I thought that as the sun dropped lower in the sky, it wouldn't be so sweltering, but any minute I'll turn into a puddle. Summer is dreadful. Especially going *out* during the summer! I've said it a thousand times and I'll say it again, - I'd much rather stay home in my cozy apartment with a bowl of ice cream. But this year is special, so I'm making a longer trek than ever. My sister is getting married in two days. Of course, the whole family was so wrapped up in those plans that everyone forgot my graduation. Everyone. Even a congratulatory card would've sufficed, but apparently weddings are more important than graduation. I'm happy for her though. Really.

The lines are getting blurry and hard to see in the dark. Street lamps are far and few between. The road twists and turns, up and down; like a rollercoaster. Nobody's out except for me. Even I don't want to be. The last hotel was a good hour ago and it doesn't pay to go back. I'm not even sure if I have enough gas to make it. Surely, there has to be a gas station up ahead. Maybe on one of the million side roads.

I stop at an unexpected red light, reaching some sort of civilization. There's a sign that advertises a restaurant, gas station, and a hotel in another 30 miles. As I let out a tired sigh of relief at a sign of refuge, a large van pulls up behind me. Came out of nowhere, really. When the light turns green, I drive on; the van tails me. They swerve from one side of the road to the other. Probably drunk. Wonderful. I better be extra careful. I need to make my sister's wedding in one piece.

They pass me on a double yellow. It doesn't really matter, though. Nobody else is out. In the blink of an eye, they're gone, and my journey continues on down the winding country road. I try to make out the time on my clock, but the glowing number is just a blur. I think it must be 3:00, though. The sky shows no hint of a sunrise.

I put my music up louder to keep me awake and sing along terribly. My voice cracks with fatigue, but I'll do whatever I can to keep my eyes from drooping for the next 28 miles. It's then that the van appears behind me again. Is it a different van, maybe? Same color. Same make. It's a Ford, for sure. I recognize the insignia. After another 4 miles of tailing me, despite my steady speed, they turn down a small street.

I'm just exhausted, on edge for nothing. It's paranoia. Glitch in the Matrix. How many times have I seen the same car pass over and over? I want so desperately to pull over and rest, but I'll suffocate. The heat is unrelenting. One sip of water almost hot enough to burn on its way down offers little to quench my thirst, but at least it's hydration. I just hope I don't need a bathroom in the next 20 miles.

The van is back! It can't be coincidence. Is there another road I can take? The map is in the glove box and my hands are too shaky to reach for it. Anyway, I can't read a map and drive, and pulling over probably isn't a good idea. Still, I keep a steady pace, follow the speed limit, keep my eyes on the road ahead. *Oh god, are they going to hit me?! I give them room to pass, and they're gone in an instant.*

10 miles to go, and headlights are creeping up behind me again. There's an inch between our bumpers, it seems. Where are the police when you need them? Why do they only pull you over for stupid shit? Two inches, now. Three inches. A foot. A car length. They're slowing down! I'm too tired for these games. Oh, good. They're turning. Yes. Go home. Go somewhere. Go anywhere but here! Just go away! Thank you, *God!*

Crack! Jolt! Thud! I face-plant into the steering wheel as my car collides with the guardrail. My music is still blaring, but now it's hurting my head. Somehow, despite this, I can still hear footsteps approaching. When they stop, my door opens. I'm heaved out of my dinky car and stars fly past me. I feel like I'm falling forever before finally landing on something soft.

The low thrum of an engine vibrates me to the core. Tiny clunks on metal pierce my ears. It could be pebbles against the hubcaps, but I could be wrong. My head is *throbbing*. A pin drop on a pillow in *space* right now would be too loud! I just want to sleep, or scream. My stomach is knotted with fear. I want to go home to my apartment and my bowl of ice cream. I don't *want* to go halfway across the country for a wedding. My sister will be just as happy without me there.

Iron gates touch the sky. I want to touch the sky, too. Will the stars welcome me home? The dirt beneath me burns my skin as it tears it away. I try to run, but there's a vice grip on my ankle. I flip and squirm and dig my fingers deep into the Earth, clawing my way to freedom. To my soft bed and plush sheets.

With the world upright again, I see headstones. I reach for one, but a heavy boot smashes my fingers against a marble marker. My scream is loud enough to wake the dead. If only. Loud enough to catch in my throat, but not loud enough for a hero to rise up from the ground and whisk me away.

I hear water. Rushing water. Splashing and rustling. Crickets are chirping in the distance! I haven't heard crickets in years. It would've lulled me to sleep in any other situation. But the pain is too strong. It's in my leg. My shoulder. Oh *god*, in my stomach! *Why?!*

I can *taste* the gates in my mouth; iron, rust and dirt. I cough, scream and sob. I claw at soft, moist grass, flinging chunks of Earth at my shadowy attacker. Sweat drips into my eyes and it burns so terribly. Or is it blood? Maybe both. Why is the *moon* so scorching? My skin is aflame. I beg for an end. For a reason. For comfort.

After a million years under white hot flame, I'm cold. Finally cold. Wet. Floating. Floating to the stars and the moon. To the crickets and my sister and my bed. To last summer at the swimming pool, when I met her fiancé. To my graduation. My crappy part-time job at the video store. My bowl of ice cream; mint chocolate chip is the best on scorching summer nights. To my soft bed and fluffy pillows.

A hit and run, they called it. They decided there were no casualties, since no body was found. Maybe one day, when the river floods again and the corpses wash up, they'll realize how wrong they were. Until then, I have to take this same miserable trip on a road I know but have never before been on, for a wedding I'll never attend. She stops by with her husband and children every summer, laying flowers where there's a dent in the guardrail. She's coming today. It's their anniversary. They've been married for twenty years now. If only I could congratulate them.

About the Author:

Rory is an artist, photographer, and writer from upstate New York. He has a knack for all things creative and finds comfort in darker themes. He ran an LGBTQ+ eZine and hopes to find more support with it in the future. In 2017, he wrote a short play performed by HVSF actors, and is now making it full-length. He is currently studying German, French, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian, and Russian.

Author Blog: [Ethereal Spectrum - Rory Roche](#)

Twitter: [@RRartphoto](#)

Suspicious Minds | K. T. Tate

I shouldn't have followed her. My wife likes night walking in the woods. It keeps her happy. And that was ok until I noticed that her shoes were never muddy.

I followed her deep into that forest. She went barefoot yet I was still curious.

I hid as she lit torches, danced and chanted in an unknown tongue. Hot urine ran down my leg as it approached. Inhuman, it's many eyes unblinking, tendrils forming and reaching. I watched that eldritch abomination embrace its priestess.

I ran.

I tried to forget.

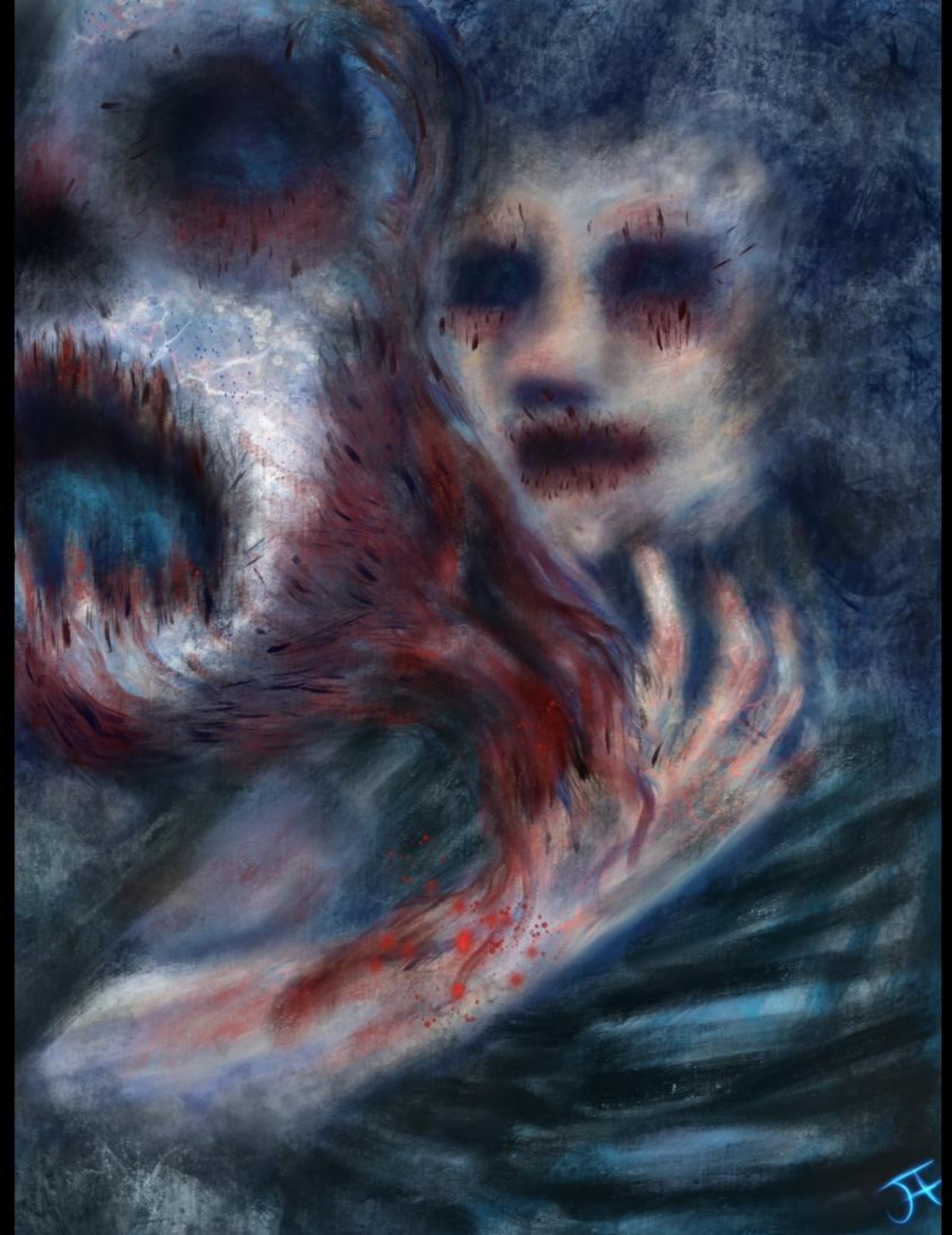
Weeks later and my suspicion grows, along with her belly.

About the Author:

K. T. Tate is an author and artist from Cambridgeshire, UK. She enjoys writing weird tales, cosmic horror and stories from the monster's point of view. Often featured in anthologies she primarily writes drabbles, microfiction and short stories.

Author Blog: [Eldritch Hollow](#)

Author Blog: [Eldritch Hollow](#)



Things hide in the shadows. Nameless things. Ageless things. Maddening things. Things without form. Things that should not (nor ever) be. It was these things that have plagued man since the dawn of time. Before that the things were there, knowing (with inhuman intelligence and knowledge as old as existence) that they would still be there long after man had left the reality of now, the immense reality that man formed a very tiny cog of. There is the Truth that man was not the only thing in the vast existence of the now, before and after.

It is this knowledge that man should not be aware of, and it is most unfortunate when the curious, unwary and incautious mind delves into the unfathomable depths of the unlearnt and the best left unknown.

The wind howled like a banshee in heat as it fled through the empty streets in search of any kind of solace. The thick pea-soup fog swirled and bubbled as it churned in chaotic madness. Eddies of discarded newspapers danced in an insane sporadic spasm like a troupe of demented ballerinas. A distant thunder drum-roll grumbled like the death throes of an ancient predatory beast.

The click-clack of boots echoed through the not so empty night. The lustful wind tugged at the lengths of black body-hugging jeggings and swirled around smooth, toned legs. The lone figure tugged at her caramel suede jacket in vain attempts to fight off the hungry cold that cut through to the bone. Her fiery red hair shimmered like a halo of scarlet in the dense fog. She looked almost ethereal. Almost out of place here, alone, in the dark and not so empty night. She held tightly onto her ruck-sack. Things tumbled and jumbled inside. Heavy things. Deadly things. She knew what she was doing here. She knew her duty. She stalked the empty streets and knew that they were not as empty as they seemed. She knew that the world was not as empty as it seemed. She knew of the things that stalked the edges of sanity and normality. She knew that there existed dreadful and cruel and malicious things. Things that cared only to rid of the vermin of man. And it was her duty to stop them from achieving their dreadful goal.

She stopped under a flickering streetlight, whose dim spear of light vainly attempted to stab at the growing thick blanket of darkness, and looked skyward. Just below the broiling thunderheads of bruised purple and black was the sickly yellow light of a half-open window. She bit her scarlet bottom lip and sucked in a breath of frustration. She shook her head and sighed. *Why do people not just simply leave well enough alone? Why do people insist dabbling in things they do not understand? Why do they make an already difficult job near impossible?* She thought in angered frustration. She shook her head for a final time and began climbing up the fire-escape and up toward the almost open window. Kaitlyn hated this part. She knew what she would probably have to do. She both hated and loved her job because it gave her both purpose and vengeance. She knew what she had to do and she hated (loved) it.

James poured over the musty tome. It had arrived mysteriously yesterday on his desk. It arrived as if it was sent to him. As if it was meant for him. He touched the leathery cover and shivered at its warmth. He had expected it to feel cold and dead but instead, it felt like it thrummed, as if it vibrated. It felt soft to the touch and warm, almost as if it was...alive. He recalled how he chuckled to himself at the ridiculous thought. Alive? How could a book be alive? But, at the same time, he knew it to be a sort of infallible truth. The book was alive, and it possessed an alien knowledge that it craved, yearned, desired, to share to James.

James poured over the faded pages. Even though much of the copper-coloured writing had faded over the decades (centuries)(millennia) he found it easy to make out the symbols. When he had started to read the book's contents he found it difficult to read. It felt like the symbols pulsed with a vitality that was beyond reason. It was almost as if the symbols slid off the pages defying and refusing to be read by mortal intelligence. The sheer effort of looking at them gave James a headache and made his nose bleed. What he failed to notice was, with every drop of blood the yellowed pages soaked up with a century-old thirst and, with every drop, the text became more and more clear and easier to 'read'.

James knew that he should have left the book in the safe confines of the museum archives but he felt an urge within to take the book home with him. He felt compelled to smuggle it past security and take it home with him to his small apartment on the 7th floor. He felt the need to further dive into the pages and decipher the hidden secrets written within the mysterious tome. It barely even bothered him that, when he looked at the cover at a certain angle, it looked like the face of some inhuman entity screaming in a silent howl of agony. All he knew was that he needed to decipher the contents of this most (un)holy tome. He felt what there was that needed to be let loose upon the world. He knew that there was an indomitable truth that needed to be released. Something ancient and awesome and terrible that needed to be shared.

The symbols had stopped vibrating a few hours back and started to sing their truth to him. He felt his joy and worship bubble within him much like the pale crimson froth that was forming at the corners of his mouth. The more his eyes danced over the pages the more the indecipherable secrets became clear answers. The more he read the more came. He felt the air get thick with truth and answers. He felt the edges of the present reality slowly peel away revealing the truth beneath, like blood and sinew that is revealed by the slow flaying of decaying skin. The more he scoured over the knowledge the more silent tentacles wrapped themselves around him and used him as an anchor to pull themselves out of their onyx black sanctuaries. He began to laugh maniacally as countless truisms slithered out from slimy cryptic orifices. He felt his sanity replaced by demented veracity.

Kaitlyn had reached the half-open window. She crinkled her nose as an odious odor assaulted her senses. She felt the coils of the unholy stench entwine her sanity and writhe at the edges of her soul in a direct attempt at corrupting her from within. She knew the feeling at once for what it was and it reviled her. She had felt this on many occasions. It was the unspeakable (she could not say evil because this predated such archaic concepts as Good and Evil) that should remain buried and unspoken. She recalled the first time she had felt such a presence. It was back when she was still naive to the 'truth' that there were things older than man and far more malicious and vindictive. She shivered at the memory and her arm stung where she was first touched by such a malignant entity. It was as if her body recognized the virulent malignancy. It was as if her body had formed a protective allergy against such a thing.

She felt bile of disgust churned in the stomach and the acidic horridness slowly rise up. She swallowed it back and steeled herself forward. She peered into the feeble incandescent glow emanating from beyond the glass of the window. Was it her imagination or was the glass...flowing? It seemed to be melting ever so slowly. Or pulsating. Or oozing. She grimaced against the thought knowing, deep down, that it was not her imagination. It was the walls of our reality slowly melting away revealing an otherworldly existence that flowed and ebbed just beyond our perception. She zipped open her bag and pulled out a silvered long blade. Runes of fiery blue cavorted over the surface in the frozen dance of eternity. She felt its power thrum in the oozing dark. She slid the window open wider and eased inside. She gasped as an affront of perceived reality smacked her hard in the chest. It felt like a torrent of water had slammed into her and knocked the wind out of her. She backed up against the force and crashed into the wall behind her. The wall buckled in a melted marshmallow way and cushioned what would have been a powerful blow. She clenched her eyes shut against the assault on her sanity as tendrils and claws and maws bit and scratched at her. She felt as if a multitude of crawling and clawing and biting creatures swarmed over her skin and past her shut lips and down her throat and up her nose and into her ears. She felt as they scurried towards her brain in a hungry attempt at devouring her mind. She coughed up a slough of thick scarlet bile staining her lips a sickly glossy red. She took in a deep breath and wheezed against the putridness of the unreality that was unfurling just beyond. She knew what this was and she was determined to face it.

She slowly rose from her glass-cut knees, feeling the warm blood sting her skin as it bled from beneath her smooth pale skin. She lifted her head and began to open her eyes. They stung as if the air itself had turned noxious. They felt dry and scratchy and as if thousands of flies were writhing over the viscous of her eyes. She forced them open to look upon what she knew she would see. There, just a few steps away, floating above a man on his knees, was a thing that could only be defined as a luminous jellyfish that glowed in unearthly purples and greens and blues. The light that radiated off its slick and slimy form seemed to swallow all other light around it. It seemed to be swallowing our reality that attempted, in vain, to expel this thing from our world. The entities' tentacles writhed and squirmed and wrapped its sinuous form around the man who was bleeding from his eyes and ears and nose. Thick red and white bubbles frothed out of his mouth. She knew he was long gone as she saw his eyes (and internal organs) liquify along with what remained of his sanity. She knew he was lost as she saw him turn his deformed face that looked more like a pool of melted wax than that of a face. She knew that he was no more as he looked at her and...smiled.

She raised her sword and frowned with the effort as she surged towards the two. He smiled at her and the bag of vile ooze screamed in defiance as her quicksilver blade sang through the thick and corrupt non-reality filled air and impacted on the man's neck. She could have sworn, in those trickle slow seconds, he mouthed the words "thank you..."

In those final moments, as James felt the last remnants of his soul and sanity get sucked away like the fluid that was bubbling out of his lungs, he felt a sense of relief. He vaguely saw the angel with a halo of fire swing the blade and slice through the air towards his exposed neck. He barely made out the cool impact of the glass slender blade that seemed sharp enough to cut through the curtain of reality and the veil of time. He scarcely recognized the warm embrace of death as his head parted from his withered body and the torrent of what was left of his organs slop out. He

only just made out the otherworldly shriek of the thing he had inadvertently summoned into our world. He could just barely feel as the thing lost its purchase on our world as the world beyond (its world) sucked it back screaming and shrieking painfully like that of a blood-engorged leech is wretched free from its host. In those last fading moments, shortly before his world faded into the velvet blackness of death, he could make out the return of our blessed reality and the evacuation of the dreadful truth of beyond. He began to feel cold as that ancient and awful truism began to ebb away and fade back to the otherness from which it had been imprisoned. He felt the last traces of what was left of his soul (and sanity) recede much like his life-blood trickle out of his decapitated body. As the light began to dwindle he saw the beautiful warrior angel stand over him and shake her head in judgment. He wanted to tell his savior that it was not his fault. He wanted to convince her that he had not chosen this outcome. But all that escaped his pallid lips was the expulsion of his last breath.

Kaitlyn looked down at the mess that was once, presumably, a handsome man. She shook her head and thought to herself *"Why can't I meet a normal guy? And why can't I meet that guy under normal circumstances? Gawds, I hate my job sometimes!"* She recalled thinking these things as she kicked the lifeless corpse in judgement before picking up the now closed, book. She examined it in interested disgust. How many more copies of this thing are still out there she wondered and how many would she have to 'save' people from before she had gotten them all. She flipped through the pages. Like all the others that she had squirmed away, the pages were blank to her. It was as if some alien intelligence secreted the accursed knowledge so that she could not use its tools as a weapon against them. She shrugged and let out a sigh that was a mix of revulsion and exhaustion as she shoved the (un)holy tome into her bag before taking one more look at the wretched thing that was once what could have been an attractive man and shook her head.

"Gawds! Sometimes, just sometimes, I hate my job!" Kaitlyn muttered before slipping out the window and into the all enveloping-night vanishing into the inky blackness as quickly and mysteriously as she had arrived.

About the Author:

Logan Fourie is a 38 year old high school English teacher in South Africa. He has always enjoyed writing poetry and stories and particularly enjoys macabre and gothic subject matter. He draws a lot of his inspiration from the likes of H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe.

Author Blog: [Wondering Bard](#)

Twitter: [@Wonderingbard](#)

The Killer Griller Barbecue Blues | Michael D. Davis

It was the annual neighborhood barbecue. This year the family and I were hosting it which is both an honor and a horror. I frankly have never hosted anything in my life, but what's so hard about it. A few decorations, some booze, some good food, a laugh or two and it's a great day.

It's even easier than you think because though I grill, the neighbors supply the food. Not the little stuff like the chips and the dips, but the meat. This year it was a horrid neighbor named Dave. He cooked up fine over the old grill.

About the Author:

Michael D. Davis was born and raised in a small town in the heart of Iowa. Having written over thirty short stories, ranging in genre from comedy to horror from flash fiction to novella he continues in his accursed pursuit of a career in the written word.

There is a wonderful comfort knowing you have someone with you in life. The shared moments build into cherished memories. Affections deepen, real intimacy develops and burrows into your being, thus creating a terrific mess of intimate pleasures.

When living exclusively inside one room, save for particular needs in the bathroom and kitchen, a whole universe can be constructed, as long as your precious roommate is present to assist the creation of heaven in a small space.

I enjoy one such roomie, who is an absolute blessing! And life is clean, neat, and fulfilling.

In between bouts of happiness, I have read how the mind organizes a measure of revolt against a confined existence; but I have learned I have no capacity to invite such negativity.

I awake every day to endless welcomes. And my moments are rewarded with conversational bliss. How could anyone lead a charge against such a positive arrangement?

There are times I wonder if my pleasure might be multiplied among others.

Well, to that, my roomie has promised there are many who await me.

My skin tingles with exaltations of joy with the very possibility!

While I wait, I preen myself by my only window ~ a mirror.

From time to time, my roomie whispers into my ears, mentioning the mirror is the way to others. And I'm listening with great excitement.

Today, I am asked to peer into my mirror, deeper than before.

My eyes widen.

What am I to discover?

The heat of light appears in the center of the reflective glass. And within it many pairs of eyes sparkle bright. There is a soft moving whiteness on their faces, a frothing appears vaguely upon their lips and in varying degrees of vivid eagerness. Their gnashing teeth create bright -sounding clicks, like tiny heartbeats. My future friends breathe with irregular rhythms, which crescendos into various high pitched psalms of glorious anticipation. Their tiny claws rattle, eager to offer rabid affections.

I hold the mirror edges hard, nearly injuring my fingers. Beads of fresh perspiration collect upon my brow, tickling my skin and tempting me to brush it all away.

"Will I be joining them?" I ask my roomie.

My stare holds firm.

Moments pass. My breathing is now rapid and uneven.

I move my eyes and meet with my roomie's loving stare. My head is gently turned and my gaze drops into the center spectacle of my mirror.

My roomie whispers, "Here they come."

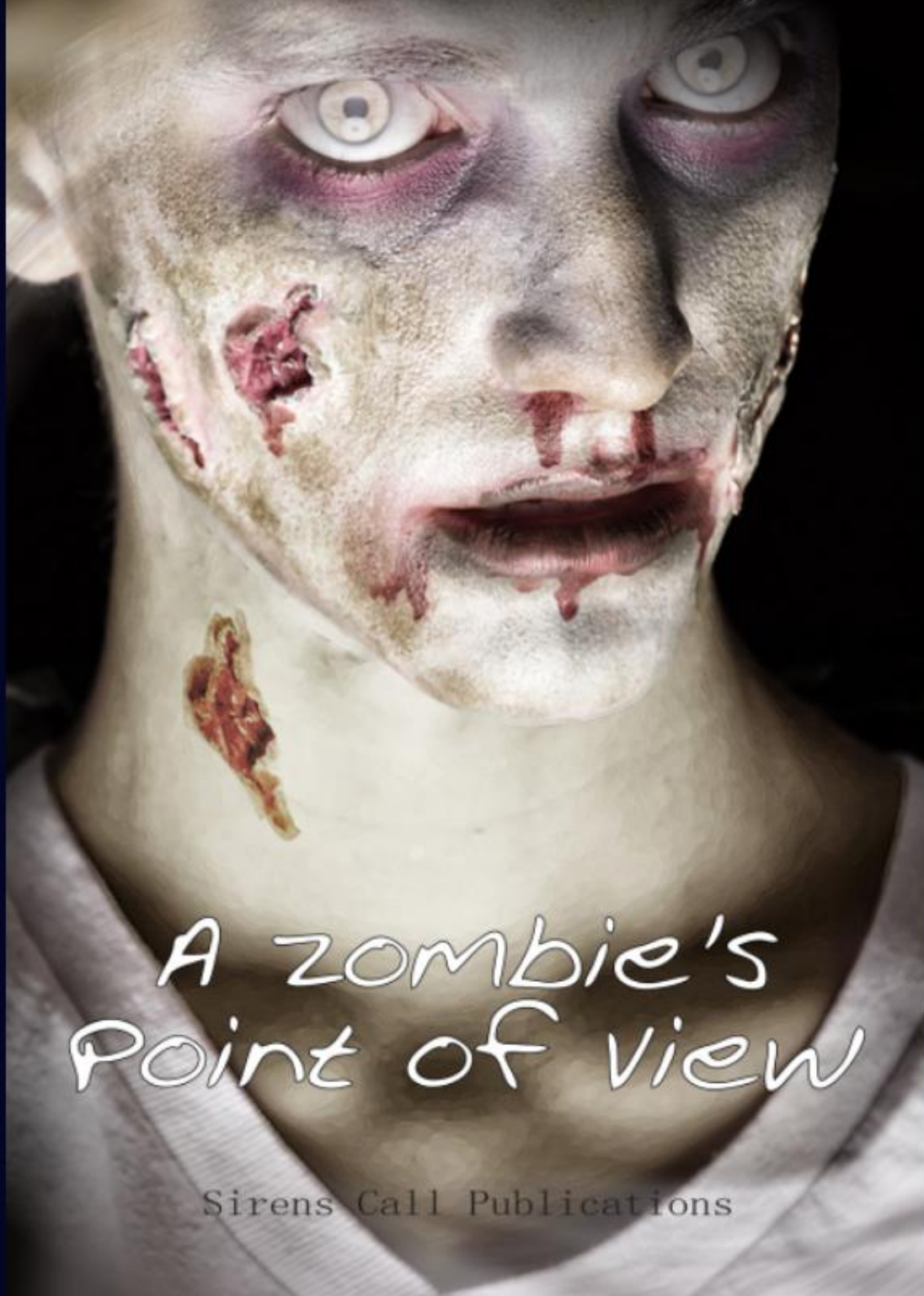
About the Author:

Bill Bistak (a.k.a BDScott, pen name) is a gothic horror author hailing from Toronto, Ontario, Canada (originally born in Ohio, USA). Having spent a half a century studying human behavior in various health professional roles, he stays up late, casting new word permutations, plots and characters into storied glory.

Author Blog: [Best Short Horror](#)

Twitter: [@BDScott7](#)

Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's
Point of view

Sirens Call Publications

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Don't move. Stay calm. I'll be okay.

I'm not okay. I can't feel my arms. I can't feel my legs. And it's hard to stay calm when I'm pivoting between a life of mobility and life as a quadriplegic. With my knowledge of spinal injuries, I know the balance could tip either way. Immediate first aid is vital. Time to treatment is crucial. The odds are stacked against me, but I'm not one to give up on a life, especially mine.

The torrential rain floods my face. I breathe between spitting water from my mouth and listen for any sound from my friends. Did they hear me yell when the edge of the embankment collapsed? Or did the thunder mute my voice? It won't take them long to realize I'm missing, but at the speed the river rises, I could drown before they find me. Water already laps at my boots.

"Jim? Where are you?"

"I'm down here! Help!" It's a pitiful plea but I don't dare yell louder. Any exertion on my larynx could place pressure on the vertebrae in my neck and I don't know what damage I've done.

The light from Harry's torch finds my face. "He's down here! Jim, are you okay?"

"I can't feel my legs."

"I'm coming down. Mike, get me a rope."

Mike appears at his side. "No, go around. This whole bank could collapse."

Harry shines his torch across the bank, illuminating the rock I hit. The soil around it has washed away. If the boulder falls, it will roll on top of me.

"Just hold on," Harry says.

By the time they reach me, water covers my legs. Harry crouches at my head. Rainwater drips onto my face from his hat.

"Oh, Christ, Jim," he says. "Can you feel anything?"

"Nothing below my neck."

"Might just be a dislocated disk," Mike says.

"Let's hope so."

Harry glances at the river. "An ambulance won't get through if the campsite crossing floods."

"We'll have to transport him out," Mike says.

"We can't do that," Harry says. "One bump and he's buggered."

"So long as you don't twist my body, I'll be fine," I say. "Get something to brace my neck. And something hard to carry me on." I glance at the rock. "Hurry."

Mike runs back to the campsite. Harry remains by my side. His expression is a concern. As doctors, we all know the life and death knife-edge, but knowing and being on it are two different things. Mike appears to be coping, but Harry has a feverish look in his eye. He's one step from panic, which is a surprise. Extreme stress in any profession can cause a sane man to behave irrationally, but I didn't expect it from him.

"Harry? Are you okay?"

His eyes snap to mine. "Yeah. Sure. I'm fine."

"I'll be okay, Harry. Just do as I say."

Mike returns carrying an armful of towels, the snatch strap, and the lower section of the back seat from his Land Cruiser. In the time he was gone, the river has risen to my knees.

"We'll be stuck on this side of the river for sure," Harry says.

"The ambulance will radio a helicopter," I say, using my years of practiced calmness for his benefit. "It will be fine."

Mike scoops at the mud and pushes the seat into the ground so the hard backing is level with my body. Then he crouches at my side. "This is your area of expertise," he says. "What's the best way to stabilize you?"

"Roll the towels long ways and then fold them in half and put one on either side of my neck. Place another towel under my chin. Use your belt to secure them."

Harry's hands shake as he helps Mike position the towels. No wonder he's a general practitioner. With nerves like his, he'd never make it as a surgeon. When they finish, I give the next instruction.

"Now roll me onto the seat. Both of you place your hands so my whole body moves at the same time."

"Are you sure about this?" Harry asks.

"Who's the neurosurgeon here?" I don't mean to snap, but his inability to keep calm is wearing thin. I sigh, and force the calm back into my voice. "Just don't twist my body."

Harry places his hands on my head and shoulders. Mike grabs my lower back and legs.

"Ready?" Mike says. "One, two, three, roll."

Mud fills my nostrils and rocks scrape my face, but then I'm facing upwards again, my back flat on the seat. I snort water from my nose. "Wrap the snatch strap around my body and the seat. Make it as tight as you can."

Mike handles the strap. Harry rolls back on his heels and watches, his eyes wide. I try not to feel too disappointed in him. The most he does is treat children's colds or give vaccinations. He's not accustomed to this level of trauma.

"You're secure," Mike says. "Harry, help me lift him."

Harry grabs hold of the seat near my head. His hands still shake.

Please don't drop me.

"One, two, three, lift," Mike says.

Water drips from Harry's hat into my eyes. I can't wipe it away. I can't even roll my head. All I can do is close my eyes and pray Harry doesn't lose his grip.

As I'm carried away from the river, I become acutely aware of how helpless I am. There's something terrifying about placing my life in another person's hands. It's a relief to reach the campsite and be lowered safely to the ground.

Harry starts tossing the camping gear out of the back of the cruiser. His unnecessary use of force bothers me. I try to get Mike's attention but he's on the phone to the ambulance and his back is to me.

Harry returns to my side. "Car's ready," he says, crouching beside me. "Hang in there. You're doing great."

Harry appears calmer. Perhaps the practicality of unloading the camping gear helped. "Put the sleeping bags back inside. They'll make good cushioning."

"Good idea," says Harry.

Mike returns and crouches at my head. "Ambulance is on its way." He frowns then wipes the rain from my eyes. "Harry should have lent you his hat."

"He's doing his best."

Mike looks at Harry, who fusses with the sleeping bags. "Harry, help me lift Jim into the car."

I'm lifted again and slid into the car. Harry cushions my head with sleeping bags and then sits next to me. Even though he appears to have regained control, I'm glad Mike is the driver. He eases the car into gear and drives slowly down the track. None of us speaks. It's hard to hear anyway with the rain pelting on the roof. I concentrate on the movement of the vehicle. The track we drove in on is rough, but Mike is doing a great job keeping the wheels to the center so there's minimal jolting.

"How far is it to the crossing?" Harry asks.

"About twenty minutes," Mike says.

"It will be flooded for sure."

Neither I nor Mike reply.

I'm jolted from my thoughts when headlights from another car light up the cabin. Then a horn blares. Mike swears. Our car rolls to the left and then drops back down. Harry reaches out to steady me, but his hand hits the sleeping bag instead.

"You all right back there?" Mike asks.

I sigh in relief. I'm so tightly bound, I didn't move an inch.

"Yeah," Harry says. "What happened?"

"Another vehicle. Came in too fast from a side track. I cut him off. I couldn't risk stopping so fast."

Harry squints through the back window. "What's this fool doing?"

"What's happening?" I ask.

"The other car. He's right on our tail."

"I probably pissed him off," Mike says.

Harry snorts. "He can just deal with it."

The horn blares again. The headlights blaze through the windows.

"Let him pass," Harry says.

"I can't," Mike says. "The track's too narrow."

"Put your hazards on, then."

A blinking orange glow lights up the back window. But the headlights get brighter.

"He'll run us off the road the way he's driving," Harry says.

"We're nearly at the crossing," says Mike. "The road is wider there. I'll pull over so they can pass."

The car tilts on the downward slope causing the sleeping bag to roll onto my face. I can't see. The fabric covers my mouth. There's a thud against the cruiser and the bag rolls to the side of my head. Harry is glaring out the window, his hand pressed against the glass. Mike curses. A cold blast of wind rushes into the cabin.

"We're carrying a patient," Mike yells out his window.

Return abuse carries on the wind through the window. Then there's a smash and glass tinkles. A loud scrape of metal against metal makes the cruiser shudder.

Harry grips a handhold above his head. "What's he trying to do? Kill us?"

"Hold on!" Mike shouts.

There's a bang and then a sickening crunch of metal. The cruiser stalls. Harry falls onto the seat. His arm squashes the sleeping bag against my ear.

"Are you all right?" Harry asks, pulling the bag away. "Did you move? Did anything move?"

"No, no, I'm fine. What happened?"

"Hit a tree," says Mike. "Everyone wait here."

Harry peers anxiously through the windows. I can't hear the other car. With the spotlight gone, we're in darkness. Mike's gone a long time but then the back door opens and he leans in, breathing hard.

"The fool's run off the road. He missed the turn onto the crossing. Vehicles half in the river and there's blood everywhere. Where's the first aid kit?"

"Bloody idiot," Harry snarls. "Toss him in the drink is what I say."

I look at him, shocked. "Harry, we have to help him."

His eyes widen. "He ran us off the road."

"Doesn't matter. He needs help."

"What he needs is a lobotomy. Bloody road-rager. Bet it's not the first time he's run someone off the road."

"Harry. Think about what you're saying. We're doctors. It wouldn't matter if he was a murderer. We do whatever we can to help."

"Yeah? And while we help him, who helps you? He's not a top surgeon. He's probably just some dumb-ass welfare bludger."

"Whoever he is, his need for medical assistance might be greater than mine. You know how triage works. At least go and see."

Harry pulls a first aid kit from a side compartment and then climbs from the car. "Get the car going," he says to Mike. "I'll tend to the patient."

I don't like his tone. Mike gives me a worried look then returns to the driver's seat. As he tries to start the engine, a chill creeps over my face. Am I going into shock, or is the chill caused by Harry's behavior? My outcome is still on a pivot, but at least I'll hold true to my oath. Will Harry?

The engine roars to life. Mike backs up the car and then continues down the track. The car stops and then Harry climbs into the back. His clothes are soaked. His hands are covered in blood.

My eyes widen. "Where's the driver?"

He tosses the first aid kit at my feet and slams the door closed. "He's beyond help."

About the Author:

Pauline Yates writes speculative fiction, dabbles in horror, has a weakness for comedy, and seeks stories for the soul. Her growing list of publications includes short stories with Metaphorosis, Abyss & Apex, and Beta Noire. She lives in Australia, prefers a lonely beach, and is proud of her green thumb.

Facebook: [Pauline Yates](#)
Twitter: [@midnightmuser1](#)

Fear, Sadness, and the Horror of Pain

When we think of pain, our first thought is often the physical feeling of hurt – a scratch, a scrape, perhaps a cut if we’re having a particularly bad day. Pain in horror is often associated with this. While the horror of pain usually comes from how visceral the wounds are, there is also much to be frightened by in terms of the psychological torment the victim goes through.

These torments, while horrifying, are not ordinary. There are people, though, who feel some sort of pain every day – one that is rooted in the mind. It is heavy on the heart and acidic to the stomach. Memories of times we were wronged, a collection of insults that march through the lines of our brain like ants in an ant farm. It creates a pain that lingers, and while it is not as bloody or visceral as a wound from a weapon, it’s one that can create its own sense of horror.

We are familiar with horror where characters snap after being provoked. We’re also familiar with stories of mental torture. I consider these in the extreme as well, as most of us will never be captured by someone like Jigsaw or be placed in impossible choice situations.

Where I see horror is in the lingering effects – the build-up that leads to the outburst, and the residue that stays behind afterward. Sometimes there’s no outburst at all – just a festering wound one carries in their heart that takes over their mind until they become a walking testament to pain. When pain is a part of you, as opposed to a wound that can heal, it’s something that can’t necessarily be fixed – and that, to me, is scarier.

Too often we associate this pain solely with sadness. Yes, sadness is a part of it, but feeling sad or feeling sorry for someone is not the same as feeling scared for them. I do believe, though, that one can feel both, like the two-toned orbs in Riley’s mind at the end of *Inside Out* (if anyone from Pixar is reading this, I’d like to make a request for a horror-themed spinoff featuring Fear and Sadness). I also believe that a story with both at once – with a slight edge given to fear – is an incredibly effective horror tale.

These are the stories I like to read, watch, and write. When I start a story, I usually start with the typical disruption: a murder, an attack, even something as simple as an argument. From there, I get to know the character by writing about them. As their lives and their minds open up to me, I find that what lurks beneath their circumstances is what’s truly horrifying. I’m scared or frightened by an action, but it’s the lingering, persistent darkness that unsettles me and stays in my heart. Stories like that are what grab my attention, and it’s those stories that I aim to write.

When we consider pain in horror, we should consider all the ways it can manifest – and worse, the ways it can persist. Our pain cannot always be remedied by words, chants, traps, or a final kill – not when it’s a part of us, and not when it’s a part of us that adapts to the ways we try to expel it.

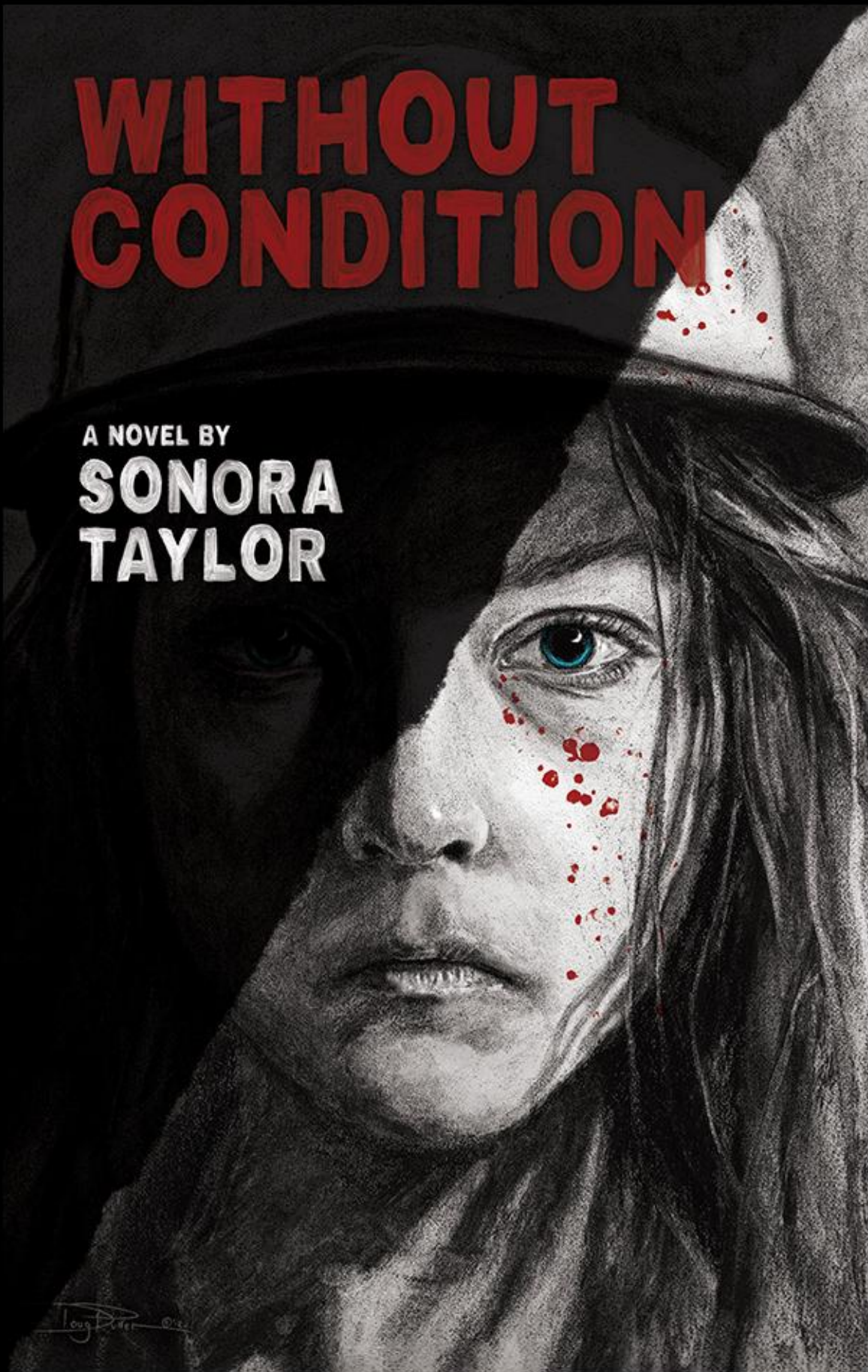


Facebook: [Sonora Taylor](#)

Twitter: [@sonorawrites](#)

WITHOUT CONDITION

A NOVEL BY
**SONORA
TAYLOR**



Available on Amazon

Chapter 1

January 2004

Darren saw his breath in the moonlight as he walked down the road. Branches sliced through the night sky, bare branches that wouldn't be visible save for the light of the moon. There were no street lamps, no homes with softly-lit porches. There were only trees, the moon, and a darkened road.

He cursed to himself as he walked. He should've asked that trucker to drop him off near Raleigh or Durham, somewhere closer to civilization. "I can take you as far as Leslie," the trucker had said with a drawl that Darren recognized as distinctly Carolinian, one that lingered on every vowel in every word. "That good by you?"

"Sure," Darren had said, grateful for any ride. He'd been stuck in Rocky Mount for hours. He'd gotten there from Richmond, which he'd gotten to from Spotsylvania, hitching the entire way. His truck wasn't working – it'd been a piece of shit even before the brake lines had been cut – and he was in too much of a hurry to wait for repairs. He had to get to wherever his girlfriend Polly had disappeared to.

It seemed, though, that Darren was doomed to disappear in Leslie, North Carolina. He regretted agreeing to the trucker's route the minute he'd driven away and left a dark, empty road behind him – one that Darren now had to walk along. Throughout his journey, he thought he heard more cars than actually appeared. The ghosts of rides he wouldn't take. The one sound that culminated into a car produced not a ride, but a slick speedster that drove right past his outstretched thumb. Darren dragged his feet, and wondered when the dark road would end.

Another phantom settled in his ears. Darren kept walking, knowing by now that no cars were coming.

The phantom honked. Darren turned and saw headlights coming near him. He jumped to the side, then gathered his senses as an honest-to-god pickup truck drove by him. "Wait!" he shouted, waving instead of sticking out his thumb. "Stop!"

The pickup slowed. Darren picked up speed. "Hold on!" he yelled, in case the driver decided to change his mind.

The pickup stopped. Darren skidded to a stop half a foot away, and pivoted so he wouldn't collide against the back. He ran to the passenger side and opened the door before the driver could leave. "You going to Raleigh?" he asked, his words coming out in gasps illumined by the cold moonlight.

"I could be," replied the woman in the driver's seat.

Darren gasped as he sat down in the truck. The seat felt like ice. He looked down and saw that it was covered in plastic.

"Sorry about the seats," the woman said as she started up the truck. "I make beer deliveries, and the plastic keeps the beer off of them."

"The bottles don't do that?"

"Not when they break."

"Gotcha." The seat began to warm beneath his body. He leaned back and sighed, enjoying the warmth of the truck and his view of the driver. He could tell she was pretty even in the dark, and could tell she was pretty beyond the bare minimum of being a woman in his vicinity. She wore a baseball cap, and long blonde hair spilled from beneath of it, ending at her shoulders. It glowed white in the moonlight. Her breasts peeked out from behind her arms as she drove. They were small enough to fit in one's palm, but big enough to want to grasp them in the first place.

"So, you live in Raleigh?" the woman asked.

Darren tried not to sigh at his peace being disrupted. Women always had to end the magic by opening their mouths. "No," he said. "Just wanna stay there overnight."

"Why not drive?"

"Truck doesn't work."

"Did you leave it in Leslie?"

"No." Darren let slip a little impatience in the hopes she'd get the hint and stop speaking. Polly always talked too much. She talked so much that he could still hear her voice in his ears when he fell asleep.

The woman turned down a road that was somehow darker than the one Darren had been walking on. "This the way to Raleigh?" Darren asked.

"It's a shortcut," she replied.

"How do you get to the city through the woods?"

"Trust me. I've lived here my whole life."

"Well, I may not be from here, but I know the woods aren't where you go when you want to get to the city."

The woods cleared and Darren saw an illuminated road, one with signs pointing to the highway.

"Well, with everything you know, maybe you should learn to trust your driver," the woman said.

Darren pressed his lips as she chuckled to herself. She was mouthy and she thought she was cute. Darren knew he could tell her otherwise, but he didn't want to be abandoned in the middle of the woods when he was so close to a city, close to a good motel and maybe a truck stop with a truck going all the way to South Carolina. He didn't know if Polly was there, but her parents were. It was a start.

"I'll trust you more when you get me to my destination," Darren would be damned if he let the driver get the upper hand.

"I'll get you where you need to go. I always do."

"Always do? You run a bus service or something?"

"You're not my first hitchhiker, and you won't be my last."

"You sure you should be picking up hitchhikers?"

"You sure you should be hitchhiking?"

"I can take care of myself. But you ... well, all alone out here, I'd be worried about picking up strangers."

"Are you saying I should worry about you?"

"Of course not. I won't hurt you."

"Good to know."

Darren smiled at her, even though her eyes stayed forward. He wondered what color her eyes were. "You always this mouthy with hitchhikers?" he asked.

"You always ask drivers this many questions?"

"I do when they're beautiful women."

He saw her smile in the reflection of the windshield. While he stared at her reflection, her hand moved to his cock. Darren couldn't hide his gasp, even though he tried.

"You want me to pull over?" she asked.

Luck shined on Darren the way the moonlight shone through the tree branches. The branches threw shadowed fragments over the seat of the car, moving like fingers in an orgy that reached towards their bodies. Darren barely noticed them as the driver stopped the truck in the woods. He unbuckled his belt and moved towards her. She had a mouth on her, but she was too cute to turn down. Polly could live another day without him.

The woman placed her hand on his chest. Darren wondered why she wanted to stop what she'd been so willing to start before. She unbuckled her belt and moved towards him. The plastic seat covers had one nice effect: they allowed her to slide towards him, let her slink to his side of the truck and pour over him as she straddled his lap. She took off her hat, then grabbed his and put it on.

"What's your name?" she asked as she stroked his beard.

"Darren," he whispered. "What's yours?"

"Does it matter?"

"I mean, you asked mine —"

She kissed him hard and slid her tongue in his mouth. Darren closed his eyes and relished it. "What do you want?" she asked as she pulled away from him.

He grabbed her waist and pulled her closer. "I want to fuck you," he said.

"Tell me what you think of me," the driver whispered. She traced her lips across his neck as she spoke.

"I think you're hot," he croaked. Words became harder to say as his erection grew.

"You think I shouldn't have picked you up?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said I shouldn't be picking up strangers. You think I'm doing something stupid?"

Darren wasn't sure where this was going, but he wanted to make sure it didn't go to a place that left him with blue balls. "I don't think that anymore," he said as he ran his hands over her ass. It was firm and taut beneath his palms. He began to ache for her.

"You thought it before?"

"I never thought it. I was just looking out for you."

"Tell me what you thought before." She ran her tongue from his neck to his ear, and Darren groaned. "I want to hear it."

Darren wondered if this was some weird kink of hers. He'd play along if it meant getting laid. "I thought you didn't know where you were going," he said. "When we were in the woods and getting further from the road."

"You thought I was stupid?"

"I thought you didn't know where to go. I thought you'd get us lost."

"What'd you think when I grabbed your cock?"

"I liked it." He moved his hand to between her thighs. She gasped a little, but with pleasure. It was so uninhibited, so unbridled. It turned him on even more. "It made me want to fuck you."

She unzipped her purse, likely looking for a condom. Darren glanced over, but before he could see, she began to nibble his earlobe. He closed his eyes and groaned.

"You liked that I wanted to fuck you?" she whispered.

"Oh, yeah."

"You liked that your driver ended up being a whore?"

"Yes." She seemed to want to hear it, and Darren would say anything to get his first good lay in weeks.

"Tell me that. Whisper it in my ear."

Darren leaned close to her ear and made sure his lips were wet before he spoke. He thought of Polly, who'd thought she could just run away when she was done with him. He thought of Polly cutting his brakes and riding on some bus to wherever she'd gone, thinking she was safe. He thought of what Polly's face would look like when he finally caught up with her and showed her that she couldn't live without him – he'd make sure of it.

"You're a fucking whore," he breathed.

His whisper became a yelp as she yanked back his hair. "What –"

Searing pain spread across his neck. Darren tried to scream, but his voice curdled in his throat. He touched his neck, and knew before he saw the blood all over his fingers that it had been cut.

He looked in horror at the driver. She smiled as she held a bloodied knife in her hand. The last thing he saw in the moonlight was her eyes. They were blue.

Chapter 2

Cara smoked by the fire. All around her were black branches illumined in moonlight and the flickers of the flames. She breathed in cedar smoke and breathed out tobacco. She was used to fires – used to setting them, used to sitting by their warmth, and used to watching them die under a cold night sky. There wasn't much to keep her warm this far away from the city. Cara didn't mind living so far away. Her town was quiet, so quiet that the crack of the fire was sometimes indistinguishable from a gunshot. Cara preferred the woods at night, especially in the fall. The hunters preferred the morning. Cara preferred to avoid their fire.

Behind her fire, a small lake glistened in the moonlight. Its waters were still, the body rolled into it already a memory. Cara didn't pay it any mind. She knew no one fished there, or skipped rocks along its surface. It was a quiet lake, a cold grave that was easier to dig than mounds of earth. When she was little, Cara used to think the lake held monsters. She'd glance over the surface, looking for signs of the bottom. Now, at 22, she knew there were no monsters above or below the lake – only bones that wouldn't be found. Not if she had anything to do with it.

Cara sighed and flicked her cigarette into the fire. It was growing cold, and the smell of smoke couldn't stop the stench of Darren's blood from emanating off of her skin. She extinguished the fire with a bucket of water she pulled from the lake, then spread the muddied ashes into the dirt and grass. She adjusted his baseball cap on her head, then walked towards her truck. It was time to go home.

Cara lived on a former pumpkin farm, remote even by Leslie's standards. It sat at the end of a dirt road, her only neighbors trees, deer, and a slew of possums that she and her mother worked to keep off of their property. Cara and her mother had lived there her whole life, and both of them worked away from the land. Cara worked for a brewery, and her mother was a secretary at an office just outside of Garner.

Cara hoped her mother had had a long day, one that sent her to bed early, as she walked up their gravel driveway. She studied the windows. They seemed dark, but that didn't mean her mother wasn't home. Delores Vineyard wasn't one to waste electricity – if she wasn't in the room, that room would remain dark.

The stench and the stickiness of the blood were growing unbearable, and it was too cold to wash herself in the lake where she'd dumped the body. Cara decided to chance the dark, and walked inside. She'd walked the carpeted floors and wooden steps so many times that she knew that path even without turning on the lights. The house was quiet, and Cara smiled as she ascended the last step. She was alone. She could keep the workings of her evening a secret.

"Cara?"

Cara paused in the hallway. A small beam of light shone from under her mother's door. She was home. There was no avoiding her.

She could at least try, though. "I'm going to take a shower, Mom," Cara said as she sped towards the bathroom.

It was no use. "You're home awfully late," Delores said as she exited her bedroom. She wore a pink bathrobe, a tattered Harlequin novel in her hand. "Were you making more deliveries?"

"Yes, and I just got home, and need to –"

"Is that blood?"

Cara stopped outside her bathroom door. Delores moved towards her and turned on the hall light. Cara's evening was laid bare. She stood in the hall, her shoes clean and her jeans mostly clean, save for some dirt. She'd rinsed her hands in the water when she'd dumped the hitchhiker's body, but smears of blood still adorned her chest and neck. And there was the hat, which Delores knew had never been hers.

Delores stared at Cara, her mouth slightly agape. Cara looked at her feet.

"Is this ... is this what I think it is?"

Cara looked up at her mother. She took a breath, and nodded.

Delores smiled. "I'm so proud of you."

"Mom ..." Cara rolled her eyes as Delores moved towards her.

"You got another one!" Delores said.

"Can I please take a shower?"

"So what was this one like? Did he struggle?"

"No." Cara moved towards her room, keeping her eyes forward and away from her mother's excitement.

"He's your first in weeks! I thought you were dropping off."

"I have to. You want people to think there's a pattern?"

"All the good serial killers have one."

"And they all got caught." Cara had watched enough hours of *America's Most Wanted* and *Law and Order* with her mother to know exactly what not to do if she wanted her actions to stay hidden. She sighed as she unbuttoned her shirt. "Mom, really, I need to take a shower."

"Alright." Her mother shrugged. "You can tell me more afterward."

Cara rolled her eyes, then sighed with relief as her mother exited her room and shut the door. She peeled off her clothes and threw them all in the trash. They could be better disposed of later. For now, she needed to focus on cleaning her body. Cara closed her eyes as she stepped into the shower, the steam bringing the metallic scent of blood into her nostrils as the water turned red at her feet. He'd been her first this year, and while Cara was careful to not take too many, she couldn't deny that doing what she did best had felt good.

Cara stayed in the shower long after his blood had washed away. She felt soothed by the stream, and wished she could melt and flow as easily as the water. But she was flesh, and that flesh was beginning to wrinkle and turn pink. She turned off the shower, and patted her hair dry as she walked to her room.

She halted in front of her bed, staring at her dresser. The hat was gone.

Cara knew exactly where the hat was. She walked downstairs and into their finished basement. The tan carpet and ugly wooden walls were a relic of the seventies, an effort on her great uncle's part to make every piece of the farmhouse he'd inherited feel a little like home. She glanced at his picture on the wall near a bookshelf filled with dusty, unread books, mostly tips on farming and a couple Joan Collins novels. Cara didn't remember much about Uncle Leo – he'd died when she was three – but his picture still brought a hint of warmth to her when she saw it, like she knew they were family even though she hadn't known him at all.

She ignored the pictures of her and her mother, or her mother and Uncle Leo's friend Terry holding Cara as a baby. Terry used to work on the farm. He'd taught her how to kill possums and had made her knife, which her mother gave to her for graduation. All of these meant something to her, but in a way that felt like breathing. Not in a way that touched her or made her stop in thought as she moved through her day.

On the other side of the basement was a large cork board. When Cara was little, Delores had converted it into a board for Cara's art projects and school accomplishments. There were drawings in crayon and watercolor, and a rare report which got an A+. Cara wasn't a bad student, but she also wasn't a remarkable one. In twelve years of school, she had one second place ribbon for a spelling bee, a few good tests, and a science fair project that was first runner-up – due largely to her partner, Tristan, who went on to major in biology at NC State.

Cara stayed in Leslie, and the cork board stayed the same. But between the papers and drawings were a slew of other items commemorating her accomplishments since school.

Delores grabbed a thumbtack from the box on the shelf next to the board and stabbed it into the cork, hanging up the hat she'd taken from Cara's room. It hung between a multitude of items Cara had kept: belts with garish buckles, an ugly key ring with some sort of blue creature Cara couldn't place, pocket knives, watches, other hats. Hats were easy. Men loved it when she took off her own hat and put on theirs while they fucked. Cara loved it because removing their hat made it easier to grab their hair and lift their necks.

"I would've brought it down for you," Cara said as her mother adjusted the hat so that it hung straight down.

"Figured I'd save you the trouble," Delores replied as she stepped back. She clucked her tongue as she looked at all of Cara's souvenirs. "I'm gonna have to get another cork board soon."

"Sorry to give you another errand."

Cara was teasing, but her mother still gave her a pointed look. "Don't be sorry. It makes me proud to look at this."

"Which is why it's in the basement, right?"

"You know why I moved it to the basement."

"I know – in case anyone comes inside. But you know that no one ever just shows up here."

Delores smiled as she patted Cara's shoulder. "No one except you."

Cara couldn't help but smile back. "Well, me and you, right?"

"Right. Uncle Leo showed me real kindness, taking me in. Lord knows Mama and Daddy were ready to throw me on the street if it meant not embarrassing them at church or around town with a pregnant belly."

"It was nice of him," Cara said, hoping to steer the conversation from Delores' bad memories of her hometown. Her trips down memory lane all led to bitterness and never to the only thing Cara ever wondered about: who her father was. Delores wouldn't tell her, and Cara had asked less with each passing year until she stopped asking altogether. But like her faded memory of Uncle Leo, she sometimes felt the question like a small beat in her heart, one that happened to catch her attention when she was alone or when her mother mentioned the past.

Delores didn't bring up the past very much, and when she did, it was usually a passing remark about wishing Terry was back on the farm to help them with vermin, or wishing Uncle Leo a posthumous happy birthday. Their life on the farm was with each other. Delores was content to spend her mornings and evenings with Cara, punctuated only by her job.

Cara was reasonably content, but she wasn't sure if she'd say her life in Leslie was what she wanted. It was a life that happened to her. She liked things well enough – her job, her home, her dates, and especially her kills – but that was all they were: enough.

Still, enough was better than nothing at all. She and her mother walked back upstairs, flicking off the basement lights and plunging their memories and accomplishments back into darkness.

***Without Condition* by Sonora Taylor is available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)!**

Credits & Copyrights

Authors and Poets

*Edward Ahern
Diane Arrelle
Carolyn Barnard
Bill Bistak
Ian Blackwell
Reneé Boyer
David Brandt
Clynthia Burton Graham
Gabrian Cui
Victoria Crawford
Michael D. Davis
Tony-Paul de Vissage
Radar DeBoard
Dawn DeBraal
Alyson Faye
Ivanka Fear
Greg Fewer
Logan Fourie
Holly Rae Garcia
Sharon Frame Gay
Alex Grey
S.C. Hickman
Timothy Hosey
Ken Hueler*

*Rivka Jacobs
Mathias Jansson
Kieran Judge
Naching T. Kassa
Vivian Kasley
Catherine Kenwell
EV Knight
Jessica Kuilan
Geoffrey A. Landis
Christine Lajewski
Roger Ley
Abigail Linhardt
Ruchira Mandal
John C. Mannone
R.J. Meldrum
Terry Miller
Eddie D. Moore
Austin Muratori
Sibylla Nash
Nicole Nevel
Ashley O'Melia
Tim O'Neal
David Lewis Pogson
Lydia Prime*

*Rory J. Roche
Nick Romeo
Brian Rosenberger
B.E. Seidl
Veronica Schultz
Angela Yuriko Smith
Laya V Smith
Meg Smith
Mark Steinwachs
Richard Stevenson
Ann Christine Tabaka
K.T. Tate
Sonora Taylor
Roxy Thomas
D.S. Ullery
Uma Venkatraman
Michael S. Walker
Colin Walsh
Zoie Watterson
Lynn White
G. Allen Wilbanks
Patrick J Wynn
Stephanie M. Wytovich
Pauline Yates*

Featured Artist
Jessica F Holt

Featured Author
Sonora Taylor

Featured Novel
Without Condition

Copyright © 2019 Sirens Call Publications
All Rights Reserved.

All stories, prose and poetry contained within this eZine are the intellectual property and copyright of their respective authors. Sirens Call Publications has been granted explicit permission by the author to publish their work(s) in issue #46 of *The Sirens Call*. All characters and events appearing in these works are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental. All featured artwork and photography are the sole property and copyright of the noted artist. Sirens Call Publications has been granted explicit permission to display their work(s) in issue #46 of *The Sirens Call*.

License Notes:

This eZine is licensed for personal use only. It may be shared freely in its current form for no monetary gain; attribution is expected and is greatly appreciated. This eZine may not be sold, reproduced, or reprinted in any format for monetary gain. If you do not hold the copyright to an individual work contained within this eZine, you may not reproduce the content in question in any form without specific permission from the author or artist who holds the copyright. Advertisements are considered artwork and fall under the purview of the creator's copyright.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of the contributing authors, poets, and artists in this eZine!