

# The Sirens Call

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issue 43



*A Dark Fiction  
Horror eZine*

*All Women, All Horror!  
Celebrating WiHfMx*

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

*Featured Artist  
Drowned Orange*

*Featured Author  
Mercedes M. Yardley*

*'A Pretty for Polly'  
shared from 'Little Dead  
Red & Other Stories'*



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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

Aside from the harsh tone his cell phone elicited each time he initiated and ended a call to his daughter, Margo, Benny's small house was filled with few sounds. His voice punctuated the quiet only to curse when he kicked his computer chair and to growl, "Flaming hell, Margo, answer your phone!" as he hung up for the twelfth time.

Shaking his head, he sat down at his computer screen and continued with his research, pausing now and then to call her again. He doubted what he was reading would calm his pounding heart—quite the opposite, more likely—but he had to focus on something other than his inability to reach his daughter.

The first swarm was accidentally released from a series of previously undiscovered underground caverns in Nevada nearly one year before. The media called them 'bone wasps' and downplayed the spread. Plenty of people were no longer worried about them or, even more ludicrous, had never heard of them. Not Benny. Even though he lived in Wisconsin (where Benny had heard the winter temperatures were too cool for the creatures to survive) he worried they would be able to destroy his world.

Margo was still in Florida. He hadn't wanted her to go on vacation for a day, let alone a month, with the world as it currently was. A year had yet to resolve the bone wasp issue. That led Benny to think the problem was getting worse, not better. His research made him double down on that assumption.

Though the major news outlets claimed the swarm would be contained well before it came anywhere near the East Coast, Benny worried for his only daughter. He cursed himself for letting her go. She'd made light of his concerns every time he called. To try and calm his worry, she'd insisted more than once that she'd be safely back at their Wisconsin home in a little more than a week.

Benny thought the country had less time than that.

Margo hadn't answered the phone at all since early yesterday. She'd scolded him several times throughout this vacation when he'd become panicked by his inability to reach her. She'd gone swimming, she would say, or hiking, or out to lunch. She was almost twenty now and he needed to give her some space.

Benny's insistence she keep her phone on and available whenever possible hadn't been taken to heart. That or Margo was ignoring his calls. He wanted to be angry with the thought, but all he felt was fear.

The last blog posting on a website called 'Becoming Anarchy,' had shown Benny the nightmare mainstream news was doing its best to keep invisible. The swarm wasn't slowing down. The bone wasps weren't being exterminated in droves as the news channels briefly claimed before returning to interviews regarding some idiot celebrity's recent ratings-raising scandal.

Benny clicked on the YouTube video link Becoming Anarchy had posted and watched with his mouth hanging open. He tried to call Margo again as he followed the movements on the screen.

Two women shambled and stumbled down a disconcertingly empty street. The images were grainy, but Benny could identify the raised boils and disfigurement which were a trademark of a bone wasp infestation.

No one talked about the things Benny had been seeing. No one except the bloggers who operated under fake names and anonymous Redditors. Benny couldn't believe he was getting his most reliable information from sources that could quite possibly be twelve-year-old kids home sick from school who'd decided to dick around online.

Becoming Anarchy had given Google Maps coordinates indicating the video took place in a small town in Mississippi called Collins. A quick Google search told Benny the population was less than 3,000 people. The limited numbers of residents didn't explain why the two women were the only lifeforms visible the entire five-minute span of the video.

The town looked as though it had been abandoned; its citizens forcibly displaced by an enemy which had left no evidence of its malignant presence. The assumption was reinforced by the sight of multiple homes with front doors standing wide open and a car that appeared to have been deserted. Its driver's side door hung open, no occupants in the vicinity. Little things. Easily-overlooked things. The women were still the focal points, but other issues made themselves known.

The first of the women collapsed to the street, making Benny pin his complete attention on her slouched form. Her companion paid her no heed and continued to walk down the deserted roadway.

Benny focused closely on the woman who'd fallen. He squinted his eyes and leaned closer to his computer monitor.

Was she dead? She looked like she'd stopped moving, but Benny couldn't tell. The image resolution was too low for him to discern whether or not her still form showed any indications of life.

She twisted on the ground.

Benny felt a wedge of relief press itself into his mind. At least he hadn't watched her die.

The other woman had wandered off screen. Though her form was blurry, the woman on the ground was the undisputed focus of the camera.

Another few seconds passed and Benny felt the clenched fist of revulsion squeeze inside his stomach as he realized he was watching something much worse than the woman's death. Her skin bulged and stretched. Especially in the area of her chest and stomach, some force inside surged up to distort her flesh. Her back bowed and her lips peeled away from her teeth. Benny was glad the surveillance footage was soundless as he imagined the hellish shriek pouring from her too-wide mouth. Like a soufflé, her skin bulged and stretched. Benny could practically hear the grotesque noise as the flesh strained across her body like a massive rubber band being pulled and contorted; sinews of skin tearing away from the ridged flesh of her muscles and fat underneath.

She jerked upward once, twice, her spine snapping with the movements so hard it seemed to Benny the vertebrae should dislocate. Her hands flung outward, scrabbling at the tarmac as she thrashed in undeniable agony.

Her hands went from clawing at the road to tearing at her own clothes, her hair, her skin. Her chest rose and fell in a hyperventilating rhythm. Benny did not consider himself a man of deep emotion, but seeing her raw anguish made tears flood his eyes.

Without warning, the woman's convulsions ceased. Her body bent toward the road, the tips of her fingers and toes and the top of her head the only parts of her still touching the pavement. Her eyes seemed to lock on his through the computer monitor though there was no way, no possible way in hell she could see him. The straining skin of her torso exploded outward and from within spewed a cascade of tiny white creatures.

Benny flung himself back from the computer screen with a yelp. Some crazy part of his brain exclaimed the miniature monsters would somehow be able to use the computer as a conduit, much as they had used the woman's body as a walking hive. With shaking hands, he picked up his computer chair, settled it back at the desk, and returned to the seat. There was less than a minute left in the video and he had to force himself to watch. With his eyes fixed on the screen, he grabbed his phone to call Margo again.

The flood of bone wasps on the video rose up, spiraling toward the treetops as the hollow carcass of the woman dropped back to the road. Blood gushed around her, darkening the road with a flood of red as her dead eyes stared into forever. Speckling the crimson puddle, white flecks of bone and gobs of flesh marred the dark consistency.

"Jesus fuck," Benny whispered as he dragged his free hand down his face. Sweat and tears mingled together and he rubbed his hand on his jeans before clicking to close the link.

Margo still wasn't answering.

He knew she wouldn't listen to a voicemail, so he hung up and shot her a text as soon as the option to leave her a message prompted him to speak.

*Margo, get your ass home. No questions. Get. Home. NOW.*

That would make her call, at least. While he waited for her to get back with him, he decided to start preparing. He stormed into the kitchen, pulling an empty box from a recent Amazon delivery along with him. The low temperatures might offer them some additional protection but he wasn't going to bank on that alone.

There was duct tape in the garage. Plus some pallets he could break down to use as barricades. Plastic coverings for the windows he put up to keep the heat in during the winter months. He always kept a decent

supply of food and water in the crawlspace. Until this shit was actually handled, he would try to keep himself and Margo inside and out of danger as much as possible.

He moved in a frenzy, unaware he'd left his phone on the kitchen table when he'd gone out the side door to the attached garage. The phone began to buzz, emitting a harsh emergency tone akin to an Amber Alert text.

Outside, a police siren began to blare. It was followed in suit by the wavering call of the civilian warning system. Other shrill, shrieking tones joined. Benny's skin tightened, each hair standing as a testament to the adrenaline-fueled terror rushing through his veins.

They were here. He didn't need anyone to tell him what those sirens meant. A bone wasp swarm had arrived and it was too late to run. They were here and Margo was not. Margo was in Florida, where the bone wasps could move and strike with far less trouble.

The thought of Margo made Benny realize he didn't have his phone. What if she'd called back? He rushed back into the kitchen, most of the supplies forgotten. He cleared his screen of the emergency text telling him things he already knew. They were here and no one was safe. That's all any of them needed to know.

Aside from the emergency text, there was a message from Margo.

*I'm sorry, dad. I love you. They got in and we can't get out. I love you so much. I'm sorry.*

Benny sank to the floor, rubbing his burning eyes with the sleeve of his shirt as he read Margo's words. Outside, tapping noises began against his windows. It sounded like pieces of hail announcing the coming of a storm. A storm he hadn't prepared for. A storm claiming lives from one side of the country to another. No one had realized the full danger of the bone wasp swarms until it was far too late and now they were all going to be lost to them.

Benny did have one last item of preparation. He'd taken his .38 from the garage, along with the box of ammunition he'd kept with it. Placing his phone on the floor, he loaded the weapon. He held it against his thigh as he stared at the cloak of faux-night claiming the world outside his window.

They tapped against the glass in a lazy rhythm which belied their threat. Their wings created a droning wind as they encircled the residence. Did they know he was inside? He'd bet they did.

*Talk to me if you can, honey,* Benny texted to Margo. *Hide if you can. Stay quiet. I love you.* He almost told her they were here, as well, but what was the point? He didn't want to steal her hope if she had any left. He wanted to keep hope of his own for her. He wanted to but doubted he would.

After all, the only thing he'd brought inside with him was the gun.

They tapped on the glass.

Benny's phone was silent.

Margo did not text back.

The swarm did as it would continue to do; the swarm grew, claimed, sought, and consumed.

Ten minutes later, the funeral-thick silence was broken by his phone vibrating against the kitchen floor. As he reached for it, the kitchen window shattered. Glass exploded inward much as the woman's chest had burst outward.

The fragile calm was gone. It was time to face the swarm.

### **About the Author:**

Ashlei Hawley is a writer of horror, paranormal, and erotica. A lover of zombie and creature feature fiction, she writes stories of the same variety. She has been involved in several collaboration and anthology projects, three of which have hit bestseller lists on Amazon.

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## Nanny | Alyson Faye

It had been a long tiring day in the woods, laying trails and checking traps, the old woman was cold and hungry. The light was failing, so it was time to head for home. She could smell gas even before she opened the cottage door.

"Damn and blast those two stupid kids. They've been cooking, even though I expressly told them to wait till I got back." She stormed in, face furrowed, mouth spitting fury.

Hansel was standing, looking shifty, wafting his hand stitched tea towel around the kitchen with its message — *Many cooks make light work*, seeming rather ironic.

"Ineffectual as usual, lad, I see."

Hansel dropped his head, tears filling his eyes. He was much better at sewing and painting than hunting, food prepping and cooking. He just didn't have the stomach for all that. He gazed, woebegone, at his favorite picture, painted in ochres mulched from the plants in the forest which surrounded their cottage. It depicted their home and their family, but encircled by a golden aura. The light was imaginary and in his head, but he liked to pretend. It was so much better than the reality.

Gretel, his sister, was trying to rescue the burnt remains from the oven's guts. She wasn't wearing mitts, so she kept shrieking, "Ow! It hurts!" Most of the food was lying in ashy piles on the tiles.

Nanny discarded her black cloak, hat and gloves and in one swift decisive movement she flicked off the main switch. The cottage went dark, except for the ring of candles burning by the fireplace illuminating the roasting spit coated with lardy animal fat.

"Are you trying to kill us?" Nanny hissed at her two despondent charges.

Her hooked nose protruded from beneath her bushy brows. Hansel and Gretel looked sheepish, glancing at each other. Caught out again! They never did get it right. They still had so much to learn.

"We just wanted to help you get dinner under way, Nanny," Gretel, the braver of the pair, muttered. "It was getting late and we were hungry." Her tummy rumbled in support of her words.

"Sorry Nanny," they both chorused, their golden haired heads and chubby cheeks quivering.

*They're so adorable*, thought Nanny, *my perfect pair of students*.

A whimper from the cage in the farthest, darkest corner of the kitchen, drew the trio's attention. The metal box hanging from a giant hook in the ceiling, creaked from side to side, whilst the occupant, that evening's dinner, moaned and rocked himself. Blood leaked through the bars. Drip, drip.

"Be quiet," Nanny snapped. "It puts us off when our food makes noises. Pass me that knife, Gretel. Now children, what cut of meat do we want this evening?"

"Breast!" shouted Hansel

"Typical man!" responded his sister, laughing.

The twins pushed and shoved each other in play, their moods much improved now their beloved Nanny was getting dinner underway.

## A Slippery Dish | Alyson Faye

Liz wondered if their guests could catch the whiff of Phillip's cooked Conger eels mixed in with her homemade taramasalata and warm pitta bread.

She thought she'd shown great fortitude tolerating 'Spike' and 'Evelyn'. The slamming of their muscled bodies against the tank's walls in their bedroom gave her nightmares.

Phil lost three fingertips to the slippery duo, but he shrugged it off. "Accidents happen," he laughed.

Liz noticed her husband of twenty-five years chewing hard on his food. A thread of something rubbery protruded from his lips. Liz sighed with satisfaction.

"Bon Appetit everyone," she raised her champagne glass.

## Angelic Abduction | *Alyson Faye*

Soaked in dusk, the boy stands, gazing at the sleeping angel Gabriel. The shadows nibble the gravestones. Jacob climbs up, nestling into the angel's wing. He is tired of running.

"Now I lay me down to rest," he mumbles.

Snow falls, soft as goose feathers, smothering and blurring, until boy and angel become one. Ivy creeps around his wrists; handcuffing him. Velvety moss furs his cheek. Insects nest inside his clothes.

His family comes searching, but fails to find him.

Decades pass. Jacob, imprisoned, howls through stone lips. Unheard.

"Eternity is yours," Gabriel murmurs. "My gift."

The boy's face cracks.

### About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK. Her dark fiction appears in 'Women in Horror Annual 2', 'Stories from Stone' and on line at zeroflash/Tubeflash/Horror Scribes, Coffin Bell Journal 1.4, Ellipsis 2, and The Horror Tree. She has a short story in DeadCades, the latest horror anthology from the Infernal Clock.

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## Witchcraft | *B.E. Seidl*

"Burn in HELL!" she hissed at the melting face, her thumbnail cutting into his throat as flames flickered from his head like a mane. His eyes were bright and full of himself. No wonder he had always said it was his favorite photograph — it truly captured his quintessence. She had studied the ritual online on a page for black magic, determined to believe that afterwards he would never hurt her again. Yet, he did. The pain shot through her fingers, the sleeve of her shirt ablaze. She waved her arm like a witch's torch and indeed it burned like HELL.

### 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.

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No matter the time of year, it's always time to be afraid of the dark.

# DIANE ARRELLE SEASONS ON THE DARK SIDE



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Jay sat anxiously on the exam table waiting for the doctor, swinging her legs like a curious child and reading every piece of medical literature on the surrounding white walls. Dr. Kaplan knocked first then entered.

"Hi, Jay! How's everything??"

"Good."

"Any heart episodes or emergencies recently?"

"No."

"Alright, we're going to do a device check. Let's get you hooked up to the monitor so I can get a reading of what your heart rates been up to first."

Dr. Kaplan began her strategic placement of sticky electrodes on Jay's legs, arms and chest allowing the attached wiring to drape over her body. Jay averted her eyes while the doctor did this, she was sick of being poked and prodded and preferred to let her mind drift during these device checks. Frankly, she hated them. Once the main hulking wire from the set of electrodes was plugged into the monitor Jay resembled a full-on cyborg.

"Okay, Jay, I am going to observe the electrical activity of your heart from the last month or so and check for any abnormalities, extreme palpitations, dangerous heart rate, things like that."

Dr. Kaplan observed the sharp dips and dives of Jay's heart rate, casually at first. Her patient's internal workings came streaming through like a ticker. Shifting uncomfortably in her seat, Dr. Kaplan moved closer to the monitor's displayed results and hit the print button instinctively. She ripped the sheet from the printer and began circling portions of Jay's heart rate results and scribbling the date and exact time of each episode.

"Jay. Do you recall feeling any extreme arrhythmias or even a shock from your defibrillator on January 3rd around 2am?"

"No. I was asleep."

"Ok. What about January 13<sup>th</sup> around the same time of 2am?"

"No. Same thing, I was sleeping."

"Alright. There are a few more of these episodes that concern me as well. The most recent being 2 days ago, again, around 2am. January 23<sup>rd</sup>? Are you sure you cannot recall experiencing any type of alarming heart rate or labored breathing? I really need you to tell me, don't be afraid..."

"Are you going to press the red button?"

"What?"

"The red button. On the monitor? The one that speeds up my heart on its own. It feels like I'm having a heart attack when you press it. Like I have no control over my own body. I hate the red button."

"Well, yes, we must check that your defibrillator is working the way it should, and the *red button* test tells me that information. It is your safety net. But Jay, are you able to at least remember anything from a couple of days ago that may have caused an issue for you, heart-wise?"

Jay retreated into her thoughts and watched Dr. Kaplan's mouth continue to move in a hazy, slow-motion slipstream, allowing her doctor's pleading words to fall deaf and meaningless. She didn't need to listen anymore because she knew exactly what the doctor was referring to. She knew what happened on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> and at 2am on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and every ten days since the accident that almost killed her. I mean, the accident did kill her. For twenty minutes. And first responders brought her back, restarted her heart and she was left with no memory of what happened. They said her heart was beating so rapidly it threw her into cardiac arrest. It was undetectable until now. From then on, Jay wrote everything down:

### **Jay's Journal – January 3, 2019**

Dreamed I was awake in bed & could not move my body or lift my head. A dark figure was looming over me & touched my chest. The silhouette looked human. I felt some type of electrical surge go through me like a shockwave & caused my arms and legs to vibrate. I could not speak. My body levitated off the bed to

what seemed like stories high and then suddenly plummeted back down. The falling felt so real. Woke up screaming.

### **Jay's Journal – January 13, 2019**

Dreamed of Dark Figure again tonight. My body felt melted to the bed. Useless. Dark Figure grabbed me by the throat & lifted me upright. I was limp, dead weight. I could not scream. Dark Figure arranged my arms & legs into a sitting position with my palms facing upward. Dark Figure placed a knife in my hand. Told me to cut. I dragged the knife across my face and neck multiple times. I could not stop. Woke up choking.

### **Jay's Journal – January 23, 2019**

DF was here again. The walls were expanding & contracting around me until finally stretching so far away, I only saw darkness in all directions. I couldn't move or make noise at first, but DF told me to stand & my body responded. We floated down into the darkness, my bed slipping away until, it too, was a black abyss behind us. Feeling like I was at the center of infinite nothingness. Looking ahead, I saw one side of my bedroom wall coming into view with a bedroom mirror that somewhat resembled my own. DF and I stood in front of it. My face & neck disfigured. DF touched my chest again, ripping it open to reveal my frantic, thumping heart, pumping blood & beating erratically. A red button appeared on the mirror. DF pressed it. My body seized. I felt the intense electric shockwave pulse through me. Similar but worse than the feeling from the first night. Woke up in the hospital.

"Jay? Are you alright? Jay, please look at me, okay?"

Jay snapped out of her mind's nightmarish retelling of the past month, but it was the only way she coped. A confession to herself without having to say the words out loud. To anyone.

"Yes, I'm fine, sorry. I was in my own head for a minute. I'm okay. I don't have any memory of any type of episodes or defib shocks. I'm sorry, I don't remember."

"That's okay, then. I'm going to schedule some additional tests for you with some specialists. It's important you keep these appointments. I need you to go to these appointments. Please do not cancel them. I will find out and you know that. We all just want you to be safe and healthy."

As Dr. Kaplan wrote notes on Jay's file, the only thing Jay could do was stare at the red button. That red fucking button. Jay was surprised news of her emergency hospital stay hadn't reached Dr. Kaplan's office yet, but it would soon, and she would deal with lying to her about it then.

"Alright, Jay, last part. I am going to check your defibrillator device on the heart monitor, and you may feel some discomfort and increase in heart rate. It will be quick, I promise." Jay nodded. Her body already seizing up in anticipation.

Dr. Kaplan pushed the red button.

### **About the Author:**

Jessica Rougeau is the author of *Witchdoctor*, a collection of horror poetry written during her recovery from a sudden near-death experience. She is currently working on a collection of short horror stories and resides in New Orleans.

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Instagram: [@ThisIsWitchDoctor](https://www.instagram.com/ThisIsWitchDoctor)

## Mother Gate | *Rivka Jacobs*

The wailing and crying gave Lisa a headache. She winced as she paused in the foyer for a moment, then followed her sister-in-law into the kitchen.

Tiffany turned around as if startled; her widened eyes were bloodshot, circled by darkness. "I thought I closed the door," she whispered through clenched teeth. "I told you to go, I said not to come inside. You shouldn't be here."

"Okay, okay, hun...." Lisa approached the emaciated, haggard-looking new mom and wrapped her in a hug.

Tiffany pushed the older woman away. "I have to get their lunch," she said. "If I don't bring them exactly what they want on time, they get angry."

Lisa brought her brows together, feeling uncertain. She surveyed the stained, crusty counters covered with dirty sipper-seal cups, plastic bowls and divider plates. A suffocating, sharp odor of rot and decay made her queasy. She recognized the smell of dirty diapers, bulging piles of garbage, stale milk, but couldn't identify the more distant piercing, sour note that made her nose sting. "Do you need any help?" she offered. She wondered how long the place had been like this. The family hadn't heard from her brother Tim, or Tiffany, for several weeks. "Mom is worried, Tif. She says no one is returning her texts or calls."

Tiffany ignored her, grabbed some of the plastic ware and started washing what she needed, bending over the sink, her elbows pumping as she scrubbed.

The wails turned into chants of MOMMY, MOMMY and FOOD, FOOD accompanied by repeated banging that grew louder and louder. There was a jarring crash. Lisa winced. "Good Lord, Tif. What the hell is going on here?" She marched out of the kitchen, through the dining room, and stopped in the living room. She could see a large, buff-colored baby-gate stretched across the entrance to the opposite hallway that led to the bedrooms. The three eighteen-month-old boys—bunched behind the gate, their faces red and wet, noses trailing snot—quieted at once when they saw her. Lisa padded a few feet closer, noted that a lamp lay damaged on the oak-plank floor to her right. "What did you guys do?" she demanded. She squatted and started to pick up the pieces; the lamp was small, the broken body shaped like a clown. "Is this from your room?"

"Go away," one of the toddlers piped at her.

She stood and stared at them. She could never remember which triplet was which; they were the result of some kind of experimental fertility treatment and not identical but it was hard to distinguish them. She pointed at the one who spoke, who seemed to be the ring-leader. "Which one are you? Are you Derrick?"

"Go away, Auntie Lisa," he answered. He curled pudgy, tiny fingers around the metal bars and clutched, tugged several times.

She flinched, expecting the barrier to give way. But it held. She could see now that the gate's steel frame was screwed to the jamb. The six-foot-tall gate door was secured by a digital lock. "What the hell," she started but then was hit by something that bounced off her forehead.

"If Auntie Lisa no go away, Auntie Lisa stay, if Auntie Lisa no go away, Auntie Lisa stay," tiny voices repeated in unison. Then, "MOMMY ... FOOD!"

Lisa turned, lamp pieces dangling from both hands, and confronted Tiffany carrying a tray.

"Here," Tiffany said, "could you hold this for a sec?" And she shoved the orange plastic tray toward Lisa, who dropped the broken lamp to take it. Tiffany swayed a bit, then made her way to the gate. "Okay, now, sweethearts, you'll have to move back. If you try to hurt Mommy again, I won't bring any more food." She was trying to look tough, arms folded across her chest. But her pale skin was shiny with sweat and she was trembling.

The dominant triplet grinned. "Okay," he said in a reedy, high-pitched voice. He motioned his brothers and they toddled backward, wobbling and bumping into one another, their pull-up training diapers crinkling.

*They almost look cute*, Lisa thought. Her stomach twisted; she glanced at her sister-in-law's fingers ticking a sequence of numbers on the lock's keypad. The gate clicked open. "They can talk really well," Lisa said as Tiffany quickly grabbed the tray. "I mean, for their age, they're really precocious." She held the gate as Tiffany scuttled through. She noticed that there were similar, extra-tall security gates fastened across the entrances to the master-bedroom, and the bathroom half-way down the hall. "Tiffany?" she called as the latter disappeared into the nursery, the three boys dancing and bouncing after her in a way that didn't seem quite natural.

Lisa pushed the gate slowly until she heard it catch. A draft of air hit her in the face as the nursery door swooped closed with a bang. Lisa gagged; this smell was more terrible than all the others. It was the miasma of death, and it wafted from the very end of the hallway, from the interior of the master bedroom. "Tim? Timmy?" she called. A gush of anxiety gripped her heart, pounded against her ribs. "Tim, it's Lisa, are you there?" A burst of loud screams came from

the babies' room, followed by gargled, weakening shrieks for help. "Tiffany? Tiffany? Is that you? What's wrong?" Lisa yelled.

She frantically yanked at the gate, pounded on the lock. "Oh my god," she breathed, tears starting. "I don't remember, I don't know the combination."

**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.

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**Cracked Spines | Linda Imbler**

"Valoween only happens occasionally throughout history. Large groups of people disappearing has popularly been explained away as the Great Plague of London, the Black Plague, the Modern Plague, and most recently, the Manchurian Plague of 1910 which we, the writers of this scroll, have firsthand knowledge."

These are the opening statements made on an obscure scroll, recently unearthed by a reliable group of archaeologists, that records an occult practice known as Valoween. The writers of the scroll were a small band of survivors who got overlooked in the last carnage and eventually made their way up into a mountain cave. They later recorded the particulars of that gruesome event as well as predicting the next and then hid the scroll. Here are their words:

"They clawed their way up from the dirt and made their way down streets and across fields to where they used to live. These beings of shiny bones, now bald of skin. Their joints sounded like clattering as they marched along. We could hear them coming, but nothing we would do could keep them out. For these were the lonely dead and they came seeking the company of those who had loved them and still remembered. They marched forward, recalling cooing words such as, "You will always have my heart" or "My heart is yours." They gnawed through the chests of their beloveds to get to the prize. To finally touch what had been promised to forever be theirs. And, to relieve those living, whom they still treasured, of the burden of a life bereft of the ones whom they had once held so dear. And who could blame them?"

"Not all who marched had been loved. As those unfortunates weaved their way along, they fell apart and the jagged pieces of their cracked spines were used as tools while the desperate deceased sawed their way through doorways and windows to gain entry."

By the way, according to the calculations set forth by this band of survivors from the early twentieth century, the next Valoween is coming Thursday, February 14, 2019.

Rather than publishing the scroll, the archeologists who had recently unearthed it decided to rebury it. They knew since there was no time for the victims of the next event to prepare, that it would only be cruel to inform them their days were probably numbered.

**About the Author:**

Linda Imbler is the author of the published poetry collections "Big Questions, Little Sleep," "Lost and Found," and "The Sea's Secret Song." Her new e-book "Pairings" has been published by Soma Publishing. She is a Kansas-based Pushcart Prize Nominee and two-time Best of the Net nominee. Her work has been published in numerous national and international journals.

Blog: [Linda's Poetry Blog](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Linda Imbler](#)

## Blood Moon | *Joanna Koch*

Spring wants a sacrifice. Blood moon squats on the horizon.  
Dreams loud in pink and orange,  
Stories of exsanguination.  
Easter dreams.

She bleeds out a deer, a vole, a man, any stray pest caught in the dusk.  
Exacts her tithe in liquid dreams.  
Blood seeps slowly from  
Heart and brain.

Pink, fat, gorged and greedy, blood moon lolls across night sky,  
Fond liquids exit eager prey.  
Flesh of the huntress  
Touches earth.

Prey wakes in a bed of galanthus. Knowing white flowers nod in the dark.  
Waits for morning to burn off bad dreams.  
He'll die before then.  
Sweet flowers nod in the dark.

### About the Author:

Author Joanna Koch writes literary horror and surrealist trash. Her short stories have been published in journals and anthologies such as *Storgy* and *Doorbells at Dusk*. She'll have new work out soon in *Synth*, *Sanitarium*, and in anthologies from *Corpus Press* and *Carrion Blue 555*. Joanna is a graduate of *Naropa University* who lives and works near *Detroit*.

Blog: [Horrorsong](#)  
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## Poison Apple | *Andrea Allison*

The bar fell into a lull. Routine weighed on me like chains. Smoke barely tickled my nose when a soft breathy voice disrupted the babbling drunks. I filled the shaker before the words escaped her lips.  
"One Poison Apple," she whispered.  
She dressed to blend in, but a trench coat, sunglasses, and a silk scarf blended in nowhere. I placed the martini before her. She took a few nervous sips and slipped into the muggy night.  
A fat white envelope awaited me in the suggestion box. Wiping my pistol clean of brain matter, I sighed. "Three suburbanites in one week."

**About the Author:** Andrea Allison currently writes and resides in a small Oklahoman town. Her work has appeared in *Trembling with Fear*, *Moonchild Magazine*, and *DeadCades: The Infernal Decimation Anthology*.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

The air-conditioner clicked on with a rough cough and began emitting poorly refrigerated air saturated with the musty scents of humanity. The smell didn't help the motel room with its beige walls, green shag, fake famous art, and tattered furniture. Rachel raised her glass, sipped her wine, realizing the dated abode wasn't messy or clean, no, it was sad.

"Fitting," she mumbled. Another sip and the wine's bite slid down her throat deepening the chill skating over her bare skin.

The cold fit the night, the room, her failure. She sat back in the chair, crossed her legs, and raised her glass to her lips. *Get ahold of yourself.* A high-pitched whine cut through the room making her cringe, and the air-conditioner clicked off. Damn. Rachel set her glass on the overly stained desk, stood, stretched, and sauntered over to lower the temperature.

"Come on." Rachel waited, one, two, three seconds and the machine wheezed to life.

With cold air circulating once more, she turned around and surveyed the room. A quick glance confirmed the heavy drapes covered the lone window, they hadn't opened in the commotion, and her bag remained where she put it. At the sight, like it held the confidence she needed to continue, the tension in her shoulders eased. On the bed, crimson glittered in the honey light accentuating his sun kissed skin and dark features. Rachel inhaled a slow breath, exhaled and waited for her heartbeat to race and her pulse to quicken when her eyes narrowed on the black walnut handle sticking out of Tall Dark and Handsome's chest. Nothing happened. *He should have been more,* she thought with regret.

The mingled scents of male sweat, flesh, and iron divided her mind with remorse and the tease of euphoria. Rachel grabbed the bottle and filled her glass, the straw colored liquid curling in the bowl. It was always white, never red. She had rules. Red was hearty, intense, embraced you with its rich body, and begged you to stay. White was cold, sharp, and sat in her mouth causing her teeth to ache from its chill and reminded her of her responsibility. Yes, and it kept her focused and matched the cold air.

"So, this is it?" she asked the room, as if the imitation painting staring at her from its perch on the wall was going to answer. She waited a full minute before sighing and mumbling, "Another let down."

Dammit, she knew it wasn't going to get any better, who was she trying to convince. *Myself,* she argued. Drumming her nails on the glass, the clicks added to her darkening thoughts. She didn't deserve his rage, his silence, or abandonment. He deserved every cut, every burn, and every curse word she threw in his direction.

A chill crawled down her spine, gripped her core, and she trembled. *This time, may be the last time,* she thought with shame. Damn him. *Shut up and focus.* With her attention back on her failure, Rachel turned from the wine to the white roses, and the black leather bag waiting silently for her to dig in to its insides. Her eyes, wet with unshed tears, from frustration, glanced at the ruby smears staining the wine bottle's gold label. In the misty film of condensation, they had started to gently slide down the clear glass. Beside it, abandoned and forgotten was a second glass. Her blurred silhouette stared back through his smudged fingerprints and she watched the mirror image sashay as she raised her glass in a mock toast to the second and its remains.

*Half empty,* she mused, *or half full?* She guessed the answer depended on the individual.

A voice rose up and whispered, *'The glass is half empty.'*

Rachel nodded in agreement and her thoughts wandered beyond the wine and Tall Dark and Handsome to her past. *My sweet.* She shook herself knowing it didn't change how she felt and how she wished it was more... Satisfying. Always thought it should have been as exciting as the first time. However, recently the anticipation was as tantalizing as the climax.

"This time was supposed to be different." Rachel had built her hopes up and convinced herself the motel and risk alone would have her blood pulsing, her heart pounding, and her nerves on their ends as if they were going to jump out of her skin. *Stupid girl.* It hadn't, not the way she wanted. Needed. After all the planning, the careful attention to every detail, and finding the perfect man, she craved more. Those she chose had to have a sliver of evil in their souls, a need to be seduced, a little controlled, and she had to be able to nurse their insanity. And she did. There was no doubt, Tall Dark and Handsome should've been perfect.

Her eyes skated over the room and the second glass, until they landed on Tall Dark and Handsome. Her patience had been put to the test trying to get him to approach her, but in the end, he had been a worthwhile challenge. An entertaining adventure who should have added satisfaction to the release she obsessed over. She wanted fireworks and bells and whistles, and freedom. She craved freedom. Not the numbness eating her from the inside out. In annoyance,

as if it was going to take the edge off and change the night and her attitude, she took a drink. It wasn't lady like, reserved, it was a swig, and she gulped it down.

"Obviously cutting him out of my life didn't work," she confessed.

Rachel sat back in the computer chair, uncrossed and re-crossed her legs bringing a tired squeal from the metal. She wished she would have gotten dressed when the cool plastic of the chair sent a chill racing across her bare back and hips.

"Why bother?" she mumbled. The negative feel lunged in and fed the building coldness and irritation.

There was always the risk of getting caught and her friends finding out and laughing at her. She could see the headlines; career woman turned serial killer found dejected, and drunk. The danger loomed over her and sat on her shoulders like a physical weight. It threatened her future, but if she stopped, she knew its poison was going to taint the smallest of things. Still she needed to accept she had a life. A very successful life. And he wasn't worth it.

Never was.

Rachel shifted in the chair, to see him better, and sipped her wine. She needed to end his presence. She laughed, a soft sound edged with bitterness because she knew deep down, if she got rid of him, she would miss him. Dear God, she would miss him. She loved to have him around. She hated the pain he inflicted and the suffering he forced her to live with. Yes, suffering was bad, but her real problem was the pain. Pain. It never left, it sat fat inside her, growing with every memory, like a cancer, clinging to her thoughts, and filling her days and nights with misery. His need to make her miserable was never stated, and adding insult to injury, the son of a bitch was there in everything she did. His eyes teeming with hate, found her in her dreams and turned them into nightmares. He invaded her life over and over again. And she loved it.

*No, I hate it.*

*'No, you don't.'*

She exhaled and forced herself to face the facts, she needed him gone. For real. Not the empty lies she told people as she tried to convince herself... But for real. Needing him wasn't real. It was the dark side of loneliness trying to weaken her resolve. Maybe. *Doesn't matter*, she thought.

This execution, all her work will have been for naught and the desolation of it was driving her crazy. Despite the chaos living inside her mind, she smiled, her lips curving, any emotion never reaching her eyes, because she knew the truth. She wanted him with her. All she had to do was wait and he would find a way to come back. He always did, and he would continue his malicious rampage through her life. That's what he did.

Every. Damn. Time.

"How long will you be silent this time, my sweet?" she asked the staring smoky eyes. "A day? A week? A month?"

Fire hadn't worked, she mused, and saw flames of red and orange reaching for him, and shook herself, but neither had water. Scarlet peppered his tan flesh, its softness marred by the white bone blazing through the slashes in his skin. She thought by taking a drastic, even radical step that it would make her believe he was really and truly gone. Hopefully it would take the sane side and the not-so-sane side, she laughed, of her mind and merge them.

With glass in hand, Rachel stood and walked over to the bed and stared down on him. All the while memories drifted around her and through the fractures of her sanity. Slowly she knelt, her knees on the shag, the thick strands tickling her shins, and met his empty dead eyes. *You should have let me go*, she thought, *before it came to this*.

Rachel gently touched his cheek with the back of her hand and watched his eyes fade. "He isn't my sweet," she whispered as if confused. Rachel raised the glass to his naked body and silently wished Tall Dark and Handsome, *Godspeed* into the next world. She sipped the chilled wine while her eyes narrowed on the scattered scarlet splashes. They glared back, the thick, fat, and thin shapes as if trying to tell her something. Once glistening, they began to dull as they dried under the scrutiny of her cobalt stare. The thicker lines shimmered in the lamplight and slipped around the silver blade and over the curves of his ribs to the crumpled sheet beneath.

The hard touches and the dark look in his eyes while they teased each other had her believing their intimacy combined with the knife was going to do the trick. With her right hand, she reached out and gripped the handle. Its smooth feel fit easily in her palm but didn't give under her touch. She twisted the handle, the blade grated against bone, and brought crimson to the surface. It oozed up only to slip down and settle in the contours of his hips. She stood, and watched the new liquid push through the cooling pool. Rachel dipped one finger into the lukewarm jelly and with careful moves, began to draw on unmarked skin.

With her head tilted to the right, Rachel liked the perfect forever heart, and stuck her finger in her mouth. Sucking the tip and pulling it from her lips, she chased the sultry iron with wine. The silence in the room took away his

pleading and whimpers, and stealing his weak voice, it brought a sadness. She couldn't stop it from weaving around her heart and filling her eyes with tears. *No*, she told herself. She wouldn't give in to self-pity. The emotions, like the process of grieving, were the same every time, and each stage passed and began turning her mind on itself. In the end, she would convince herself he was going to come back. He always did, and already she could hear his whispers and feel his presence strengthening.

Rachel touched the knife, turned away from him, dropped in the chair, and stared at him. Maybe she needed to change things up. She took a slow sip and considered the idea she had been doing it wrong the entire time. You can never relive the first time, everyone knows that. It needs to be reinvented. What if white was a bad choice?

What if it was as simple as red? What if red is the answer?

Red like blood. Like the crimson staining his body.

Her mind raced through the wines she had tasted and loved. Quickly the memory of a smooth velvet laced with chocolate brought a smile to her face. An old vine Zinfandel. Red invited you to crawl into the glass and spend the evening cuddled inside its dark coffee notes and hints of cocoa. It might be the change she needs to put her mind at ease. She would give herself one more chance to make things right. With renewed passion, her body fought the chill creeping over her, it made her bare skin warm, and her heartbeat fluttered with anticipation.

Anticipation.

"One more time," she whispered to the dated room.

Rachel stood, her mind cleared, her emotions eased, and she saw the reality of her fury and bent up disappointment. The worse being the cavity in his chest. "Left me with a broken heart, my sweet. Turnabout is fair play." Rachel drank the rest of the wine in one gulp and set the glass on the desk. After wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and her hand on her bare thigh, she looked at herself in the mirror screwed to the wall. Smears of blood stained her stomach, breasts, and hands. And now her thighs. It was better than her clothes.

Rachel watched herself stretch, and the way her skin pulled where blood had dried. "Dirty girl," she purred, as she grabbed the bag and walked over to the couch.

There were rules to her process and she considered them as she mentally went through the stages in which she would clean the room and discard Tall Dark and Handsome. With a plan in place, she unzipped the bag, grabbed a pink towel from its depths, and approached the bed. Rachel wrapped her hand around the handle and yanked as hard as she could. The blade held tight, and she jerked again, and with the next tug, it slipped free. While she cleaned the blade with the pink towel, she walked to the head of the bed, sat down, and watched his head loll and stop at her thigh.

"This isn't the end," she promised.

'No,' he whispered, his voice rough from his absence.

"Have I told you, just how much I love you?" She felt him come alive and his ghost caressed her entire body. She moved strands of hair from his eyes, and tucked them behind his ear. "My sweet."

Rachel giggled, an honest, happy sound and felt the delight from her fingertips to her toes and raised the knife. As she went to work, his smoky eyes gleamed as if he too was being swept up in the excitement.

#### About the Author:

Originally from the mountains of Northern California, M.A. Kastle resides in sunny Southern California with her family and two German shepherds. When she isn't writing, she is reading, camping, or out wandering with camera in hand. She is the author of *Bone Chimes*, *Tales of Woe*, and *A Curse Revisited*.

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Rubbing my eyes as I sit at my laptop I was reminded of how late it was. Groaning, I looked over to my clock and seeing it read two AM. I dragged my fingers down my face, leaning back, I silently cursed my boss for having me answer all these emails. Doesn't he even look at them himself? *Most likely not*, I thought to myself as I yawned again. Especially when he's too busy flirting with the other secretary. *How does he even keep his job?* Snorting in disgust, I took several deep breaths, and closed my eyes. I knew for a fact that I did not get paid enough to sit here and do his job. I could feel myself slipping ever deeper into exhaustion, my eyelids drooping and my head nodding forward into the waiting arms of sleep. *Don't go to sleep!* I have to finish the bloody work. I can not go to sleep.

Snapping my eyes open, I rubbed my face and looked at the clock.

When did I doze off? I just closed my eyes! The time read three AM, demon hour. So, I did doze off. I need to finish this garbage before I can go to bed, though. I so do not get paid enough for this... Demon Hour, yeah... Chuckling slightly, I could not help the thought that maybe a demon would haunt my boss. Serves him right.

Rubbing my temples, I stood up and stretched. If I was going to finish, I needed to go make coffee and maybe something to eat. Closing my office door, I looked down the hallway, but something was different. I don't know what it is, but there was something wrong, out of place. Turning on the light, I looked at the walls, corners, doors, and hanging artwork. Nothing was out of place, nothing was out of the ordinary. Thinking it was related to the fact that I was tired and hungry, I turned off the light, and headed toward the kitchen.

Then, out of nowhere, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, my breath caught in my throat, and my heart sped up. Looking around, the world seemed to dim as I continuously spun around, looking for the source of my panic. I couldn't pinpoint the issue, I was struggling to breathe. I closed my eyes and dropped to the ground, covering my ears and holding my breath. Every second seemed to feel as if I was chained to a cement block in an airtight room.

Nothing. No pressure.

Blinking... Everything was fine. I could breathe. The hallway seemed to be brighter.

*What was that all about?* Shaking my head, I stood up and briskly walked towards the kitchen. Breathing in deeply, I walked toward the table but stopped.

The first thing I saw was the white cabinets and counters. The next was something hanging from the off-white walls there was a wooden rectangular table sitting in the middle of the room.

This isn't my home! Turning around, nothing was like *MY* kitchen. I have black cabinets, tan coloured walls, marble counters. I didn't own a table in my apartment.

Looking around, I took a closer look at the sign, seeing that it reminded me of the sign that hung in my childhood home.

*CHILDHOOD HOME!* This was my mother's house.

I spun around and saw the entrance to the kitchen and saw that I was in fact in my mother's house. I could see the brick fireplace, the childhood photos sitting on top, with the television hanging on the wall. *How did I get here?*

"My child." I heard, the voice was similar to my mother's, but had a gray undertone to it. I froze where I stood. My mother is dead.

"Turn around to face your mother when she speaks to you, child."

Holding my breath, I turned around, and I see my mother. She looked as she did when she was alive. Blond hair, green eyes, rosy red cheeks. I rubbed my eyes, to see if this was real. My mother stood there in front of me, and I did not waste any time running to her.

I could feel her nails run through my hair, and she laughed. "Oh, child, how I have missed you."

I could not help the tears that fell. "I have been watching over you and I must say, you have failed me," she stated, her voice, laced with disappointment...

I was pushed away from her as she kept her hands on my shoulders. She no longer had her sparkling green eyes, but had dead white eyes.

"How dare you fail me?" She said, her voice turning more and more demonic. "Have I taught you nothing?" I was frozen in place, my eyes opening wide and my mouth opened for the scream that would never come.

"You are nothing, *NOTHING!*" her face began to grow darker her teeth, growing in sharpness. She--no *It* became more demonic. Its nails began to grow to the point they cut me. I felt claws around my neck. Suddenly, frighteningly determined, I began to fight against this, this thing. I fought as if my life depended on it.

"Weak. That's all you are." It said, lifting me up and squeezing my throat tighter and tighter. I found myself unable to breathe, much less speak, I began to kick, to struggle harder and harder. Panic filled me up and tears began to form as I felt myself weakening, even as I fought. Was I weak? Was I *nothing*?

Stopping all attempts of fighting, I closed my eyes and waited for my death.

Nothing happened. Eventually, I opened my eyes. I was in my kitchen, my *OWN* kitchen, this time I reached for my throat but felt nothing there but the choker that I wore. Throwing it off, the pressure went away. I looked around the kitchen, *my kitchen*. Nothing was out of place. Black cabinets, *my cabinets*, my floor, my tea kettle. This *was* my kitchen. I spun around looking for that...*that thing*!

Finding nothing, I took a break, and laid down. That...what was that? A nightmare? It couldn't have been, it was too real to be a dream or nightmare. I touched my neck and felt the scratch marks. *The hell?* I opened my eyes and tried to breathe for a moment. Maybe it's from me clawing at my own neck, like I did in the...nightmare? I should just go to bed.

Going to sit up, I heard dark, gritty laughter. I looked around but found nothing. I tried sitting up, I realized I couldn't. Looking down, vines held me to the ground.

"You stupid thing never learn, do you?" I looked to my left and right, but I found nothing, not even my kitchen. It was like a black void with a white spotlight on me. I began to fight. I went to scream, but I was unable to make a noise.

"No one can hear you, you silly, stupid thing. Your worst nightmare will always keep you from making a noise." I looked around but found nothing. *My worst nightmare?* My thoughts came thick and fast, jumbled like the memories of a thousand nightmares.

"Now, what to do with you...scare you to death? Or would that be *too* easy? Choices." Cold air shivered down my spine as I closed my eyes.

*Not real*, I thought. This is not real. It's just my imagination. This thing can not hurt me. It isn't real. *Not real, not real. Not real.*

"Hahaha you truly believe that?" It said, stepping out into view again, but as me!

"I am your worst nightmare, child. I can shape shift into your deepest fears. *I am you!*" The *thing* that had looked like my mother, and then *like ME* went up in smoke. Vanished.

I closed my eyes again and steadied my breathing. *Feels like I just ran a marathon*, I thought. *Not real*. I thought again, my mental voice screaming inside my head. This thing is not real.

*It can not hurt me.*

*It has no power.*

*Wake up. Wake up. WAKE UP!*

Snapping my eyes open, I sat straight up and looked around, while holding my neck. Sighing, I took a deep breath to slow my heart rate down. Looking at the time, which read three thirty, causing a shiver to shoot down my spine. Am I really awake? Looking around, I saw I was still at my computer, my half a mug of coffee still sat about four inches away. The computer had timed out. Everything looked the same as it did right before that nightmare came. I began to laugh, unable to keep the relief internal, I covered my face for a moment.

Everything felt so real! My mother, the choking, the vines. Everything felt too real, but it couldn't have been, right?

*Of course it wasn't real*, the voice in my head said. People don't shape shift into demons.

Dreaming or not, now there's a scary thought, there was no way I was going to be able to go back to sleep. Not on purpose, anyway.

Closing my laptop, I stood up. I am not going to stay up this late to read some damn emails. My sanity levels are not worth doing my job and his.

Walking through the door, I turned on lights as I went to the kitchen. Listening to the house, I noticed that it was quiet, too quiet. Reaching over to my coffee maker, I went through the motions of my typical coffee routine, but suddenly stopped. I was getting a sense of Déjà-vu, as if I had done it at this time before. Shaking my head, I continued.

I closed my eyes as the coffee began to brew, getting lost in the dream. I couldn't shake the feeling that rose in my chest--I couldn't figure out. Knowing it was going to be a long day, I took the coffee cup and sipped it straight black. Turning so that I could lean against the counter, I kept my eyes closed as I took another sip. Why was I so afraid?

"Shall we continue?"

I heard the thing's voice in my head. Gasping, I opened my eyes, and the coffee cup fell, smashing against the floor.

I could not move.

I could not scream.

I was petrified.

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

T.J. Ravenwood is a young writer living in hilly southwestern Virginia. With her free time, she creates humorous short videos for the amusement of her online friends and fans. She also is relearning to play the violin after a long hiatus from her music. T.J. lives with her best friend, Comet the wonder dog, and is currently hard at work on her first novel.

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It was 7:30 in the morning. The small office was just stirring. Some corners were still dark. The coffee machine rumbled off in the distance. The cleaner hummed to himself as he mopped the tiled floors, and I typed away on my reports. It was just another morning, and the sun was starting to rise. And it was time for my first cup of coffee.

I walked through the hallway, trying not to slip on the floor. I was a short distance away from the break room, and the dark corridors chased me like shadows. I passed by the windows. Most of them faced the back of the building, and all you saw were trees, so many damn trees. Then, I noticed that the trees were all bare, which was strange, but then again, it was December.

There was one window right by the break room that faced the other way, and I saw headlights. My coworkers were arriving, and the parking lot was starting to fill up. And the sky was an amazing pink color. I thought the sun would have risen by now, but the sky was beautiful. And my coworkers stood outside, captivated by its beauty.

Suddenly, a gentle rain fell from the sky. It was like pink mist, settling over their skin, and my coworkers looked at it in wonder. Then, their smiles turned into screams, and they started to smack at their hands, their faces. They looked up at me in horror, screaming louder, and their skin began to melt. Their eyes turned into white goo, and bone stuck out from smooshed, pale spots. And they dropped to the ground. Their screams stopped.

A moment later, they stood and turned toward the building. Their skeletal structures shined against the pink mist. Their jaws locked in smile. Their phalanges waved at me in the air. Then, they stepped closer, and I knew that they were coming in. And I ran to the office door, getting there just in time to lock it. As the lock clicked into place, I looked up and stared into the eye sockets of what used to be my coworker.

Someone screamed from behind me. I spun around, facing five coworkers. They had made it inside just before the pink mist had fallen, and now they were staring out the door at the horror that waited for us. Most of us were women, but there were two men including the cleaner. Their faces were stricken with panic, and one woman screamed and screamed. Her screams were grating on my nerves, but it was distracting me from what stood on the other side of the door.

"I can't be here," the other man declared. "I can't be here," and he tore down the hallway.

With horror, I realized where he was going. There was another door in the break room. It couldn't be open from the outside, but if he opened it, they would come in. And they couldn't come in. If they came in, then we were all dead, and I pounded the floor, chasing after him, nearly slipping on my ass. But I made it just in time to see him open the door.

"See? They're not out here." He turned toward me, still holding the door open. "It's safe. We can leave," and then one of those skeletal creatures stepped into sight, grabbed hold of him and yanked him outside.

I ran toward the door and tried to close it. Skeletal hands wrapped along the side, trying to keep it open, but I pulled it harder. Finally, the door slammed shut, and skeletal fingers dropped at my feet. I looked up through the little glass window in the door and stared at a skeletal face, and the skeletal face leaned closer, daring me to open the door. But I refused.

I turned my focus on my coworker. He was surrounded by what used to be our peers, our friends. They didn't attack him. They just surrounded him, and then he stared up into the sky. And he screamed. He screamed as he touched his face, and his skin peeled away from his hands. It reminded me of that Indiana Jones movie, and now he looked at me. And he stopped screaming. He began to grin, and he continued to grin as his face turned into mush. His eyes were white pudding mixing into the pale lumps, and his lips fell away like dead leaves. But his skeletal face was still grinning, but what was even more horrifying was that we couldn't leave here. If we left the building, we would become like him.

I turned around and faced the people that were trapped inside with me. We were the lucky ones. We had some food and water. There was a bathroom and lights and heat, and no one knew what to say. At least that woman stopped screaming, but now she was crying. And I hurried past her and out into the corridor, where I looked through the window and into the parking lot, and I realized that there were people trapped in their cars. We couldn't get to them. They were going to die out there, and they knew it. Some of the drivers took off, running over skeletal coworkers, and others just sat there, looking at me for help. But I couldn't help them. There was nothing that I or anyone else could do to save them. All I could do was stare up at the pink skies.

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

Melissa R. Mendelson is a published Horror and Science-Fiction Author. Her short stories have appeared in Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press, and her short stories have also been featured on Tall Tale TV. She is currently halfway through writing her Horror novel based around a porcelain doll called, Ghost in the Porcelain.

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It was one of those California-dreamin' sort of evenings, a salty bite to the air. Alec's heart skipped a beat with every step as he thought of Bonnie, her hair soft as silk, dresses forever accentuating her curves. She put him right smack on the top of the world. They'd had a close call with a semi-truck last night, but his Bonnie still wanted to see him this evening. How could he say no after *that* scare? What a lucky guy he was.

Stopping in front of Crawdaddy's (where everything was fifty percent off—Today Only), he smiled at the bouquet of yellow daisies in his hand as he checked his cell again for texts on the six-block walk. Time sure did stall when you can't wait to get somewhere. The scent of fried crawdads reached out from the restaurant and churned Alec's stomach. He texted Bonnie as he hot-footed across the street away from Crawdaddy's.

As soon as he stepped on the decrepit sidewalk, the far more delectable scent of fresh pizza took him off guard. He followed his nose into Mama's Pizza Parlor where faded red carpet with taped-over bare spots welcomed him. An Italian aria—sung a capella—drifted out from the kitchen while black-and-white photos of lovers and drippy candles lounged on the scratched-up tables, beckoning romance.

Alec texted Bonnie again and hurried on.

Greeted by her dad (who looked a little crispy around the edges), Alec walked into their tiny home. It had a smoky sort of smell to it, which Alec ignored as he didn't want to be rude. They came to the back patio where Bonnie and her mom sipped fruity summer drinks. Bonnie—still wearing her yellow sundress from last night—waved him over.

Alec handed Bonnie the flowers, and the foursome talked for a while. When Alec pulled out his cell to check the time, Bonnie threw it across the yard. "This again?"

Alec laughed it off, then—retrieving the phone—said, "Hey, Bonnie, let's grab a bite."

Her mom said, "There's a pizza joint around the corner. Best in town. Been going there for years."

"But you can get out of Crawdaddy's at half the price," added her dad, his eyes hopeful.

Bonnie said quietly, "Can't we just stay here? I haven't seen you in ever so long." Her voice quavered.

Alec didn't want things to turn sour, so he jumped in, "You know, I passed Mama's Pizza Parlor on the way. I was thinking on taking you there."

Her mom smiled. Her dad looked betrayed. Bonnie sighed.

Alec and Bonnie headed out.

Bonnie's pumps clicked against the concrete. "You know, we don't *have* to go to Mama's. We *could* go to Crawdaddy's. It's half the price."

"Who cares about price? Mama's looks romantic, and your mom said it's the best."

She pulled Alec to a stop. "But you understand, we don't *have* to go there."

Looking lost and haggard, people moved around them along the sidewalk.

"I know. But you deserve it after last night's scare."

She stared down at her pumps.

It was their first disagreement as a couple. Feeling a bit of panic, Alec said, "It's okay. We can get to Crawdaddy's easy from here."

They started walking again, but shadows colored the mood. Alec and Bonnie couldn't muster a single word of conversation.

As they walked by Mama's, a woman—who looked a lot like Bonnie's mom—waved to them from within. "Hi, dears," she sang. Sounded like her, too.

Bonnie said nothing. She gripped Alec's arm tighter and hurried them past Mama's.

They crossed the street at the corner and continued toward Crawdaddy's. Midway down the block, they came to the *same* pizza parlor. At first Alec thought it might be a different restaurant. He stopped at the door and looked inside while Bonnie pulled his arm. It had the same taped up carpeting and chairs. The same tables with the same candles stood ready for customers. Even the pictures were the same. The same song with the same woman's voice came floating to his ears from the back.

"Wait a minute," Alec said. "This place looks exactly like . . ."

Bonnie's eyes narrowed. "Did you go *inside* Mama's before you met me at my parents'?" It sounded accusing.

"What's your deal? What's wrong with this place?"

Tugging his sleeve, she shook her head.

He relented, following her lead down the street. For all the ice between them now, they could have been strangers.

Halfway down the block, Alec stopped. Mama's *again*. The aroma of pizza drifting out drew him in, though the impossibility of it being there a third time blew his mind. Mama—in reality, Bonnie's mom—greeted him from behind a little stand. "Two for dinner?"

Alec's jaw dropped. "You run this place? How did you get to your house when I heard you singing earlier, and you beat us here besides?"

She winked. "A woman never reveals her secrets."

Alec didn't see any other workers. No customers either. Why wasn't anyone else here? "How do you run this place by yourself?"

Mama seated them at one of the ancient-looking tables and handed him a menu. "We're hiring, if you're interested." She bustled to the kitchen.

Bonnie knocked the menu out of his hand. "You *did* come in here before going to my parents'. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Bonnie, what's the matter? We were *fine*. Now you're turning the world upside down for no reason." He loved looking at her beautiful face, and the dress gave her a classy look even if she *had* worn it the night before.

When she said nothing, he picked up the menu.

If he thought Bonnie was acting weird, it was nothing to the menu. Written on ancient parchment in various people's handwriting, it could barely be read in the dim light. Stranger, it listed nothing he'd expected. He should have seen things like pepperoni pizza. Lasagna, maybe. But, no. All the dishes had names like *Bob and Susan*, *Chris and Charlie*, and *Daryn and Carla*.

He set down the menu. "What do you know about this place and this menu, Bonnie? No more games."

"You might as well order. We can't leave."

"What the . . ."

She leaned toward him and finger-stabbed the table with every word. "Crawdaddy's would have given us a much better deal. But no! You *had* to come to *Mama's*. They cut you up into little pieces here."

He couldn't believe the words he'd just heard. "You're *nuts*. Maybe we should go."

"We *can't*. We're here. Just order something." She sat back in her chair.

Alec threw down the menu and stomped out the door. Standing outside in shock, he realized he hadn't actually *gone* anywhere. He was still *inside* the restaurant. There was Bonnie, sitting where he'd left her.

He dashed to the plate-glass window. He saw nothing outside. It was as if the entire restaurant were floating in a black hole. After trying to leave a few more times, he sat down and picked up the menu. "Fine. Let's order Chris and Charlie. Good as anything else."

Mama took their order. As she returned to the kitchen, she sang like the call of a Siren.

For what felt like an eternity, they waited, staring at different walls.

After the pizza came, Alec stared at his plate while he ate in the echoing silence. The pizza wasn't bad. Mostly it looked like an ordinary pizza with chunks of cubed steak and such. But he'd never tasted meat quite like these toppings: a cross between bacon, sausage, and veal. But not *exactly* like any of it.

Licking his fingers after those last bites, Alec said, "Hey. When did the other couple get here?"

The lady wore a red dress with a white flower in her hair. The guy had on a black dress shirt with rolled sleeves and a pair of jeans. When *had* they come in? Alec hadn't *seen* or *heard* them do it.

He hadn't realized he'd stood up until Bonnie grabbed his arm.

"Don't," she said. "They won't want to talk with us."

He shook her off, meaning to see if they had noticed anything strange about the place. "Excuse me," he began. Then he stopped, jaw hanging.

He'd been wrong about the red dress.

It had been white originally, but it was red now because it was drenched in blood. Hers, apparently. Knife wounds covered her chest, obviously causing her wardrobe malfunction. Her gray, decaying skin had drawn up, exposing her teeth. The guy's skin looked the same, though his throat had been slit. He had a knife sticking out of his right eye. They turned back to their dinner.

Horried, Alec backed away, bumping into Bonnie. With every bite the couple took, their skin looked less gray, more ... healthy. The blood drew itself back into their wounds.

He backed up some more but tripped over something lying on the floor.

It was an arm. Bonnie's arm.

Bonnie's clothes—now bloody where her arm had been torn off—looked nothing like the pretty yellow sundress she'd been wearing. Her face puffy beyond recognition, half her brain lay on the floor near her arm.

Unsteadily getting up, he reached out to help her sit down or lie down, but, as he rose, the room spun. His head came fully off his body and rolled around on the floor. He looked up at his standing body, realizing he, too, was horribly mangled. His entire abdomen had been ripped open, evidenced by his guts coiling on the floor at his feet. He could see his stomach working to digest the pizza.

He wouldn't have taken his eyes off his own body except that Mama burst through the kitchen doors.

"Ah! Charlie and Chris! How was your meal?" she exclaimed, handing Chris the menu to sign.

"It couldn't have been better," said Chris, entirely too jaunty for Alec. "All in order. I never realized just how good I'd taste."

She finished signing, and they left, hand in hand.

Alec tried to say something. He couldn't. He just opened and closed his jaws. He had no breath, none at all.

Mama turned to him and Bonnie. "So, darlings, I trust your meal was good. Chris and Charlie were pleased to finally get out of here after fifty years."

Bonnie wobbled her head. Alec flapped his jaws.

"Excellent," said Mama. She turned serious. "I don't know if you remember the car crash you were in, but you can't move on until you pay your dues. You can either do prep work for me, or you can be on the menu. Either is fine. Most people pick being on the menu. Gets them out faster. The preparation is quite painful, though. Some don't like doing the prep work. Squeamish. The bright side of that is, no one will chop you up and bake you at 5000 degrees." She winked. Singing, she dusted the pictures. "All these couples were on the menu at some point."

Alec looked up at Bonnie, a mile tall from his new perspective. He flapped his jaws. No sound came out.

"It's not fair. I know," said Bonnie. "Not for me. Not for you." She looked absurd with half of her head gone. "After the car crash, I invited you to my parents' house. They've been dead since their antique business burnt to the ground ten years ago. I *had* to see them, so I stayed the night. I wanted to go to Crowdaddy's, because that's *Daddy's* restaurant. He's not such a stickler to the rules as she is. It would have gone easier for us." She looked down awkwardly at her feet.

Alec watched his stomach churning in his body across the room. It was weird how he could see it *and* feel it.

She continued, "They showed me magazine reviews of both places at the house. The best two places are Mama's Pizza Parlor for pizza lovers and Crowdaddy's for Cajon lovers, but Crowdaddy's lets you out in half the time."

Alec racked his numb mind.

"Mom said, since we were lovers and died together, once one of us enters a restaurant, both of us have to eat there. When you ordered Chris and Charlie, we filtered out their badness when we ate their bits of flesh on the pizza. Once we were done, they ate pizza from the rest of themselves. Now they've moved on."

Alec flapped.

"And we're stuck here. All because ... Anyway, we get the same deal. We don't have to if we become prep cooks."

Alec wanted to scream. He couldn't. Then he watched in renewed horror as vomit spewed out of his neck. Like a fountain.

Glancing at their reflection in the window, Bonnie said, "Yikes! That semi-truck you hit while texting and driving really did a number on us. Looks like our grace period for seeing ourselves whole is over."

Alec flapped.

She grabbed his head by the hair and handed it to his body.

He held his own head in his hands. He spewed again. A regular *Fount Alec*.

"Tell you what," Bonnie smiled. "I'll let you pick. If you don't mind being a meal, put your head on Chris and Charlie's table. If you'd rather be a prep cook, put your head on ours."

Alec put his head on Chris and Charlie's table. Who wanted to stay here longer?

Mama hustled over. "You've decided."

Bonnie nodded. She signed their names in exquisite script on the master menu. "Maybe someone will pick us quickly if my handwriting catches their eye." She flashed a grin. Then she said, "Oh, look! 'Chris and Charlie' now have the notation of 'No Longer Available.'" She laughed.

Mama took them to the back where all sorts of canning supplies stood at the ready. While Alec watched, she suctioned out Bonnie's essence, allowing the clear, gelatinous stuff with the occasional black oil spots to goop across a queen-size cutting board until, essentially, a clear, 3-D duplicate of Bonnie lay there.

Mama slid Bonnie's body into a morgue-style freezer bay. Then she sliced up Bonnie's essence into steaks, keeping the oily spots separate from the clear. She cubed and browned up the oily Bonnie meat. Then she canned it, putting the jars marked *Bonnie* in tidy rows on the shelves.

As Alec lay on the prep table watching the meat clever screaming toward his decapitated head, he thought, *Boy, I sure hope Bonnie's right, and someone orders us for dinner fast as a semi-truck.*

**About the Author:**

Stacy Fileccia is a technical writer/editor who also enjoys writing dark fiction. A coffee and chocolate addict, she strives to intertwine interesting life experiences with fantastic imagination to deliver pure entertainment.

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**Teardrops of Blood | Maria DePaul**

Teardrops of blood fall gently upon my window.  
Who knows whence they came?  
What kind of celestial blood flow  
Transforms into rain?

Teardrops of blood fall  
Puddling into the ground.  
What is their final destination?  
Will a collecting place be found?

Tear drops of blood fall,  
Will it ever end?  
What manner of witchcraft  
Could resolve this meteorological trend?

Teardrops of blood ceased.  
The cloudburst abruptly stopped  
When suddenly an ethereal beast  
Was discovered to have dropped,  
Crashing down to Earth  
In an unceremonious thud.  
What began as a crimson torrent  
Ended in a sea of sanguinary mud.

**About the Author:**

Maria DePaul is a Washington, DC, based writer whose work has been featured in many publications, such as: *Aphelion*; *Akashic's Terrible Twosdays*; *Better than Starbucks*; *Bindweed*; *Dual Coast Magazine*; *The Horror Zine*; *Illumen*; *Innwood Indiana*; *Luna Station Quarterly*; *Nature Writing*; *Plum Tree Tavern*; *Poetry Quarterly*; *The Review Review*; *Scifaikuest*; *Speculative 66*; *Three Line Poetry*; *Violet Windows*; and *Wax Poetry and Art*.

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Blair slowed down and pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway. She cut her lights, but left the key in the ignition, so she could listen to the radio for weather updates. It didn't hurt to have music on and DJ chatter, either; it helped to keep the panic at bay, and to fill the empty spaces in her head. The radio announcer reminded her to keep her lights off, put the car in park, and keep her foot off the brake so other motorists wouldn't see her lights and think she was still moving along the highway when she was in fact stopped. Keeping lights on was a good way to get calamitously rear-ended by another storm-blind driver.

The storm outside her little car swirled and howled and rendered the mid-morning sun a dim ping-pong ball in the reddish sky. It pelted her windows with grit. Her nosy next door neighbor had given her dire warnings, long ago, about this flat stretch of highway that runs through southern Arizona, but she had assumed he was exaggerating. Like he always did; for him, nothing was merely 'good,' everything was either 'extremely awesome' or 'extremely awful.' Why would his stories about driving this highway, with its seasonal dust storms, be any different? Besides, why would she rely on the word of that old—what? Janitor? Investment banker? Blair couldn't remember what he'd retired from, not because she was forgetful, but because she didn't listen once he started rambling. He'd corner her when she was taking out her garbage or recyclables, and go on and on about this or that conspiracy, and most times her mind wandered—

*Thump.*

The sound came from the back of her car, like something had hit her trunk. Blair twisted around in her seat to look out her back window. Nothing but a wall of amber-colored dirt and dust washing over her little vehicle. It didn't sound like anything substantial had hit her car, and she was not about to get out of the safety of her little space to take a look. Probably a piece of wind-blown garbage—a crushed cardboard box or maybe a woman's lost sandal. On this trip she'd noticed all sorts of random garbage tossed out on the side of the road. Once, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she'd caught a glimpse of a coyote—or maybe a stray, gaunt German shepherd—racing alongside her car. But that was impossible; no canine could run that fast, and when she turned her head to look—of course it was gone.

*Thunk.*

Another jarring noise, but this time the back end of the car shook with it. Larger garbage, dancing in this torrid, dirty wind? A small tree limb blown out of the back of landscaper's truck? The desiccated body of a dead wild cat? She looked again, and again saw nothing—except a flat, sheet-like shadow grotesquely undulating in this wind-blown grit. With a horned head and an elongated face—a leering, wide-mouthed face; why did people (including herself) always see faces in things that weren't even remotely human?

Blair blinked, rubbed her crusty eyes, and squinted at the back window. Nah, nope, no way; it was just a trick of the light, trick of the eye. She turned up the radio. The song playing was "But I'm Not Cold," by Starfish in a Coma. Blair smiled and relaxed. This song was her absolute favorite that summer when she was—

*Slap. Slap. Slap.*

She sat upright, tense again. *Jeez*, Blair said aloud to herself, *now that definitely sounds like something walking across the back of my car*. Something with big, flat feet. With her wide eyes, she followed the ensuing slaps across the roof of her car. She clenched her teeth when the scritch-scratching began, a sound like rough claws being dragged across the thin metal roof overhead. Nails on chalkboard. Her ears ached, her eyes watered with the noise.

Then it stopped. Perhaps whatever had climbed aboard her rooftop had been blown off with a vengeance by the towering, ancient gods of this hot dry storm. Blair didn't really believe in pagan gods—but in this instance she hoped they did exist and did indeed do so. She licked her lips and got sand on her tongue. Even with all the widows snugly rolled up, the dust and dirt seeped in. Blair pinched the bridge of her nose; she had a burgeoning migraine. She imagined the empty cavities of her sinuses packed with rust-colored dust and dirt, leaking down the back of her dry throat. If she drank water from her one water bottle, would all that dirt turn to mud inside her? Would she drown in muck? If she didn't drink—thirsty as she realized she was—would

she just fill up with sand, like an hour glass? And if that fragile glass broke, would her soul spill out—would the voracious demons panting for her demise then spend an eternity counting every single last grain of her soul-sand—

How much longer was this dust storm going to last?

She changed radio stations, looking for a storm update. There, at last she found an emergency weather broadcast—no, it was the end of the segment. Blair huffed with annoyance. Now, she'd have to wait who knows how long for the next report and—

*Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap.*

That was coming from the driver's side window. Blair refused to turn her head and look.

*Tap-tap-tap.*

She closed her eyes, held her breath, and did her best to swallow her panic.

*Knock-knock-knock.*

*No.* She violently shook her head, *no.*

*Slap-slap-slap.*

She looked.

\*\*\*

In the hazy morning after the storm, a tribal police officer wiped the coating of amber-colored dust away from the tinted glass and then tapped on the driver's side window. He didn't recognize this car, and he knew almost all the cars on the reservation. Probably a tourist, a lost outsider, who'd gone way off track during the dust storm; times like that a GPS was worthless—folks would literally be driving blind. But sometimes they drove anyway.

He stepped back and looked the car over. A dent in the back fender, and the trunk was creased liked something heavy had been dropped on it. Broad, deep scratches trailing from the trunk to the rooftop. The scratches on the rooftop looked old, though, as they were edged in what appeared to be rust.

Didn't seem to be anyone inside the small vehicle, but maybe there was information on the car's owner in the glove box or console. He tried the driver's side door handle; the car was unlocked, but the door was stiff, its hinges likely thickly coated with dust. Once open, he stuck his head into the interior, but found no one. Just a neat pile of sand in the driver's seat, shaped like a little pyramid, like some obsessive-compulsive's idea of a joke.

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

Hillary Lyon is founder and senior editor for the independent poetry publisher, Subsynchronous Press. Her stories have appeared recently in *365tomorrows*, *Trembling with Fear*, *Night to Dawn*, *Yellow Mama*, *Sirens Call Publications*, and *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. She's also an illustrator for horror & pulp fiction magazines. Having lived in France, Brazil, Canada, and several states in the US, she now resides in southern Arizona.

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## **Almost Human | Lydia Prime**

How tiresome it had become to watch them come and go with no regard for me or my kind. We stood all around and effortlessly represented what they could *never* be. The vast majority of us were expressionless, but if you cared to look closely, you would see the rage building on our faces. Just this morning, I saw the children of these pretentious brutes tear the limbs from one of our own and wave them around triumphantly; clashing the severed appendages together as they feigned a fight between each other, cackling madly all the while. Their mother smiled, as if there was no cause for concern for what her little monsters had done. She simply ushered them away, leaving the amputated extremities haphazardly on the ground. We all watched in horror, paralyzed and disgusted.

Night fell and the overstuffed room was dimly lit by only emergency lights. The horde had disbursed and we roamed freely – repairing our wounded. Upon further inspection of the carnage, I'd made my final decision. By tomorrow we would no longer be plastic pariahs. We had plucked one of the more pompous specimens from the crowds while no one paid attention and hid her between the racks. I strode behind a checkout counter and retrieved a box cutter while the others dragged our guest into the open. I held the blade out so the cowering woman could see what was walking towards her. While my friends circled around us, I crouched down to her level; the same woman who'd smiled at her children's violence would understand agony, of that I was certain.

A bit unsure of what I was doing at first, I began making crude incisions, her yelps of pain were music to my ears. A copper fluid flowed from every wound. She cried, screamed for help, but no one would be coming. I plunged the box cutter into her neck and instantly became coated in the ruddy liquid. She went limp, there were no more screams. I cut into her scalp and beckoned to my friends for help cracking her skull. Her rose colored brain exposed, and slightly throbbing – I grabbed it. Everyone watched as I placed it atop my own head and ambled towards the display window.

With as much force as I could muster, I whipped her broken skull remnants through the glass. Blood splattered and wearing my new accessory, I returned to my regular position. The broken glass and twinkling alarm lights caused me to look even more glamorous than ever.

## **Markings | Lydia Prime**

I was unsure of how long I'd been walking, nothing looked familiar. The trees had strange markings on them, each increasingly concerning; monstrous creatures eating each other, fighting – some even appeared to be staring. *What are these?* I questioned and pressed on.

Though alone, I could not escape the feeling of being watched. I quickly moved through the clearing only to happen upon tracks that sat seemingly forgotten. The entire scape was blanketed in dust, as if untouched by the elements. Peering at the rusted train cars, only then did I notice how silent the area had been. The stillness was unnerving to say the least; nevertheless, I was drawn to the enigmatic scene.

I hesitated, but my desire to know forced my feet forward. I stepped into a paint chipped car and immediately felt the gravity of my mistake. A horned creature materialized in front of me, its stench and putrid flesh were utterly repulsive. Every instinct was screaming 'RUN', I could not move. As it drove yellowed claws through my chest, my final thought was of the trees. A guttural voice scoffed in my mind, *"You shouldn't have dismissed them."*

## **Some Carnivores Have Roots... | Lydia Prime**

Agile movements by a tongue so sharp and sleek, blackened teeth stretch wide to distort the mighty jaw. Concealed by delicate beauty, secrets lie inside their florescent warning. A field springs up with no gardener in sight and onlookers are drawn to the mysterious plants. Mobility is unnecessary for the ravenous blossoms the Reaper keeps.

Those misguided admirers lean too near the center for a closer peek, before a second thought is had, flesh and bone are devoured while blood and soul slurp down their immaculate throats. The first crimson droplets soak the yellow petals of the rooted beasts; the golden plot now scarlet after the grotesque feast.

Gurgling sounds echo from the rows of flowery plumage while his grimness emerges from the dark. Satisfied by quick collection, the lemon color returns.

## **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 behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

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

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Nanay told me she almost lost me as a child. That I was lucky to be alive, a soul of purity teetering between birth and death.

"My baby, *my* baby..." Nanay said, stroking my hair. I'd never interrupt when my mother talked in her sleep. Despite the tender touch on my head, the fierceness of her words tingled on the back of my neck. "*My* baby, not yours!" Then Nanay would collapse her hand and sleep like the dead.

She often told me of the *wakwak*: the unborn-eating monster. She'd detail its long feathers for hair on the back of its neck and leathery wings along a hunched, crunched over back. By day, the wakwak walks among us, looking like anyone else, if a little shy and keeping to the shadows, if a little tired and ringed around the eyes. By night, the wakwak splits in half, crouches its back enough to hide in its wings. And it flies all over the Philippines, in search of creatures with other creatures living inside them. Fetuses in pregnant mothers, like candy-coated chocolate.

I'd imagine its dark shape, its wings flapping like some oversized moth, clawing around for a chimney, a way in, to snatch me.

"The house is surrounded by salt, isn't it?" Nanay would say. "Wakwaks wouldn't dare risk their hind half shriveling up in salt, *diba*?"

At least this was better than how most kids heard it, whenever they misbehaved: "*Hmm, sounds like the wakwak's getting you tonight!*" Nanay would always tell me not to worry.

"No, silly daughter, you survived birth. That's the end. Wakwaks only eat *unborn* babies."

I listened, munching on blackened toast crust and microwaved meat. Nanay told me that was a peculiar snack to enjoy. I swallowed. "Are there peculiar wakwaks? Who eat overgrown, overripe babies that got to grow up?" I daydreamed there very much *would* be a nightmare creature out there that was just like me, with hair that wasn't quite like others', with problems drawing a straight line and problems splitting perfectly in half, who ate peculiar things. My childhood lived and breathed that curiosity. The safer I was from the monsters, the more I wanted to meet one. Nanay sometimes entertained my curiosity with a devious smile at night. But sometimes, she would tell me that wasn't realistic, and to repeat after her that *we are safe. The salt is enough.*

\*\*\*

It wasn't until I grew up and moved out into my own apartment that I saw her. One night I was curling my hair and dressing up for a night of staying in and enjoying my own company. What a peculiar thing to do, to dress up without leaving your own four walls, people would say! But no one was home to judge. I would do these things for fun...enjoy my youth before I passed it on to another.

No one was home to judge as I dressed myself up for only me. Here, my rituals and responsibilities followed nobody's timing but my own. Here I could mourn as long as I pleased, bring things up again, or forget them. Here I could read all the stories of other creatures Nanay one day decided to bar from me. No one could judge that I hadn't even started cooking dinner yet. I was amusing myself with the old stories, tying a chicken egg around my stomach as the superstitions recommend. A childhood fantasy of mine was to become a wakwak, let the life force within the egg pass along to me. *Become one with me*, I wanted to will it.

Part of me laughing, indulging in the legends and rituals for the amusement.

Part of me somber, dressed up for a ceremony of my own pretense, dressed up for whatever spirits may witness in the room. Who could say? Have you ever held that moment, that midnight moment between the real and make-believe, where you held all your contradictions in your hand, half praying and half doubting, part believing and part doubting? Split between wanting another life to grow within and permeate you, and wanting to just fit in with other kids at school.

I was crazy, I knew it. Perhaps part of me wanted to entertain the spirit of Nanay. Tease her with, *here I am, all the more fascinated with stories you've stopped telling me. Better come back and stop me.* I missed our midnight snacks. It had been too long since she disappeared. Others told me they were sorry and wish I could at least have peace of mind, and closure. I didn't tell them what Nanay and I knew about wakwaks. I don't know if finding her and seeing her buried would have helped anything. Didn't mean she was safe. Some creatures just go and eat corpses in the grave, like chickens pulling worms.

Life force feeding life force, that's all it is. Death and consumption just an exchange. I knew not to be terrified of nature's way. But I still selfishly wanted Nanay to have escaped. Even if I was mad that she told me nothing anymore. If she had disappeared completely, at least I had a hope she was whole.

I was just about to light another candle for her memory.

All of a sudden, the pot of water I *promise* I was going to cook soon began to make noise. I could hear it bubbling quickly, furiously, as if the pot had come to life and were stirred with its own life force. I scrambled forth to turn it off. I must have forgotten I had left it to boil, what an idiot, Nanay would say! *Be responsible with your midnight snacks to make up for dinner!* But the stove wasn't even on. The pot, I realized, was boiling by itself. It was bubbling over like insanity. Overflowing to the floor. I screamed as hot water splashed on my toes and still I scrambled to turn the knobs of the stove all the way off. There must be some mistake. The stove must have been broken! I slipped and grabbed the counter for support, smashing the egg I had tied around my stomach for ridiculous indulgence in macabre curiosity.

Oh, I could just *hear* Nanay tell me this was ridiculous now! How could I even manage to make a living for myself if this scene had to look like *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*?

And then just as suddenly, it stopped.

I flinched, held my breath. I could hear something else breathing. But no one else was in the room.

I sought to clean up the chicken egg. Stupid ritual. I must have looked *ridiculous*. If anyone were living with me, what would they say? I had just finished cleaning up the eggshells when I realized that was all I had to clean.

The egg was empty.

I shuddered. *Life force passing through to life force. That's all it is*, Nanay used to say when she told the stories. Before she feared her own stories. Before she let that fear drive her away from her own daughter.

"Dud egg," I laughed, faking humor in the situation. I left the kitchen to rinse off in the bathroom. I washed my face.

But then, I could hear the breathing again when I turned the faucet off. In the mirror, crouching by the window, I saw it. The feathery, leathery woman with limbs all identical and eyes that looked like they housed hands inside them. A creature, the tangled scarf of her own hair dragged along with dusty things caught in them. The wakwak.

Twenty years and I finally saw it.

I screamed and fell, and suddenly the floor was awash in hot water, which burned me.

She was by me in a second. Atop the bathroom counter, her torso, by itself. Only the top half of her body had made it inside. Reflected on the shiny, squeaky-clean counter was just her torso, again, like a grotesque queen of hearts on a playing card. The wakwak tapped a finger against my lips and then against hers.

And then she spoke with a distortion of my voice: "*My baby. My baby.*" She peered at me longer. I couldn't look away. I saw her eyes were like mine, a black so black they gleamed. Her pupils filled her small sockets so that there was very little white. Sometimes, my eyes got like that too. My reflection, however, was upside down in her eyes.

I couldn't see if her tongue was as straw like and sharp as they say, because now her lips were sealed. I winced when she touched my face, touched where I burned myself. She parted the fallen hair out of my eyes.

Then she kissed me on the forehead, and some coolness spread throughout me...and my burns disappeared.

For a moment I stood there, stunned, even when she tapped my voice back to me. She blinked, waiting for me to communicate. Her eyes shimmered.

As her fingers ran through my hair, my hair started creeping longer and longer. It almost matched hers. She tried to braid it together with hers, like a long umbilical cord. It was so strange, but I found it soothing...I let her keep braiding my lengthening hair to hers. There was warmth in her touch that I wanted more of...that I missed...

The wakwak also leaned forward to ever so slightly touch my stomach. Her hand rested there for a long time, a scuttling spider that suddenly stopped. Waiting for her turn to move. Hungry.

Some new monster woke then. A *gro-o-w-w-w-w* was building up within me.

I broke out of my trance. *You've let a wakwak in. What do wakwaks eat???* Scared now, I swung at her and knocked her down onto the sink. She shrieked and the leathery wings broke out from her back, flapping violently.

"*My baby! My baby!*" screeched the voice--hard to tell if it was a distortion of mine or not.

I scrambled around for some salt. If I could make it to the outside where the hind legs of her other half were waiting. If I could destroy it with salt, I could save myself and the fetus within me.

She flapped and smashed into the lights and mirrors like an overgrown moth.

When I found her lower half, legs standing crouched and frozen outside, I threw salt over it. I watched it crumble onto its knees and melt away.

On damaged wings she scrambled in, a top half divorced from her bottom half, now widowed from it. Screeching, the wakwak torso made one more dive for my head. Her hands pushed down on my scalp, my hair, and just like that she launched off into the air. Leathery flapping wings took her away, disappearing into fog. I never saw her again.

For good this time. I never saw my mother again.

I still hadn't figured out if maybe all the stories weren't, well, *all* the stories. The fetus-eating, leathery-winged creature that stalks pregnant women and steals naughty children. The flying, crawling nightmare able to split into two. The shapeshifter, coming in and out of nurturing and tormenting human life. Perhaps that wasn't all there was to it.

Suppose monsters have babies, too, I thought, remembering the wakwak's dark eyes matching mine. Perhaps, twenty years ago, a wakwak wearing human skin decided to grow a human baby inside herself. Perhaps the labor of human birth tore her apart and in fear, she raised a child that was half hers, and half what she used to eat for breakfast.

My Nanay was long gone by now, so there was no one to ask. But I found my breathless voice lingering with a question caught in my throat: "Nanay, which is the real you? Your top half, who kisses and soothes and hushes my voice, or your bottom half, drunk with night terrors about clutching a child too close?"

The Nanay I knew kept me, and the wakwak within her wanted to claim its child back. So then she took herself away, sealed herself up in her wings one day, and disappeared. I had always thought the dark under her eyes was from the tiredness of life. Not the tiredness of teetering between life and death.

She said she nearly lost me before I was born. Who would've known you could lose something to yourself?

Either way, I stare up at the ceiling feeling like a small child again. Me, a wakwak's child. Only a matter of time before my nightmare caught up with me, dragging behind it its dusty hair and things caught in it.

I'm bound to learn how she felt, as my stomach grows. The cycle would continue, life force against life force in my womb. But I've seen wakwak healing powers as well, melting away the burn on my face. Perhaps I can heal, the way the wakwak unites her two sides again and again.

If a creature of death gives birth to humanoid spawn, who is fated to die and who is forever changed?

I prepare myself, and breathe deep, deep, deep. My stomach gro-w-w-w-wls. *It wasn't me.*

I still feel her touch in my blood. Having my child. Halving my child.

Before bed, I dash salt over my pregnant stomach.

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

Ellen Huang has pieces published in As I Am, HerStry, Awkward Mermaid, Enchanted Conversation, The Asexual, Writers Ink, Our Daily Rice, Rigorous Magazine, Ink and Nebula, The Folks, Whispers, Hummingbird Review, The Gallery, The Driftwood, and Perfume River Poetry Review. She loves monster stories, burning things, lighting candles, dark fairy tales, swimming in the ocean, All Hallow's Eve, and wearing a cloak just for fun.

**Blog:** [worrydollsandfloatinglights.wordpress.com](https://worrydollsandfloatinglights.wordpress.com)

**YouTube:** <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA3c6U727XzmZpdDk2oEyXw>

Stephanie hated eyeballs. The look of them, the mention of them, and the mere *thought* of them.

*They rolled around in her hand, squishy and warm, like . . .*

Stephanie's stomach lurched; she threw her hard-boiled egg in the trash by her desk. *Great, something else I can't eat anymore*, she thought. She had recently given up grapes after unwittingly putting her hand in a covered box filled with peeled ones at a Halloween party. She imagined eyeballs felt like that. And now the hard-boiled egg grossed her out. What was next? Why couldn't she keep such horrible images from invading her thoughts?

She knew she had a phobia and that it wasn't a very common one. But not many people witnessed a friend tripping with scissors in the second grade. Stephanie would never forget the scissors' blade jutting from Amy's eyeball, blood and fluid oozing down her face. Amy's scream played in Stephanie's dreams frequently.

Her lunch break was over, so she turned to her files and began to work. Gradually, the mundane task of proofreading distracted her from the eyeball images.

"Hey, Stephanie—"

Stephanie jumped in her chair, startled by her boss's voice behind her.

He laughed. "Didn't mean to scare you. I guess you were pretty involved in that stuff."

"It's okay, Trevor. I just wanted to get it done before I left tonight."

"You know, you've been doing a great job here. How long have you been working for me now, six months?"

"Yes, sir. I've enjoyed my time here very much."

"Well, you're almost up for review, and I think it's going to be a good one. You're going places in this company. I'm going to keep my eye on you."

He pointed at her, winked, and walked away, leaving Stephanie staring at his back with a look of horror on her face.

\*\*\*

Stephanie tossed and turned in her bed, unable to get Trevor's words out of her head. She would finally doze off, only to feel eyeballs sticking to her body. Then she'd jolt awake, trying not to scream.

*This is ridiculous*. She grabbed the remote from her nightstand and turned on the TV. *A Clockwork Orange* came into focus on the screen, with protagonist Alex's eyes mechanically held open as he was forced to watch violent films.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" Stephanie cried. She threw the remote at the TV and ran into the living room. Her Ambien was sitting on the coffee table. She took one and swallowed it dry. She collapsed on the couch, breathing hard. She turned on the TV and let the CNN newscaster drone while the Ambien lulled her to sleep.

\*\*\*

Stephanie woke several hours later, refreshed and determined not to let anything spoil her day. The eye thing was silly, really. Who was scared of eyes?

She went into the bedroom to get ready for work. The TV was still on, but thankfully another movie was playing. She turned it off, and then headed for the shower.

The hot water helped Stephanie calm down. She washed her hair, but then as she rinsed it, some shampoo dripped into her left eye, and she gasped. She turned to the water and let it wash out her eye; she couldn't stand the thought of rubbing it out with her fingers.

She looked in the mirror after she got out of the shower. Her eye was bright red. There was nothing she could do about it; no way was she putting drops in her eye. She figured it would heal on its own soon enough.

\*\*\*

"What's wrong with your eye? You don't have pinkeye, do you? That's contagious; you shouldn't be here."

"No, Trevor—I got soap in my eye this morning. Nothing for you to worry about." Her eye burned, but she tried to ignore it.

"You should get some eye drops," he suggested. "Go to the drugstore downstairs and pick some up. You'll feel better."

Stephanie shuddered. "No, it's fine. It'll clear up soon." She turned to her computer and began her work for the day.

Stephanie's eye twitched while she worked. It annoyed her a great deal, but she couldn't wipe at it with her finger. Finally, tired of looking like she was flirting with her colleagues, she took a little mirror out of her purse and checked out the eye. It seemed redder, swollen. The white of her eye was red, with tendrils of darker red snaking out from the iris.

*Gross.*

She decided to go home early; maybe take a warm shower to help her eye. She packed up her things and stopped at Trevor's door. She knocked lightly and he looked up.

"Hey, Trevor . . ."

"Holy crap, Stephanie! Your eye looks awful! You should really go to the doctor, or it might get even worse."

"Yeah, maybe I will. I'm heading home to take care of it, if that's okay."

“Sure, go ahead. I’m sure you’ll be fine. Just looks a little infected or something.”

\*\*\*

Stephanie let the warm shower water rinse her eye, hoping it would alleviate some of the redness and itching. Instead, the water stung, and she cried out, backing away from the stream. She got out of the shower and grabbed a towel, dabbing carefully at her eye. She looked in the mirror, recoiling at her reflection.

The eye was practically popping out of her skull. It was red, inflamed; the pupil and iris couldn’t be seen. Red rivulets ran from the eye down Stephanie’s cheek.

“What the hell?” she cried. She started to cry, but her eye burned from the salty tears. She dabbed her face with the towel again. Red streaks stained the white towel. Stephanie dared a peek at the mirror once more, and immediately regretted it. Not only was her eye swollen out of its socket, it now had white pustules dotting it. Stephanie screamed and ran out of the bathroom.

She grabbed the phone by her bed, but hung up. Who would she call? An eye doctor? Out of the question—what if he wanted to *touch* her eye? Same with 911. Stephanie sat on the bed, her arms around her knees, and rocked back and forth. Finally she went to the linen closet, grabbed a hand towel, and headed back to the bathroom. Careful not to look in the mirror, she folded the towel and wet it with warm water. Gently she put it to her eye, hoping at least the swelling would go down.

Stephanie sighed. The warm towel felt good against the inflamed eyeball. After a few minutes she looked in the mirror. The swelling had gone down considerably, much to her relief. Now she could blink, but her eyelid brushed against the pustules. She shuddered. She leaned into the mirror to see the nodes close up. They were mostly a creamy white, but with a pinhead-sized bit of gray in the center. To Stephanie’s horror, the gray spots moved slightly.

“What the fuck?” she whispered.

Now she *felt* the movement; the gray spots grew a little larger. Stephanie felt some pressure against her eye, and then . . . *pop*. A tiny worm undulated out of one of the pustules, floating along in a thick fluid. Stephanie screamed as the other nodes popped as well. Worms slithered onto her cheek, falling onto the bathroom counter. Viscous fluid oozed and dripped on top of the worms. The eye deflated like a balloon, falling out of its socket and flattening against her cheek.

Stephanie stared at her reflection, unable to scream or talk. She shook her head in denial. The eyeball flopped around on her face. Her mind snapped.

“Well, this isn’t right,” she said to her reflection. “You certainly can’t go out in public looking like that!”

She grabbed the scissors from the vanity drawer. She lifted up the flattened wet eyeball and held it out from her face. Then she took the scissors and cut through the muscles and veins holding the eyeball to her skull. It fell with a wet splat on the counter. She screamed from the pain, and then smiled serenely.

“That’s better.”

Blood flowed from the empty eye socket. The muscles lay limply against her cheek. The white of her right eye was now taking on a red tinge. Spots dotted the redness.

“Something’s just not right, though,” she mused. “But what?” Then a verse from her childhood Bible study classes came to mind.

*And if your right eye offend you, pluck it out, and cast it from you . . .*

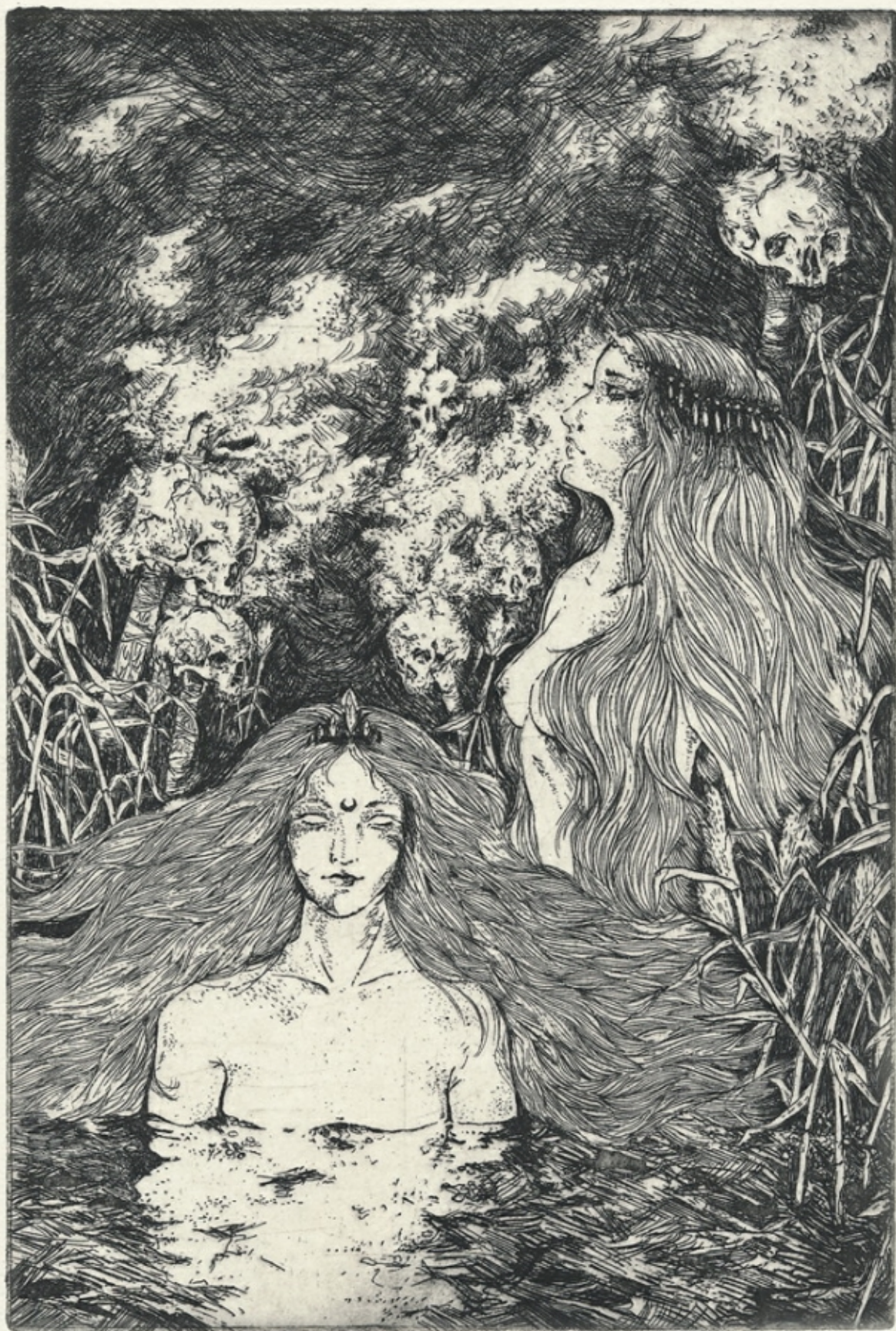
Stephanie nodded as if a voice had spoken to her and picked up the scissors once again.

#### About the Author:

Sheri White has lived in Maryland all her life and has the crab-picking skills and the big can of Old Bay in her pantry to show for it. Her stories have been published in many small-press anthologies and magazines. Her first collection, *Sacrificial Lambs and Others*, was published by Crossroad Press in 2018. She is also the editor of the UK magazine *Morpheus Tales*.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

Not afraid of the water? Perhaps you should be...

# FEAR

Of the Water

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## **Ritual | Ashley Davis**

Rune before ritual;  
Fire before stone.  
Black runs the ichor  
Over cracked, yellowed bones.

The water is rising,  
Winds coming to bear  
Shouts of indifference  
In brisk autumn air.

She is a naiad,  
A spirit of seas.  
Alone in her witchcraft,  
Scars on her knees.

Call the night wind,  
Hear the wolves cry.  
She is their priestess,  
Longing to die.

Morning comes quickly,  
Shadows are gone.  
Her cauldron is empty  
And she is alone.

Death has defined her,  
With a craving for blood,  
Rotting, gray insides,  
Swathed in lichen and mud.

She's smoke on the water  
Poisoned sweet wine,  
She seeks her true love,  
Just on her insides.

Marsh creatures flee her,  
Deer know to run,  
And even the crocodile  
Leaves his place in the sun.

The birds drown themselves  
To escape her tortuous fate,  
But humans will follow  
Until it's too late.

Is she real? Does it matter?  
Or have we become blind?  
For all forms of Hell  
Survive infinite time.

## **Buried | Ashley Davis**

Walk the weathered boards.  
Grip the railings  
Coated in dust.  
Lift the lantern higher.

The peeling wallpaper calls out your name.  
Dark mirrors in endless twilight corners  
Make shadowed promises.  
Promises you don't want them to keep.

The death-smell of lilies  
Pervades this purgatory.  
White, wet, and wilting,  
Begging to be buried.

From some places  
There is no way back.

## **Wild River Soul | Ashley Davis**

She has always been  
More than human.  
Running with wolves  
And delighting in fire.

Her voice speaks lightning,  
And her footsteps are thunder.  
The wild winds of tornadoes do not frighten her;  
She collects them in her soul.

She is a single drop of wild water,  
Beautiful and luminescent,  
But it is she who makes up the wildest of rivers,  
Finding life in the chaos and healing in the depths.

She breathes flames and calming waters.  
She speaks birdsong and battle cries.  
She is both war and woman,  
And she'll step into her fear and conquer the very stars.

### **Asphyxiation | Ashley Davis**

Trapped within and without  
I fasten my own chains  
But these stone walls can't hold my soul.

Claustrophobia closes in,  
My breaths shorter,  
My heart arrhythmic.

I run too fast to seek more air.  
The madness is rising;  
I fall to pieces.

Bring me under the stars.  
Say things you can't undo.  
Show me my face if you can find me beyond my reflection.

Look harder.  
On the other side of the glass—  
But my last breath has escaped my lips.

### **Black Water Magic | Ashley Davis**

It was their second trip down here in the yellow wheeled sub. Dee drove.

"Dorothy..." Ralph complained.

"What did you say?" Li flinched. "Don't make me remind you..." A deep hole and fifty pounds of concrete had shut Phoebe up. Sure, they'd been childhood buddies, but they were a team now, and lives were on the line.

Li said, "It's cool, Dee. He's dumb as a box of rocks, but he sure as hell can carry a box of treasure." Li was her expert diver and artifact analyst. With chem and microbiology doctorates, family money, and reputed gang ties, she was quite the asset.

"Awaiting orders," Carlos said from the boat above. He was a brilliant inventor, but flighty. Li and Ralph shared the airlock.

They'd found unusual tectonic activity after an earthquake in a series of caves inside a mountain rising from the sea. Too steep to climb and surrounded by rocks, seals, and sharks, nobody had claimed it. Several instances of boats broken on rocks and their occupants' half-eaten remains in the water had given it a bad rep.

Minerals from their first mission had proven profitable. Li found rare metals in the rock. Cave examination and high-volume samples were the goal this time. Carlos piloted the drones and cams from the boat. Li would explore the caves. Ralph would wait outside with his harpoon gun before hauling gear. Dee was reading up on black-market rare-element values.

At anchor drop, Dee radioed up top. "Status?"

"Visibility at eighty meters."

"Fuck yeah. Let's get rich!"

"Ralph, swim to the yellow marker." Dee radioed HQ.

"Vee here. Where's my money, Agent D?"

"With the fishes now, but it'll be lining our pockets soon. Deploying Agent R. Good visibility. Li...Agent W...next."

"Proceed."

Dee opened Ralph's airlock. A flurry of bubbles arose and she saw Ralph hauling gear to Cave A. "Engage drone and enter Cave B at red flag. Li...go." Dee activated trackers, cameras, and mapping. "Watch for sharks," Dee warned.

"Funny, I don't see no seals," said Carlos. "I never seen any out here. Why d'you think that is?"

"Pay attention to the drone." Maybe he needed some concrete, too.

"Detecting large veins of three elements!" Li reported. "Drone showing two more." A collective cheer.

An hour later, Cave B dead-ended, so they sent the drone into Cave A. It found an aboveground chamber, which they resolved to explore.

"What the fuck?" Carlos.

"What?" Dee said.

"Camera. I was rounding a corner...shit! Drone down!"

"I bet you ran into a fucking wall," Li quipped, and Dee smirked.

"Suit up and retrieve equipment, Agent C," Dee said.

"Gimme a minute!"

"Hurry up, *pendejo*. Unless you wanna join Phoebs." Li laughed.  
 "Diving in," Carlos said, annoyed. "Fuck, it's cold!"  
 "I told you to buy a better wetsuit," Li chided.  
 "Shut up, you two. Boss calling."  
 "Team, I'm liking the readouts, but I've lost visibility on Camera Three."  
 "Carlos ran into a wall or something," Dee said. "He's retrieving it. Agent W will have the final report."  
 "Good job, team. Vee out."  
 "I thought the yellow flag was Cave A," Carlos said.  
 "Yeah. Why?"  
 "Where the fuck is Ralph? His gear's here, but he's not."  
 "What?" Li said, then calmed. "Chill. You know he wanders. Hey Ralphie, radio in."  
 Dead air.  
 "Agent R," Dee yelled.  
 Static.  
 "Probably magnetism blocking radio signals." Dee checked her meters. No large activity recordings since arrival. She relaxed. *Idiot*, she thought. *Gonna get himself lost*. She watched as Carlos entered Cave A.  
 Dee looked around. The water was clear, but she hadn't seen any sea-life. *Odd*.  
 "Entering aboveground pool," Li said. "Based on spatial mapping and temperature, this water is goddamn deep. Some kind of massive sinkhole."  
 "Can you map it?"  
 "It could go down for miles. And some lower zones are dangerous—chemical content. But aboveground, maybe. There's an outcropping along one side."  
 "Pulling myself up," Li said ten minutes later. "There's an epoxy-like substance on the floor. It's been disturbed frequently, by many organisms."  
*Maybe seals*, Dee thought.  
 "Hold on—another cave!" Li said, though her voice was hard to make out. "This mountain must be riddled with caverns. There's a whole ecosystem down here."  
 Dee started losing her.  
 "...glowing fungi...survive...depending on depth..."  
 "Li, you're breaking up. Don't go—"  
 "...algae composition...twice what we...my *god*..." A scraping noise, followed by silence.  
 "Li?"  
 Nothing. Was she beyond range?  
 The radio came back. Screaming. Pure terror...and agony. "Get out...everyone...fucking God...get it off...*get it off it hurts!*"  
 Silence.  
 Dee was breathing heavily. She radioed Carlos. "Li's in trouble. Get the med kit. The aboveground cave."  
 She put the sub into gear and moved closer. "Ralph, where the hell—" As she spoke, the breath left her body. In her mirror was Ralph. Well, not entirely. A disembodied head and an arm dangling by a tendon wasn't much compared to Ralph's usual heft. After staring for a few moments, she radioed Carlos. "*Code Five. Exit immediately! Bypass side cave and get the fuck out!*"  
 "Within five meters of entrance."  
 They'd get out and call for help for Li, though inside Dee knew...  
 "Dee, you're not going to believe this." Carlos's voice sounded...odd.  
 "What?"  
 "Dorothy Ann, it's so beautiful. The lights...so many colors..."  
*Oh God*, she thought. Then the screaming started.  
 She turned off the radio. She felt a bump. Another. The sub was being dragged. The size of... She didn't bother doing the math. She radioed HQ. "Dorothy Ann, final report. Full casualties expected. Do not send rescue. Ralphie, Wanda, Carlos, me—we're all dead. Thanks for a damn good time, Viv. It's been...magical." She gave a wry laugh. Then she saw tentacles and everything was blood and pain and then...nothing.  
 At HQ, the boss turned off the radio. Her best team for twenty years. Who was left? She knew, and dreaded the call. Arnold. But he'd saved every mission so far. She hoped he could handle whatever was out there. Dr. Vivian Frizzle picked up the phone.

They look like old bones, but they're so much more. The Earth belongs to us in this brief spark in the darkness that is human life, but it reclaims us all in the end.

*1959*

He was only twelve, and surely he would be safe with eight other boys and two troop leaders. One weekend away from the safety of home. But one of those men wasn't a man inside; he was a monster. A blow with a flashlight and a violent struggle, and then he went out with a shoestring, ironically, from his own beloved boots he'd begged his mother to buy. The monster did what monsters do, and he dumped the mutilated body here. But the boy remains. Maybe not in his former state, but there nonetheless. Now the boy is a stained ulna, accompanied by a clump of fire-red hair. Caught amongst the detritus is the decaying leather cord of the friendship bracelet he'd made with the other boys that day. It had lasted for the rest of his life, just like he'd promised.

*1964*

The cello was her greatest love, her greatest master, at least until Sheila. Then she threw it all away. At fifteen. She'd been a prodigy, but she turned away easily. For her. For love. Breathless nights of planning, throwing the essentials in a bag; it was a betrayal to her parents, but she wasn't planning to be gone forever. Just one trip through the woods, so they couldn't track her, and Sheila—the only one who understood her internal turmoil—would meet her at the pier with forget-me-nots—her favorite—on the other side of the mountain. But that moment will hang in time forever. Tree roots are treacherous in the dark, especially when you're a scared young girl. Sheila eventually went home, believing her love had abandoned her courage. The girl's family moved on, assuming she had cut them out of her life, never realizing that her love for both them and her partner was her truth. After the head wound against the base of the oak tree, she'd felt all right for a few hours. Then came the dizziness, the nausea, the lightheaded shortness of breath. She lay down to sleep a while, and sleeping she would always remain. An earthquake-triggered rockfall brought her here, where she is a humerus among the bracken, a small brown box, sparkling promise ring still inside, an eternal symbol of her love, only revealed to the universe now.

*1978*

He thought the world was his for the taking. Getting his Eagle Scout badge had cemented that. Sharp blue eyes and hair like soft wheat, a crooked smile that charmed all the girls. He was headed to university in the fall—a soccer scholarship. But his true passion was sculpture. His parents were so proud. One last hike, he'd said. One last view of home before I conquer the world. That evening he sat down on a cliff edge to watch the setting sun. Without warning, it gave way, trees falling with it, and—mercifully quick—that was the end, a sharp branch puncturing one eye socket and penetrating into soft brain tissue. He's here now, a prominent, strong femur, an engraved hunting knife—a gift from his father—rusting in the loam inches away. He thought the world belonged to him, but he, like all of us, in the end, found that he, in fact, belongs to it.

*1985*

She was a being at the edge of water and light. A ballerina who loved poetry, romantic comedies, and strawberry wine. A blossoming career before her, but blurred by pain. She wanted to rediscover the universe through the great, wide green. After he left her, she wanted to show that she was strong enough alone, but humans are breakable on the outside. One misstep on a rock, a small splash in a rocky brook, and time went on. All that's left was a scrap of white denim on a water-smoothed tibia, resting softly on the leaves. As soft as her hands used to move as a swan in white lace and satin.

*1993*

She would like where she is now. A fitting ending. A wildlife ecologist, a proponent of the beautiful, wild spaces of this incredible, dying planet, she was here to save what was here and rebuild what was possible. She always wore her lucky hairband in the field—had since grad school. It had been lucky since she'd successfully defended her PhD in front of an all-male committee, standing tall instead of crouching down, for once. By chance, while observing a family of foxes, she'd espied some rare purple flowers on a slope beneath a limestone overhanging. It was steep, but she knew how to anchor herself. Specimens bagged perfectly, labeled just so, logged in her red leather field journal. She was a perfectionist, if nothing else. But she had a soul that appreciated what lay beneath it all. She turned around to look out over the woods, taking a breath of fresh air, and in that moment she knew nothing but joy when the stone overhanging crashed down, crushing her instantly. Pieces would lay there, perhaps forever, but the dark-haired woman who laughed at raccoons and tried so hard to find meaning in the tittering of the night owls was now fragments of a scapula and clavicle, the only parts that escaped the boulder, a lens from one of her beloved instruments her last mark upon the Earth she loved so much.

*2002*

Life and death were his only thoughts, his only options. An abusive childhood in poverty led to a brief high when he put himself through college, but he never found his passion. At least he made money, but not enough to buy true happiness. At fifty,

single and balding, he hated his tedious office cubicle, his micromanaging boss, his lonely apartment on the edge of town, and the expectations of his aging mother, a woman who had abused and neglected him, but demanded his every spare moment in her gloomy, ugly nursing home. Not one of the nice ones, with smiling nurses and flowers and field trips, but one of the cheap ones, with broken ceiling tiles, mountains of dirty laundry, and empty-eyed staff who forgot everything from birthdays to essential medication. His only happiness was his dog, Lee, which he had given to a lonely neighbor before his 'trip'. He couldn't walk into that office to be yelled at and accomplish nothing one more time. He couldn't pick up the phone and hear the screeching of his drug-addicted sister, begging for money, any longer. He couldn't pretend to not know his mother for the monster she was every time he looked into her hateful eyes. All that was left was endless nights of TV dinners while watching *Law & Order*, wishing for a different life. One that had probably been unobtainable from the beginning. He parked his car on the side of the highway on a cold September afternoon. He climbed over the barrier, backpack in hand, and entered the woods still wearing a suit, tie, and dress shoes. He walked until it got dark, then he slept near the base of a laurel tree. He found the perfect tree the next day. An oak with strong branches, stronger than he'd ever been. It deserved the life he had been given. The oak would have flourished, despite the hardships. He pulled out the stepladder and looped the rope around the sturdiest of the lower branches, not too close to the trunk. He followed the directions he'd read online and copied down to make the noose. The knot was perfect—the best thing he'd ever made. He felt pride and a stunned sadness as he climbed the ladder. He had no final words to say, no final things to do. He was empty, as he was always meant to be. One step, and it was over. He hung there for seasons—no one was looking for him—but eventually the rope rotted through and animals scattered the remains. Now he was part of a cervical spine, broken but real, just as he was in life, inches from a small, silver cufflink shining in the dust.

2010

A new life for a new woman. Once a hard-hitting Wall Street trader, this powerhouse had powered down to retire early just shy of sixty. A simple cottage, a loving husband, and freedom. She would drink chamomile tea every morning with fresh-baked bread and eggs from her own chickens—a novelty for a city girl. Her soul was always a battle between Emily Bronte and a Hallmark greeting card. Even now, she was still finding who she was. Each morning, after her sunrise tea, she would dress in her running clothes, grab her iPod, and hit the mountain trails. The trails were level, short, and easy to navigate. She never considered that predators might lurk outside the urban areas she was trying to escape here. He was a young man, in his thirties, addicted to methamphetamine. Desperate for more while walking blindly through neighborhoods, he followed the affluent-looking woman into the woods. He waited until she reached a lake with a waterfall, then shot her twice in the back of the head. She never knew he was there. A life exchanged for fifteen dollars in cash and a credit card he only got a few hundred out of. He was never caught, and he blended into the rest of addicted society, living his unremarkable life. After being thrown into the lake, her body washed downstream, through some rapids from a recent storm, and into a pool that soon froze over and was covered with snow. A fallen tree dislodged her many seasons later, her long, delicate radius ending up here, the ribbon from her hair caught among some lichen.

2015

He had owned these woods for eighty years. Knew them and the wildlife like the back of his hand. He'd sit outside his makeshift cabin and whittle, breathing in the scent of life that was the blue planet itself. He played a wooden flute his father had carved. "Claire de la Lune" was his favorite, sometimes "Syrinx", though sometimes he would play Bach's "Partita in A Minor" for his late wife, Agathe. The grizzly had been stalking him for days, and the old man's senses weren't what they had been. He never heard the great beast move behind him, didn't see the shadow on the ground or feel the rough, ragged breath on the back of his neck. Only felt the pain when claws met flesh, when jaws rent tendons and muscle and bone. The bear dragged him to a den. When all the scraps were gone, his skull, mandible still intact, now set upon by birds and small animals of the forest, rolled down a hill and rested here. The flute he played, in his pocket that day, lay there too. And so the man became the mountain. Jagged and broken, but home.

#### About the Author:

Ashley is a writer/editor, PhD astrophysicist, AI scientist, synesthetic Savant, and screenwriter. Her work can be found in *The Literary Hatchet*, *The Horror Zine*, *Illumen*, *Ladies of Horror*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Beyond Westworld*, and anthologies. She's ghostwritten five novels, and her debut novel is set for 2019 release with a poetry collection and novellas. She writes as Juliet Amequohi to honor her indigenous heritage.

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Kelly pushed herself into the corner of the entranceway to the tube station, trying to shield herself from the rain, shaking fingers fumbling for the cigarette packet in the breast pocket of her denim jacket. Shivering from the cold she stuck a cigarette between her lips, taking care to keep it as far to the right side of her mouth as possible. Her lips were still swollen on the left side, tender to the touch. She scrabbled for a match and found one, cupping her hands around the meagre flame to light the cigarette. She took a couple of deep drags and leaned back, trying to calm herself down. Her hand, she could see, was still shaking as she held the cigarette, though whether it was from cold or anger now, she no longer knew. She could feel her heart thudding furiously in her chest. Her wet hair hung in limp blonde strands around her shoulders. The bruised and tender flesh around her right eye was still stinging from the assault of the wind and rain.

There was no sight or sound of life from the underground, bar the empty rattle of the ramshackle escalator. Scott evidently hadn't arrived yet. At least there was no guard around, to hassle her about loitering. She felt like shit.

She finished her smoke and threw the butt on the floor, feeling at least a little calmer. She heard someone coming up the escalator and started. A moment later Scott appeared.

"Hey; Kel. You OK?"

Kelly turned her pale face towards him. "Not really."

Scott's smile of greeting turned into a frown as he came close enough to study her bruised face. "Did he do that to you? Jesus Christ."

"Let's just get out of here," Kelly said. "Can we go for a coffee or something? I'm freezing."

"No problem." Scott took her arm and they headed back into the freezing rain.

They went up the road to McDonald's, and the rain was easing off by the time Scott finished chomping his cheeseburger. "You sure you don't want anything to eat?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry." Kelly stared out of the window. The coffee had helped her thaw out somewhat; her fingertips were still tingling as her nerve endings defrosted.

Scott rolled the straw around in the rest of his chocolate shake for a moment, then he looked up at her. "Why don't you come to my place tonight?"

Kelly shook her head. "I'm in shit as it is for going out again. I've got to go back. But I'm scared as hell."

"Well I'll walk you back."

Kelly sighed. After a moment she got to her feet, turning towards Scott with a sad, haunted look in her red-rimmed eyes. "I guess we should do it, then."

\*\*\*

Kelly was silent for most of the trek to her house. "Hey, Kel," said Scott suddenly, slowing beneath a street light. "Look what I got." He showed her the switch blade he had in his pocket.

She looked at it for a minute, blowing smoke up into the air. "Where'd you get it?"

"My brother. He knows a guy who gets 'em all the time," Scott said. He looked at her expectantly, clearing wanting a reaction of some kind. Admiration, perhaps? But Kelly merely nodded and continued walking. She was reaching for another cigarette even as she threw the last butt to the ground. She had been chain smoking ever since they left McDonald's.

Scott hurried to keep up with her, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, take it easy."

"How can I take it easy," she snapped, spinning around, "with what that bastard's been doing to me all my life?" She pulled the cigarette out of her mouth, wincing. "It even hurts to have a smoke because of him." She stuck the cigarette carefully in the right side of her mouth and struck a match. "I hate him, Scott. Even if he is my dad, I hate him so much."

Scott studied her as she paused to light the cigarette. She was acutely aware of the marks on her wrists and arms as she brought her hands up to her face, the scars of old cigarette burns. Ever since she'd known Scott there had always been bruises, black eyes – once she'd even had her arm in a cast. They had talked about it. Scott had seen Kelly cry many times. So many times she had told him of her desire to be free of the hurt, the fear. It had to stop.

"It's going to end," Scott said. "Just remember that."

"When I think of what he's done to me." Kelly wasn't listening to him; she was lost in her own world of pain. "How much he's hurt me. I wish I could make him pay for that. For all the pain." She was shaking again.

Scott put his arm around her. "He will pay," he said softly. They had reached Kelly's street, a long, straight row of Victorian terraces. Kelly hated the place. It was so bleak and depressing. Lots of grubby kids running around with snotty noses while their mothers threw pans at sloppy, drunken husbands.

"We'll go in through the back," Kelly said. She led Scott down a rubbish cluttered alleyway and through a back gate. A patch of bristly grass and a shed that was falling to bits made up the back garden. Kelly fumbled for her keys and unlocked the back door. Gingerly she pushed it open. She turned to Scott, her fingers to her lips. Then she entered the house.

Scott followed her into the kitchen, counters were piled high with unwashed dishes and empty beer cans. The room reeked of stale grease.

Kelly hesitated, her hand on the door, and glanced back at Scott.

"What's wrong, Kel?"

"Wait here," she whispered.

"What for?" The son-of-a-bitch was sitting behind that door right now, ripe for the picking. Scott's hand closed around the blade in his pocket.

"Just let me talk to him. Wait here." Kelly pushed open the kitchen door. As she pulled it to behind her Scott hurried to press his eye to the crack.

Kelly's father was watching TV. The top of his balding head was visible above the back of the sofa. The room was musty with the odors of stale sweat and food.

"That you, Kel?"

"Yes, Dad."

"C'mere."

Kelly paused. Slowly she walked around the sofa to face her father. He looked very much the way he had when she saw him earlier, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, unshaven, a cigarette in his hand. On the stained coffee table in front of him was piled the remains of a meal: dirty plate and cutlery, a ketchup bottle, a couple of empty beer cans, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts.

"Where you been then?" her father said. "You stormed outta here without so much as a by-your-leave. You know I like you to tell me where you're goin'."

"You hurt me, Dad," Kelly said nervously. "I was upset."

"You've been stealin' my fags."

"Only one. I had none. I'll pay you back; I went and bought some." Kelly fumbled in her pocket for the cigarette pack; her hand was shaking. As she pulled it out and held it out to him, something fell out and landed on the floor.

"What's this?" Her father leaned down and picked up the small square of foiled paper. He stared at it for a moment in disbelief. Kelly felt her heart miss a beat: *Oh shit. I'm in for it now.*

"It's a fucking condom!" Her father stared at her, his face turning beet red. "What the hell are you doing with this?"

"It isn't mine, Dad, I swear! Sharon gave it to me. I wasn't gonna use it!"

"You little slut!" He grabbed her by the arm. "You gonna tell me who you were with tonight?"

Kelly struggled. "No one, Dad. I just went out for a walk. I swear!"

He caught hold of her hair and pulled her head back. "Don't lie to me! Who were you with?"

"I wasn't with anyone, Dad. Let me go, please!"

"You're lyin' to me, Kelly." He slapped her across the face.

Kelly threw her hands up to her face, and kicked out blindly, catching her father in the shins. "You little bitch!" he yelled, and dropped her to the floor. She fell, hitting her head on the corner of the coffee table. Groggily, she tried to claw her way up, hanging on to the side of the table. She reached out for the glass ketchup bottle as her father lunged at her. He grabbed her by the collar and hauled her up off the floor. "Tell me who you were with!"

"Nobody!" Kelly screamed.

"Tell me!" He slammed her head down onto the table, scattering the clutter upon it. Pain lanced through Kelly's skull and a red haze swam before her eyes. She screamed, and her father lifted her up to slam her down once again. In a panic she swung the bottle and bashed it against the top of his head, so hard the glass broke. Ketchup and glass flew everywhere. Her father howled and let her go. Kelly hit the floor clutching the broken bottle by the neck. Her father swayed on his knees before her, ketchup dripping all down his face. Or was it blood? She saw him making a grab for her again; she tried to get up but her head was hurting too much.

She could dimly hear her father yelling, and Scott calling her name. She struggled to lift her head. She saw her father falling back onto the settee. Scott jumped on him, the switch blade in his hand, plunging it over and over again into her father's chest. Scott's face was red with rage, and he was screaming something unintelligible. Her father was screaming too.

"No, no, stop!" Kelly screamed. "Scott, stop!" There was blood everywhere – all over the floor, the table, the settee, all over Scott, all over her father.

Then Scott stopped. The screaming stopped. Kelly could hear the blare of the television, but it seemed distant, like a far away dream trying to intrude on a thick blanket of silent slumber. She dropped the broken bottle. It hit the carpet with a dull thud. She stared at her hands, smeared with blood, then at Scott. She felt numb.

"It's finished, Kelly," he said. "He won't hit you again."

Kelly got to her knees. It was done, but she was still shaking. Why couldn't she ever stop shaking? Her father lay sprawled on the settee, eyes wide and staring, mouth hanging open. The front of his shirt was torn and sodden with blood.

Scott looked down at the bloodstained blade in his hand. "I want you to go upstairs and pack your stuff," he said. "Take what you need: you won't be coming back here again. Quickly now."

Kelly struggled to her feet and staggered upstairs. Her room was so safely familiar – it would have been so easy to shut herself away in there and pretend nothing had happened.

From the dressing table a gaunt, white faced girl stared back at her, hair matted with blood, black-eyed and bloody-lipped. Her head was pounding.

She stumbled downstairs a few minutes later, dragging behind her a sports bag. She didn't know what was in it; she'd stuffed it with whatever came to hand. Her hair was wet; her face was raw and sore from trying to scrub all the blood away.

She didn't look over at her father. She didn't want to see. The TV had been turned up; the noise was deafening. As Scott ushered her out of the house, she looked up at him. He had washed the blood off his hands and face and he carried his jacket under his arm.

"We killed him, Scott," Kelly mumbled numbly. "We'll go to jail."

Scott squeezed her hand. "Nobody's gonna know what happened, Kel. Nobody's gonna put you in jail. Besides, it was self-defence. He would have killed you. Now he can't hurt you any more."

Kelly let Scott steer her down the street. "Where are we going?"

"Back to my house."

"But what about tomorrow? What about your parents?"

Scott paused to look at her. "Don't worry about that." He smiled then. Kelly looked into his eyes and what she saw there suddenly filled her with terror. "I've already taken care of them."

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

Sara Jayne Townsend is a UK-based writer, and someone tends to die a horrible death in all of her stories. She lives in Surrey with two cats and her guitarist husband Chris.

She is author of several horror novels, and a series of mysteries featuring contemporary actress and amateur sleuth Shara Summers.

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



# The Morning Tree

*A fairy tale with a dark twist*

K. A. MASTERS

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Elizabeth Cleary woke up in a bad mood. Her husband would have attributed it to PMS, as men so often blamed every foul thing on, but it wasn't the reason. If anything, he was more responsible for her bad mood than her hormones.

"Do you need to take a shower first?" she asked him. He stared at the ceiling, not speaking to her. Elizabeth looked at him a while longer, waiting for him to answer, but he was clearly still mad at whatever her husband was always mad about, suffering from PMS more than she ever was.

When he still didn't answer, she got up from the bed, closing her book and lying it on the nightstand. "You know, just because you're mad doesn't mean you can't answer a simple question," she told him.

He continued staring at the ceiling, refusing to answer her or even look in her direction.

*Being a royal prick, as usual.*

Elizabeth growled under her breath and left the room. She started to head downstairs when she passed the twins' room. She noticed the light beneath the door first. Rolling her eyes, she turned the knob. "You both know it's way past your bedtime!" she yelled.

Sammy was laying on the floor with a toy car in his hand. Elizabeth found herself smiling at her sleeping child. Fallen asleep while playing, it seemed.

"Played yourself out, huh, little man," she whispered, lifting him up carefully and tucking him into bed. She looked under the blankets of Jack's bed, but he wasn't there.

"Jack?" she called, but in a soft voice. "Where are you?"

She looked under his bed, but Jack wasn't there. Down on her knees, she sighed. *Hiding in his closet again*, she figured, getting up and heading to the door.

There was a hole that went straight through to the other side of his closet door. She held her temples for a moment, to keep from scolding her children. Once again, they had been poking holes into things they shouldn't be.

*I'll see if the royal prick will talk to me long enough to get onto the boys tomorrow morning.*

She opened the door and her anger melted at the sight of his sleeping form. Slumped against a basket of toys, clutching his blanket, Jack had fallen asleep while hiding. She lifted him and carefully carried him to bed to tuck him in.

She looked at both of her children. They looked so sweet and innocent now. In the morning, she knew she would wake up and they would be terrors again, but for now, they looked like sleeping angels. It was moments like that that reminded Elizabeth of why she loved her children.

She crept out of the room as quietly as possible, not closing the door all the way in case the boys woke up in the middle of the night. They would be scared of being locked in a dark room, wake up screaming, and she knew her husband wouldn't get up to calm them down.

Elizabeth walked downstairs to get her clothes from the laundry. Tomorrow she would put them up, along with a load of towels she had in the dryer. Today had been a bad day and folding and hanging clothes had been the last thing on her mind.

All she wanted to do was take a shower. She climbed the stairs again, quiet as possible so she wouldn't wake the boys, and back into the room. She didn't look at her husband as she passed by. She ignored him completely.

He was cheating on her. She knew he was. Because she had married a bad guy, because he told her he had cheated on her, because he was still here, despite having told her so.

*Maybe I should get a divorce.*

Elizabeth stopped in front of the mirror and stared at her face. She once was so beautiful. Men had begged her for her number, and she had decided to marry the first jerk that knocked her up. She had given up all of her dreams to love a man who would cheat on her.

She stepped into the shower and began cleaning herself. She was surprised when she stared at the drain and saw blood mixed in her water. She even laughed a little.

*Maybe that idiot was right. I started my period a week early.*

She laughed as she finished taking a shower. She was even smiling a bit when she came back into the room and got into bed beside her husband. She looked at him, stared at him for a long time.

Something was missing, an image she knew she needed to see, but couldn't. She just smiled it away, leaning over and kissing his cheek. "I still love you," she told him. When he didn't answer, she turned to her nightstand. "We'll talk in the morning."

She looked at the gun on the nightstand, a moment of recognition coming over her. Three bangs, one after another in her mind. She looked at her husband again, felt the truth creeping up her spine, and then shook her head, placing the gun back in the drawer.

"We'll talk tomorrow," she told him, turning off the lamp and slipping beneath the blankets.

#### About the Author:

Christy Aldridge is a horror writer raised in the small town of Samson, Alabama. She's written six books, including "Rogues and "Six Months". Her inspiration comes from her semi-psychotic family and God. She often procrastinates from writing to watch horror movies and calls it research.

Twitter: [@ChristyA\\_Horror](#)

Blog: [Christy Aldridge](#)

**Poison Apples | Erin Sweet Al-Mehairi**

Like apples falling from my eyes,  
fire flames lick the rope,  
and I might be free,  
if you open that door.

Red,

like my little wellies lost in the woods,

Red,

like my 10-speed daily riding escape,

Red,

like the cardinals flapping, chirping warnings,

Red,

my hands drip with it, I drip death  
...or is it remorse?

My insides feel like they are surrounding  
me, clenching tight,

...I want to sleep from the exhaustion,

I want to drift....

Floating,

I feel the stone cold,  
the cracking cement,  
smell the damp earth,  
hear mildew whispering my name.

**About the Author:**

Erin Sweet Al-Mehairi is a writer, editor, and PR Professional with degrees in English, Journalism, and History. *Breathe. Breathe.* was her debut collection of dark poetry and short stories from Unnerving, which was reviewed as both visceral and haunting. Her other work has been in several anthologies and magazines and was the co-curating editor for the gothic anthology *Haunted are these Houses*.

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Haylie felt herself vanishing into her math homework. The numbers were as concrete as the desk in front of her, brought to life by the soft warm glow of the desk lamp gilding her math book. Haylie wanted to sink into the problems, solve them, move on. So different than real life.

Eventually she even tuned out the music playing on her phone, something her friend Kat had suggested to help her keep calm. It took Haylie a while to surface from working the final problem. Gradually, she became aware of something scratching against her windowpane.

The snowstorm was bad tonight: four inches of snow predicted, maybe more. Haylie hoped the weather woman was wrong. She hoped the worst of the storm would pass them by. The last thing she wanted was a snow day, forced to stay home with her weeping mother and shouting father. She'd much rather be at school, where work might take her mind off of things.

The storm scratched more insistently at her window, dragging her away from the final math problem again. Sighing, Haylie tugged an earbud from one ear.

Her room faced Magnolia Street. The old oak tree in the front yard remembered the Civil War. Maybe the wind was enough to make its twigs scratch at her window.

When she twisted in her desk chair, the shadow at the window startled her. Amidst the swirling flakes of snow, the shadow raised a hand again, this time to tap on the window frame.

Haylie almost shouted for her dad. As the sound rose in her throat, she realized she didn't want him here in her cozy room, stomping and shouting and watching her as if she was going to disappear.

The shadow put its face closer to the glass. The desk lamp's glow reflected from ice crystals in Miria's hair, like diamonds in her black curls.

Haylie jumped up to open the window to let her sister in. In her haste, the earbud's cord snagged on the desk lamp. The lamp toppled over to crash against her math homework. Shaken loose in its socket, the bulb went dark.

Again Haylie almost shouted. Again she stopped herself. She didn't want to set her mother off on another crying jag.

She reached out to turn the window's lock, but the jamb had swollen in the cold. Although she yanked on it, the window wouldn't open.

"You're going to have to push," she said, sure that her voice was too soft for Miria to hear over the storm. Haylie didn't want their dad to overhear. Until she made sure her sister was okay, she didn't want her parents to intrude. She was desperate for a moment with Miria all to herself, before the world crashed in. She wanted a world without TV cameras and police lights.

Miria put her hands flat against the wooden frame and shoved as Haylie heaved. The window popped open abruptly. Haylie stumbled backward, collided with the bed, and sat down hard.

Although Miria waited outside, the snow didn't. It flew into the room, melting as it fell against Haylie's face.

"What are you waiting for?" Haylie gasped, struggling off of the bed. "A personal invitation?" That was something her dad said and she grimaced. "Come in and close the window before we get in trouble."

Miria slithered in. She moved in a weird boneless way, stretching one leg down until her toes touched the carpeted floor, then sliding the other leg in and down before drawing her torso after her.

Instead of the purple Converse high-tops that Miria always wore, she had on a pair of black leather boots with sharply pointed toes and even sharper heels. Haylie asked, "Where did you get those boots, Miria?"

"In the pines." Her sister's throaty voice was almost unfamiliar.

Haylie finally untangled her feet from the comforter. She reached over to turn on the floor lamp standing beside the bed.

Her sister wore a tiny shimmery dress, barely longer than a bath towel. What Haylie had taken for snow crystals on the fabric were actually little glass beads, black on black. The dress made her sister look older than fourteen. Haylie would have sworn Miria was wearing makeup too, bruise purple shadow and a lipstick that gave her lips a bluish tinge.

"Where did you get that dress?" Haylie asked.

"In the pines."

Was that a store? Haylie didn't know it, but she wasn't very interested in shopping and girly things. She hadn't thought Miria was either.

"Where have you been?" Haylie demanded. "Mom and Dad have been sick with worry. The cops have been here I don't know how many times. We drove all over town, putting up posters and handing out flyers. They've even been on the news."

Miria stared at her, but didn't answer.

The cold wind whistled through the room. Miria made no attempt to close the window behind her. Haylie wanted to reach past her sister to close the window, but something held her back, kept her standing in the circle of light thrown by the floor lamp.

"Where did you sleep last night?" Haylie whispered.

"In the pines," Miria said. "In the pines, where the sun never shines."

"Dressed like that?" Haylie asked.

"I shivered when the cold wind blew."

Haylie stared at her sister. In the back of her mind, she could almost hear a song that echoed the things that Miria said. Maybe the bruises around Miria's eyes weren't makeup. Maybe Miria's lips were sort of blue.

Her parents were just downstairs, watching TV and waiting for news about Miria. Haylie knew she could call them. Dad would clomp up the stairs and shout at Miria and Mom would hang in the doorway and start crying again...

Whatever happened next, Haylie knew it would be awful.

The doorbell rang downstairs. Before anyone could move to answer it, someone pounded on the door. It was the police. That's what the police did whenever they thought they had a lead about her sister.

"My baby!" their mother wailed downstairs. Their father yelled for Haylie to come down.

"You coming?" Haylie asked.

Miria shook her head and held out her hand. There was dirt under her broken fingernails.

The cold wind howled through Haylie's room. Both of them shivered.

### **About the Author:**

Loren Rhoads is the co-author of a succubus/angel novel called *Lost Angels*. Its sequel, *Angelus Rose*, will be out this spring. Her short stories have appeared in *Best New Horror #27*, *Cemetery Dance* magazine, *Fright Mare: Women Write Horror*, *Sins of the Sirens*, and most recently in *Weirdbook* and *Occult Detective Quarterly*. Check out her Alondra stories on Amazon.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

It had been the longest day. She just wanted to get home without more trouble, but no. Like so many times before that subway ride, she felt the stranger's erection pressed firmly against her backside.

She glared into the empty space in front of her. She got that accidents happened, such were the perils of public transportation, but this? This took effort. *What, did he have his whole groin thrust forward? What fucking planet did this guy wake up on thinking this is okay?*

He'd have calculated the risk, she knew. They all had before him, no doubt. She looked younger than she was. She was shorter than him. And she was certainly alone. Even with people speaking up more and more, he would expect her to remain silent in the moment. Not cause a scene. Maybe her face would flush crimson with fear and embarrassment or rage. Maybe she'd slap him. If she called him out, he could deny it. He could have a laptop bag ready and waiting, an eager explanation for the confusion. Because *he would never*. And she was too fat to be his type anyway, ha ha.

In her stomach, she felt *them* begin to rumble.

She shut her eyes and breathed slowly.

*Not here. Please.*

She moved farther down the packed subway car, hoping that would be the end of it, hoping she could focus on her ride without another person invading her space.

Maybe it would have been different on some other night and she could have shrugged it off. Like, if she hadn't been out canvassing in strange Rich People towns, trudging door to door alone, asking Schrodinger's douchebags to sign a petition. Sometimes the people were nice. Very interested in hearing about marriage equality, very excited to sign the papers and call their representatives. Other times, like that night, there were asshole cops whose doors she hadn't even knocked on.

He wasn't on her list. Probably for good reason. But when he saw her wait for what *he decided* was too long at one of his neighbor's doors, he threatened to sic his K9 on her. He said she was there to break in. Said she could clearly see no one was home because the lights were off--even though not all of them were.

She'd begged him to just call down to the station, like her boss had told her and the others to do if anyone ever bothered them. The local police could clear everything up, her boss had assured her. She had permission to canvass.

Training didn't matter in the moment. In the dark of that suburb, with an angry German shepherd jumping on her because his dad told him to, explanations were worthless. To a cop, she had no right anywhere near him or his neighbors. And especially not after she started to explain she was there to get same-sex marriage approved in the state. She was lucky the asshole hadn't bitten her himself.

Where had her grumbling rumbling stomach full of terror been then?

She sighed, bone weary. Some other commute home, she also wouldn't have just been let go. Her boss bemoaned her failed last shot to hit the numbers. She was a reliably safe driver but they needed staff who got people invested, pressed the issues, filled up the signatures.

*Well, let him go face down homophobic cops and their dogs.* She rubbed her arm where the dog had nipped but not broken skin. A warning bite.

She tried to focus on seeing her girlfriend and wondering how much to explain. But at the next stop, there he was again. The walking hard-on had shuffled inconspicuously down the aisle.

*Oh, gosh,* she thought with heavy sarcasm, imagining his voice, *what a strange way the foot traffic flows, conspiring to put me beside you again, young lady? Definitely haven't chosen you as my spank-bank victim of the day. Ho ho ho! Ha ha ha!*

She went back to her flip phone, messaging her girlfriend to make sure she'd be right on time. The doors opened. The crowd thinned and swelled.

He leaned against the nearby pole, pretending to ignore her on his own phone. She saw him angle the phone toward her, then hit a central button. Just once.

Taking pictures, was he?

She didn't need this. She just wanted to go *home*.

After that night, she wouldn't be in Boston again or riding the T anytime soon. Hell, she shouldn't have been on public transit that night to start, but cancelled dinner plans will do that. With too much homework in one course, her girlfriend went home early rather than wait around for her in the city. They'd meet up at Alewife, the end of the line,

and her girlfriend would give her a ride the rest of the way home. They could spend the drive together, not totally missing each other.

At least there was that, in a day that wouldn't end.

The guy, meanwhile, made sure she couldn't ignore him. Yet she couldn't look at him. She knew where this was headed and she felt powerless to stop it.

She remembered the first time. Those boys. Her classmates. They weren't friends but she'd been forced to see them outside of school. CCD. Catholic indoctrination classes at another not-a-friend's house. When the mother-slash-teacher left the room, those boys teased her. Called her a freak. It was like they knew she kept a powerful secret. But of course, they didn't. Couldn't.

Once and only once, she fought back. A mistake that caused them to escalate. His little boy hands grabbed her little girl wrists to throw her on the couch among the quilted pillows. His taller friend laughed and helped to hold her there while the younger boy climbed on top of her, holding her down with his weight. Even though she knew they were all children, the boys' faces looked so much older in her memory.

The feeling of that little unpleasantness grinding against her leg through both of their pants haunted her. He must have thought he just looked like he was fighting back against her fighting him. She froze. She didn't know what *it* was except that it was wrong. It wasn't normal. It was firmer than a leg, softer than a knee. It was nothing she had herself. The puzzle pieces drew the absence of a shape, defining it precisely.

Her stomach had rumbled, ground down into that brown faux suede couch. She'd felt close to vomiting. Thinking back on it, she wondered what would have happened if she had let loose then instead of bottling everything up for years?

The boys had let her go only when another girl warned them that the mother was coming back. And she looked the fool for being upset when no one else corroborated her story. She ended up the one in trouble for causing a scene. She was the one not allowed back.

Good. She hadn't wanted to be there before and definitely not after. Still, she'd spent time locked in guilt--wondering if someone else would've believed her, and if the boys harassed another girl with her gone. It filled her stomach with dark pitch.

Other times filled her memory, attached to objects: the little white unicorn figurine, the summer pool, the Blue Man poster. She wasn't sure about other times, couldn't focus on them long enough to sharpen their images. They felt like mirages. Lovecraftian horrors that, if she wrote them down even privately, might swallow her whole and burst her chest. The guilt of them bit into the back of her neck.

Every time her stomach rumbled away, raging against their desire to control her for those moments, unsure of the nothing that had happened and lost over why it felt like something.

Feeling unimportant, she'd shrunk into herself, never able to talk about these times. Friends had had it far worse after all. And this was just boys being boys, oh he probably didn't mean it, besides what can you do about it? So a few clothed erections had invaded her day uninvited. Some hands had touched her breasts 'by accident'. An intimate ex-partner had assumed consent even when she slept. Big whoop, right?

Worse than someone shrugging and telling her to get over it, what if they didn't believe at all? She couldn't bear that embarrassment. Even with her girlfriend, she'd been quiet about everything. Best to leave her secrets in her stomach where they belonged.

But this dude! This preening man on the subway. He reminded her that her stomach growled and rumbled and buzzed something fierce--and had been doing so for a lifetime! She felt ready to boil over.

When the crowd thickened, he came closer to her with his hateful intentions. She shut her eyes. It was inevitable. It had been building for so long: why *not* him?

The back of his hand idly brushed against her ass. Her stomach flipped, buzzing and churning. How did no one hear it?

When she froze rather than moved, he became emboldened. As the car lurched, he turned his hips toward her. She felt the thrust of his erection pressed against her hip. She gagged as the first little darkness crawled up her throat.

The car swayed. He rubbed to one side and back, the feel of him easily distinguishable through his mesh running shorts against her corduroys.

She choked as her anger climbed into her mouth.

He sighed a little, self-satisfied with his presumed power over her and her body.

*That's enough!* She turned on her assailant, spitting out the vengeful creature on her tongue.

"You," she said, eyes burning and throat tingling with the legs of her rage. "Don't ever. Get to do that. Again."

She slapped him in the groin with an open palm but held tight, mashing his pride between her fingers. The pain stunned the man. She squeezed, ferocious. Then, before he could say anything--call out for support that would never have been there for her--she tilted back her head, mouth gaping open.

In between the flashing lights of the subway tunnel, ichor-coated bees rumbled up and out of her throat. They seemed imaginary for a moment, like only she could see them. But when they dove to the man's face, oh, he saw.

He shrieked and jumped back. But the bees swarmed him, grasping his face, beating their wings. They stung and shivered. Blood blossomed on his skin and in his screaming mouth. He flailed, swiping at the insects, but they would not relent.

Black and droning, yellow and stinging, the bees drove deep into his flesh, eating him alive as every man before him had done to her. When he fell back gurgling, she grinned around a mouthful of her anger.

The bees kept coming. The crowd had noticed him scream and hit himself, but it wasn't until the man toppled to their feet that they took him seriously. Around him, other men slapped their arms and torsos. A few of them began to freak out alongside her attacker.

The crowd panicked as one, freeing her from the weight of guilt and shame and just.... The years. Of existence. And silence.

She opened her mouth wider, far and farther, impressively impossibly so. By the dozen, the vengeful bees that had ripened in her since birth escaped at last. Oh gods, it was magical!

She opened her arms wide. Bees. Bees for them all!

Bees for those who saw and never said anything!

Bees for those who had hurt others!

Bees for those who hurt her!

*Send them all out. Cover the world. Buzz and rumble and tear them apart! Blind their power-hungry eyes and swell their lying tongues!*

Around her through the blackened din, she saw other women and girls and several young men start to understand as the swarm let them be. They stood and opened their mouths, joining her in a chitinous chorus. From those new human hives, a flurry of wingbeats and a blanket of bees poured forth, strengthening their number.

Together, they looked rapturous. They looked beatific.

She laughed, seeing and feeling seen for the first time in forever.

The train slowed to a halt.

"Alewife. Final stop," the conductor said over the speakers, oblivious to the incident.

She damn near bounced out of the cacophonous subway car, delicately avoiding the writhing masses of men on the metal floor, and brushed past the stunned people waiting on the platform. Some moved to board the car before they saw her glorious mess.

"What... what happened?" one woman asked at last as she tugged along her friend.

She coughed. Another dripping bee crawled from behind her teeth and flew off. She wiped the corner of her mouth. "It was time."

The woman took a moment, locked gazes as her eyes began to tear, and nodded. Then the two other women shared a glance. They tilted back their own heads and opened their mouths for their swarms. The noise grew deafening but sweetly so.

She breathed without fear and headed for the escalator, hoping her girlfriend was ready in the parking garage. She'd had such a long day but... it was getting better.

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

Olivia Hennis is the author of the *Iron Garden* and the *Bloodletters* short story series. Originally from autumn root, Ollie now lurks under sky and cherry orchard, plying trade as anything from a Halloween park designer to tarot reader or bookstore gremlin. When not writing, Olivia enjoys social deduction games with friends, petting every cat, and drinking cheap absinthe with Backlist & Chill Podcast.

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"I want to leave. I believe there is another place...where it isn't like this."

Her voice was low. So low I found myself looking at her lips, trying to see the words forming there. But it wasn't low enough. Soon a siren sounded and a man in a Regent's uniform appeared at our table. The others in the restaurant pretended not to look but I knew that we were all they saw.

"Those words were not pre-approved." The uniformed man said, and I could see from the ID pinned to him that his name was Bernie.

Sandy hung her head. We both said nothing. Bernie sighed and said, "Consider this a first warning. I am not a monster, you know?"

"Thank you," I said.

"It's a beautiful day," he said. And this was true. The sun had been shining when we entered the restaurant to have our lunch. I had hoped the lunch would cheer up Sandy. She had not been herself ever since we found out about the baby. I would find her staring out a window, one hand on her abdomen, the other on the pane of glass as if trying to transport the tiny passenger inside of her into the great wide world.

We were lucky. We had a neighbor who had been caught using words that were not preapproved. His house has been vacant since. Everyone whispers about the punishment. I have heard everything from loss of property to loss of life. The whispers even happen in the Regents' headquarters where I work. There is so much that we don't know.

What we do know is that another baby is coming. Sandy cried when they took each of our babies. I cried the first time but not after that.

"You mustn't talk like that," I whispered to her when we left the restaurant.

She turned her face to the sun. "It's a beautiful day."

"Indeed, it is."

\*\*\*

I couldn't stop thinking about what Sandy had said when I went to work the following day. According to our data files, there were no other places. This was all we had. The Regents controlled everything. In so many ways they made it easier for us.

"Hey, Jonah," Craig from archives rounded my desk balancing a cup of coffee in one hand and a thick file in the other.

"It's a beautiful day, Craig," I said, making sure to peek out the small window across from our cubicles before saying it.

"Indeed, it is," he agreed, trusting me enough to respond without seeking confirmation from the outdoors. "How is Sandy feeling?"

"Oh, she just glows, my friend, positively glows."

"She—" he caught himself and I had no idea what he meant to say, "It really is a beautiful day."

The Regents were always listening. They listened to protect us. They banned any words or statements that were polarizing or provocative.

"It's a beautiful day" was one of our preapproved statements. We could say it, unless it was cloudy and cold or rainy or snowing. Then that would be a lie. Then we would be punished.

I made an appointment with Human Resources where I was greeted by the Executive in Charge of Positive Workplace Development.

After assuring each other that it was a beautiful day, I said, "My wife is pregnant."

The Executive popped open a laptop and began scrolling. She traced the screen with one finger while scrolling with her other hand. Her eyes scanned the screen quickly. She stopped and looked at me. "Again?"

I nodded.

"The Regency is not responsible for the safety of an organism that is unable to follow the rules and is not employable—"

"Oh, I know. None of those, none of my children are with us."

She nodded. "The Regents do what they do for us. We can't have anything polarizing or provocative amongst us. In so many ways, they are helping us."

I failed to understand how infants were polarizing or provocative, but I couldn't ask for clarification as that question had not been preapproved. Instead I had to agree that the Regents helped us; that they made life easier for us. This was not entirely indoctrination. Since the Regents took over, unemployment was lower than ever. People had food, people had shelter, as long as they followed the rules.

"You have been here a long time—"

"—twelve years."

"And you have no citations on your record." The Executive shut her laptop and leaned on her desk. "My best advice is to put in a request. The baby may be permitted some...allowances, because of your track record and loyalty."

I thanked her, and we reminded each other that it was a beautiful day before I left her office.

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I told Sandy about my meeting with HR. I stuck to preapproved verbiage, but I made the message clear. Her eyes grew wide. "Do you think? I mean it's something, right? Some hope."

I tapped my nose, reminding her to be mindful of what she said.

She sighed and rubbed her abdomen. "Would you like dinner? You must be famished after a long day at work." The question and following supposition were approved for wives.

"Dinner would be lovely," I responded, which was preapproved.

Sandy motioned for me to follow her to the sink. She turned on the water and the fan above the stove and whispered in my ear, "We have to follow through. We have to ask if we can get allowances for the baby." She looked at me and her eyes were hollow. "I can't lose another one."

I nodded. I would do what I could, but I didn't want to get her hopes up. We had three children removed. Sandy kept a memento of each of them. A blanket that smelled like the first. A tiny pair of socks that had been worn by the second. A knitted cap from the third. There was a tiny dot of blood on the cap, a remnant from what the Regents had done to the third.

We had named the first but not the other two. Names would have made them more real and names would have to be approved which would draw more attention to them.

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Sandy's abdomen continued to grow and, along with it, her anxiety. Because I had worked for administration and had a clean track record, our baby was approved to cry twice a day. That was a relief but neither of us were naïve enough to believe we could get the baby to agree to such limited communication. The tiny blood stain on the cap of baby #3 served as a constant reminder of what happens when you don't follow the rules.

I was about to enter my office building when I saw a familiar face on the sidewalk in front of me. It was a friend from my elementary school days. A friend from before the Regents' rules. I was overcome, both by his presence and by the reminder of other times.

His name was Jeremy and he and I had been inseparable for many years. We had loved each other like brothers and would have done anything for each other. The distance that had been placed between us via different pre-approved Regents' Higher Education Academies and by the Regent's regime itself melted as soon as he smiled.

We hugged for far too long. That is what you do when your words are limited.

"It's a beautiful day," I said, my voice cracking with emotion. There were no other words.

"Indeed, it is," Jeremy smiled and pulled me in for another hug. I thought this was strange until he whispered directly into my ear, "There is a tunnel in the basement of our old elementary school. Behind the furnace. It goes to a better place."

I stood silently in his embrace, trying to look natural.

"It leads to the dock. There are boats scheduled to leave in a month. Be on one of them."

When we pulled apart he said, "Gosh, Jonah, so great to see you and on such a beautiful day." He nodded in a quick way, urging me to believe the provocative words he had whispered to me. "I am so glad to see you again. We mustn't let so much time pass between us." He duplicated the nod and I nodded back. "We have much to catch up on, but I won't make you late for work." He looked up at the sky and smiled. "What a beautiful day."

"Indeed, it is, Jeremy," I replied and squeezed his shoulder, leaving him on the sidewalk and hoping the Regents would not understand our exchange.

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On a cloudy and overcast day threatening with rain, Sandy and I decided to walk to the school to see if Jeremy had been correct. The wind was piercing, and we were both bundled up so that only our eyes were visible. No matter how many layers were applied, Sandy's condition could not be hidden. And that was acceptable: the Regents did not have a problem with pregnancy, only with babies.

The elementary school had been abandoned. The Regent's policies had voided the need for the organized education of the young. I was able to shimmy through a window that would have been much too high for Sandy and we agreed that she would wait outside and pretend to exercise by walking laps around the old playground.

I had no trouble accessing the basement of the school, but the tunnel had been difficult to find, per design. A few tiles that were behind the furnace were loose. Once lifted, a rounded passageway could be seen. I wasn't sure if Sandy would fit either behind the furnace or in the tunnel, but we had no other options, and I believed Jeremy—that the tunnel led to somewhere better. He had always been true blue; he would never put me at risk. My belief was such that I took the time to crawl into the tunnel myself and follow it until I could not deny the smell of the ocean. Then I had to crawl back as I had left Sandy alone long enough.

I peered out the window before exiting the school, not wanting to be seen or to give away the escape plan that others had worked for. I saw Sandy talking to a man in uniform. It was the same man from the restaurant, Bernie. I rushed to her side, forgetting about the need to keep attention away from the school.

“Hey—” I started to say it’s a beautiful day but stopped myself as that would have been a lie. Instead I said to Sandy, “We must have gotten separated on our walk.”

She turned to me, her eyes wide. “He knows. He knows about the school.”

My words escaped me, “The Regents know or just you?”

Bernie shook his head. His eyes glanced to the right and I could see two cars pulling up. They were official automobiles. We stood speechless as happens so often in our world. Uniformed men began climbing out of the cars. It would only be a matter of time before they started questioning us. I was aware that their interrogation tactics could be far from friendly and I made a silent promise to Jeremy that I would not give him up no matter what they did to me.

Bernie’s eyes went to Sandy’s rounded abdomen. He began to shake. “It’s a beautiful day,” he said, even though it wasn’t. And he knew it wasn’t. When the Regents put their hands on his shoulders and dragged him away, his shaking stopped.

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The days passed slowly as we waited and plotted our escape. Communication is difficult as the Regents made mobile phones and the internet illegal, and they monitor and control all words. I was able to ferret out additional information, both from Jeremy—who *accidentally* bumped into me again in front of my building—and through a few co-workers who had been part of the plan.

We were to stagger our trips through the tunnel. There were other tunnels, all leading to the docks, but there were enough of us using the school that we had to be careful of how our activity appeared. The Regents patrolled day and night, so there was no safe time to leave. Fortunately, the school was centrally located so we could act as if visiting other buildings and then sneak over.

Sandy and I were pretending to buy clothes for the baby. We glanced at each other nervously over the tiny garments and smiled politely as the sales person asked if we needed help. Sandy bought a small knitted cap, similar to the one bloodied by the Regents when they took baby #3. I knew the choice was intentional; it gave her the anger needed to escape.

We left the store and feigned heading home, passing the school and taking note of any activity. Once we assured ourselves that we were alone, we entered the building. Sandy had been complaining of cramps all morning and said she wasn’t sure she could make it. I told her she had to. None of these words were preapproved, but I no longer cared. I had to get her inside the tunnel.

“I just feel...so...dizzy...” Sandy said and rubbed her abdomen which had become tighter and lower over the last week.

“It’s nerves, honey. Everything will be fine, just keep going—” my next words were obscured by doors being slammed open at the front and rear of the building. Sandy gasped, and I covered her mouth with my hand, forcing her to make eye contact with me. “You are going to keep going. You are going to keep going,” I said sternly.

She shook her head, but I urged her forward, toward the basement. To cover the sound of her opening that door, I said very loudly, “It’s a beautiful day.”

I looked toward the closest window. Its shutters were askew. It had started to rain, and the clouds were a thick blanket in the sky.

“It’s a beautiful day,” I repeated.

Four men in Regent’s uniforms surrounded me. The important thing was that they were fixated on me, as I continued to say things that were false and unapproved. I don’t think I have ever said such provocative and inflammatory statements, even in the days before the Regents’ regime. I had enough anger in me to keep talking, to use my words to save Sandy and the baby.

“You know it’s a beautiful day,” I said to the Regent that kneeled on my chest, pinning me down. “You know it,” I insisted and then I started to laugh. Once I started laughing, I couldn’t stop.

I laughed, as the Regents began my punishment. I laughed, despite the torture, because I finally knew the truth and I knew why Bernie’s shaking had stopped.

#### About the Author:

Elaine Pascale has been writing for most of her life. She took a break from fiction to give birth to two children and a doctoral dissertation. She is the author of *If Nothing Else*, *Eve*, *We’ve Enjoyed the Fruit*, *The Blood Lights*, and the nonfiction book: *Metamorphosis: A Grounded Theory Study*. She lives off the grid in the Everglades with a variety of animals.

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A disheveled 18-year-old leaned haphazardly against a column in the middle of an abandoned warehouse. Hair, mangled and matted, layed down past her face covering her eyes. Breathing shallowly as if in a deep sleep.

Her nose and lips were swollen and veiled in her own blood. Her right arm lay at an awkward angle. Sweat dripped off her chin onto an already soaked t-shirt. Her jeans, barely hanging onto her hips, were ripped and she was completely covered in something dark and sticky. One shoe barely on her foot, the other missing entirely. Her skin had tears and small cuts, clearly, something sinister had happened to this teen. As she lifted her head, pain and confusion filled her mind immediately.

She sat there for some time trying to remember the events that brought her here. She'd met her girlfriends and they were going out to a local sports bar. But what happened between there and this place...she couldn't recall. She wondered where her friends were now, had they met the same fate that she had? She called out weakly, "Hello"? She slowed her breathing down to hear any reply. Her heart beat loudly in her head and chest. The only sound she heard was water dripping onto a metallic object somewhere in the distance.

She gazed around the room, in the far corner there was a pile of broken furnishings and a variety of trash. Along the opposite wall, she noticed two doors, one marked Stairs, the other had no sign.

She carefully stood to her feet, her body sore from her injuries. Pain shot throughout her whole body. Using her left arm, she cradled her right and attempted the first step. It was so fast she couldn't regain her footing. She slipped on the dark sticky fluid that covered her clothes and floor. She hit the concrete floor, the back of her head taking the brunt of the blow. The room spun and the darkness swallowed her once again.

She came to moments later as her head screamed with injustice. Her stomach lurched as bile rose to the back of her throat. She could barely keep her eyes open, she again passed into a darkened state of mind.

Time passed slowly as she lay there in a heap, blood covering the back of her head. She searched the room patiently as she recovered from this latest fall. When she finally did begin to move, her body and head protested. Dizziness engulfed her, nausea creeping up in waves. She realized that she had to push through the pain...she needed to get out of here, wherever here was. Gradually she stood to her feet, this time stepping gingerly, she made her way towards the doors.

As she walked purposefully, she continued to scan the room. To her left were windows that extended across the entire wall. They were filthy and broken, some panels were missing completely. On the horizon, she noticed a thunderstorm approaching, she would welcome the rain.

Finally coming to the doors, she froze. She placed her ear close to the panel and stilled her breathing to listen for anything on the other side. Hearing nothing she placed her hand on the knob and turned. As the door creaked open, pain sliced through her temples causing her head to spin in quick spasms. She could not allow this to stop her, she had to continue.

Inside a small room, she saw trash and more broken pieces of furniture. There was what appeared to be a burn barrel in the middle of the floor. Kids must use this place as a place to get numb from life, escape their parents rule. She too knew this need for space.

She headed back out into the larger room and made her way to the second door, the stairs. It hit her in the gut when she realized as she opened the heavy door, there would be no light in the stairwell once the door shut. She went over to the pile of debris and picked up something to wedge the door open. A slender piece of wood fragment would work, she hoped.

Opening the door, she shoved the slender fragment into the door jam. It held the door in place. She peered down the shaft, more debris, but she felt she could manage if she moved slowly. She placed her right hand into the waistband of her jeans to give some support to her injured arm. She proceeded to take hold of the handrail with her left and began her descent into the unknown.

As she came to the first landing, the heavy door slammed shut. Startled, she stood still for a moment as her head once again screamed in agony. Her resolve carried away with the echo. Terror began choking her, she couldn't breathe, frozen in place. Her mind and body rejecting her desire to move on.

A bead of sweat trickled down her cheek. She's not a strong person, she's shy and stays to herself a lot. Fear was a constant companion, rejection its twin. But all of that pales in comparison to this horror. She would need to dig deep within herself to find the courage and strength to make it out of this. She began rejecting the fear that overwhelmed her. She forced herself to take the next step.

She took her time taking small steps, feeling the floor before each step with her foot. A light breeze brushed the side of her face, not a breeze but a breath. It made the hair on her arms and neck stand on end... Her breath quickened as did her heart. Was someone in here with her, and then something touched her arm. Barely noticeable, but definite. Her body, moving of its own accord, powered by fear, hastened with a new focus to get out.

For the first time since entering the stairwell, she noticed a pungent odor. It stung her nose and throat, making her eyes water. She coughed and heaved, but kept moving. That is until she ran headlong into an object of great size. Her head bouncing back from the impact.

Out of pure agitation, she pitched to her left and quickly took to the stairs. She could see nothing, but the adrenaline was propelling her forward. She didn't fight it, neither did her aching body. She stumbled on trash but didn't let that stop her either. She was getting out of here, no question.

She staggered onto the next landing, feeling the wall for another door. Her hand hit the knob and she jerked the door open. To her delight and surprise, she was outside. Rain pelted her face, and she relished in it. She had made it out. A sense of gratitude washed over her. But it would be short-lived.

As she opened her eyes, there in front of her were her friends. They were soaked from the rain but otherwise unscathed. Confusion and questions swept through her mind. Why didn't they come looking for her? Why are they looking at her with a deep hatred? A smirk crossed their faces.

She tried to find her voice, but it wouldn't come. She began to walk toward them, but only a few steps in, her head exploded. She fell to her knees, her body becoming weak. Life poured out of her eyes, as she was hit again. Death took her quickly. She lay on the ground, face into the soil. Eyes still open but vacant of any evidence of her life.

A lit match was flung onto her body and the still body welcomed the flame.

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

Brenda Matteson of Vass NC has been writing poetry for most of her life. She now enjoys writing short stories, a recent addition to her hobbies of reading, working with crafts, and photography. She has been published in City To Country Magazine as well as with Sirens Call Publications Issue #42.

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*Come set sail with ghosts, gods,  
and sea monsters.*



# GHOSTS OF THE SEA MOON

Book I  
Saga of the  
Outer Islands

A.F. STEWART

Narrated by Alyson Grauer

Available on Amazon

*Day 1*

I can hear them scratching – almost ticking, always clicking, as they move around inside my head. It's maddening. Their tiny feet always touching, testing, *feeling* their way around. Each hair-coated limb sliding between the soft tissue and bone – scuttling through the crevasse in between. Feeding off the fluid...growing.

Sometimes, when I look in the mirror, in the worst moments, the moments where I have to hold onto the basin to support myself and can barely catch a full breath, I swear I see a shadow scuttle behind my eye. The quick darting of a grotesque form moving swiftly past before I can focus on it. My own visage in the mirror is a horror in itself; long hair a greasy tangled mess, cheeks sunken and hollow, skin a sickly yellow hue from their rancid poison. Sinking to the floor, scratching at my face to be rid of them, I gouge my eye sockets with filthy, ragged nails. Will they find their way through the opening if I offer one?

Covered in the blood oozing from destroyed tissue around my eyes, forehead slashed bare, with flesh caked beneath my fingernails, I crawl on hands and knees to the bed where I cower beneath the covers seeking refuge, hoping to hide. But there is no refuge, nowhere to hide; they are always with me – inside me, there is no escape from what is inside...

*Day 2*

I would have thought knowing they were inside me would be the worst part, but it's not – the mind adapts to such things; it's feeling their movements, their scurrying back and forth beneath my skin that is the most repulsive. I don't know how they were able to gestate inside me; they seem maddened at not being able to get out. Their constant frenzy keeps me up at night – I'm getting no sleep; it keeps me sick throughout the day – nourishment something I've not known in weeks; a prisoner in my own home – I'm terrified to go into the light, I look the part of a monster – a filth ridden hag.

I wonder: will they roast in the sunlight if I let myself burn in its glorious blaze? The sun beating down upon me, turning my skin the blistering red of cracked paint on canvas. Perhaps I should wander to the basement and embrace the furnace with its searing hot metal, cooking myself like meat thrown upon a hot skillet. Or simply douse myself with open flame; does it matter at this point? Tempted to try such things, my mind wanders to the possibilities: what if they panic from the heat and start to run, cascading in a black surge from my ears and shrieking maw? Nowhere for me to go, no way to escape – more still coming, an endless flow. What if they are no longer only in me, but all over me? The thought alone drives me beyond the limits of my tenuous sanity.

The cacophony of their humped bodies sliding between the soft tissue of my brain and the hardness of my skull is deafening. I have to find a way to get them out. Nails gouge once more; I rip chunks of skin from my body sending fresh streams of puss and blood down my face, past my eyes – my mind shuts down; I feel no more.

*Day 3*

Oh God, I think I threw one up during the night. It's lying on my pillow, but it doesn't look like I expected it would. It's far too elongated, thin and as withered as I am; almost a milky grey. Covered in mucus, mine or its own, I cannot say.

It twitched! I know I saw it twitch, I didn't imagine it. Frozen in fear, I stare wide eyed at the collapsed carcass of the thing on my pillow, hoping it was my imagination. It twitches again; not my imagination.

I leap up, tangled in my own covers, screaming wildly. It still lies there making a feeble attempt to move; I think it's dying. There's a sloshing in my head – I moved too fast, screamed too loud, they're scuttling insanely about inside my skull. I retch, and retch again. Vomiting up more, I realize they are no longer only in my head but have found a way to travel into my throat. The thought makes me retch yet again. They are agitated by my convulsions; I can feel their vibrating urgency to quell their host. Oh God, please get them out of me!

The pounding in my head is beyond bearable, the heaving of my starved body uncontrollable; afraid to breathe yet terrified I won't, panic begins to set in as my body spasms of its own volition.

Blackness.

#### *Day 4*

They are larger now, no longer simply sliding through the minute fissures of my skull. I feel a piercing pain with each stab of their clawed legs as they dig in and drag themselves forward. I can barely inhale for the number of them clinging to the walls of my throat. Coughing blood and eight legged bodies, I feel them holding on with their barbed legs so as not to be ejected with each contraction.

Swallow or vomit my only choices, I grab a bottle of water from my nightstand and begin to gulp the warm water. I can feel it sluicing over their swollen bodies like lesions grown from my esophagus, not just the intruders that they are. I vomit more, pulling one or two free that refuse to be expelled. The others grasp tighter, puncturing the delicate pink tissue of my already mutilated gullet. These, the ones spewed onto the bed, seem different, more frantic as they dance about. Their color more dense, darker – their bodies harder in form. Clearly blind, they dart in sporadic circles, slowly growing more sluggish, more translucent; collapsing like the first one I saw.

It seems they die quickly; they don't survive long outside my body.

#### *Day 5*

Scratching my ear, I feel something long and thin move away from my finger. Something covered in fine wisps of hair, something that slithers backward and draws into itself, much the way I have snatched my own hand away, clutching my blood covered finger to my chest.

Crawling again to the bathroom and scaling the sink, I open a drawer and reach for my scissors intending to cut away a chunk of hair to more easily see inside my ear. As I grab a handful of hair, I realize that the clump I'm clutching is slowly pulling away from my scalp with a slurping-sucking noise. Tendrils of a thick sticky substance adhere to the skin for a brief moment before slopping to the side of my face. The exposed tissue is raw and stings – small globules of fatty tissue clinging in place.

With a terrified grimace, I turn my head ever so slightly to allow the light to shine on my ear. There! Just like the shadow scuttling behind my eye, something quickly moves further into the darkened recesses of my ear canal. Barely able to stand on quivering legs, weak from hunger and brought to the brink of insanity by this infestation, I pull my long tweezers out of the drawer – the medical ones, and with a shaking hand, I begin to reach into my ear hoping to extract what is hiding there.

A sharp nip warns me to go no further; I drop the tweezers and my other hand slips off the slickened sink as I crash to the tile floor. The coolness of the stone a brief reprieve from the molten pain I feel in my head and throat. The smack upon my skull barely noticed above the crunch of crushed bodies.

#### *Day 6*

I wake in a sticky patch of drying blood on the bathroom floor. Disoriented at first, I wonder how I got here, but the first subtle movement reminds me as *they* begin to rummage through my decimated body. Glancing downward, I can see the shape of one as it moves under my skin making its way across my abdomen and down my thigh. They're crawling throughout my entire body now. They seem to be making their way to the cooler surfaces that are in contact with the tile floor I lay upon.

They relish the cool feel of the stone as much as I do. The clutter of them must have moved while I was unconscious. There is a pregnant hum to the silence, almost an anticipation of retribution should I try to move yet again.

The more aware I become, the more I come to realize that they're not all seeking to be dormant – not all moving toward the cool floor. The smaller ones still crawl through me, using their clawed legs to move in

and around my organs. My body spasms from the pain, and I feel the frenzy of awakening. They nip in vague warning for me not to move, poke at my tender innards with their pincers and jab with hardened claws.

Exhausted from not eating, from the loss of blood, and the horror of knowing my body is their only source of food, I reach out towards the edge of the bathtub. As my hand closes around it, I feel their carcasses crunch between skin, tendon and bone. They bite and scrabble frantically to escape; I can't help but feel a smug bit of satisfaction. Others awaken and join the fray, biting and stabbing with abandon at their host; my body. But I refuse to be coerced, I have found strength in their terror. I drag myself to the bathtub; its cool surround offering a coffin of reprieve.

I manage to pull my torso up and over the edge. God do they hate this. The moment my abdomen is bent in two, head dangling in the tub, I begin to spew blood and small black bodies. Fatigued from my efforts and unable to go any further, I lay bent over the edge and watch as their slickened bodies scurry about, unable to find purchase on the smooth surface. Too drained to do more, I collapse in a heap half in, half out of my enamel coated salvation as the malformed creatures desperately crawl up my limp hair, trying to enter through ears and mouth that others are still using as a route of mass exodus from my traitorous body.

### Day 7

Pressure, there is so much pressure building behind my eyes. My head feels like it's going to burst. So many of them have returned to my skull – I feel them packed in there like the woolen stuffing of a doll. For some reason this thought makes me laugh. *Stuffed like a doll I am with crawling monsters gnawing away at my insides.* More laughter, hysterical this time. I hear it as if from a distance, but know it's emanating from my own cracked and swollen lips, my own cracked and damaged mind. The laughter gives me energy, makes them crazy. I can feel their panicked agitation escalate with the flow of what little blood is left in me.

Heaving the rest of my body into the tub, my swollen and infested carcass is wracked with uncontrollable convulsions. A stream of small creatures emerge with the spittle that I cough up. They scurry for the darkness of the drain. Lifting one foot, I manage to flip the hot water tap. Immediately they begin to scale my body and climb my flesh to escape the torrid flow.

Twisting, contorting and clawing my way around, I manage to turn my body so that my head is closer to the near boiling stream. It is excruciating; gloriously agonizing. I rip handfuls of my own hair from my head, and stuff them into the drain effectively clogging it to trap the scalding water in the basin with me – *with them!*

Delirious as I am, a small voice in the back of my mind whispers that I may be imagining all of this, but as my flesh peels back from bone and sinew, and the smell of steaming meat assaults my nostrils, I can't help but feel that I have finally won. They will die along with me in agony and pain. My final act – to slide shut the glass doors, trapping them in the swiftly filling watery grave I've chosen for us all.

### About the Author:

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair and dread. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old graveyards. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications* and *Phrenic Press*, a co-founder of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

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**This Savage God | Joan McNerney**

Calamity hides under cover  
lurking in corners ready  
to rear its head.

It lies in neat lab reports  
charting white blood cells  
run wild.

*What is this savage God  
who pushes us down to comas?*

Sneaking along icy roads  
daylight ends while sea gulls  
circle steel gray skies.

Brake belts wheeze and whine  
snapping apart as we careen  
against the long cold night.

*What is this savage God  
who lunges us into storms?*

An official white envelope  
stuffed with subpoenas  
waits at the mailbox.

Memories of hot words  
like razor blades slash  
across our faces.

*What is this savage God  
who rips open the heart?*

So we stand on the edge  
breathing mean air  
smelling fear.

Fires leaping out of rooms  
where twisted wires  
blaze from walls.

*What is this savage God  
who stabs us with flames?*

**Clandestine | Joan McNerney**

In the rinse of another gray day  
unrolling before us like an empty film.  
I want to scream out against  
flat skies, tear up coarse air.

Another gray day gnawing  
at me sounding metallic beats  
putting me through its paces  
with long lists of minutiae.

Acrid weariness crawls up spine.  
shifting pain like broken shards  
of glass cutting my fingertips.  
My eyelids drooping shut.

Today marches forward...another  
tin soldier knocking yesterday aside.  
Each night coming faster, faster.  
Winds blowing stronger, stronger.

Cats howl in cold circles as  
ragged leaves cling to boughs.  
Raindrops fall like black ink  
under small pools of lights.

Darkness gathers close...  
my shadow, that long black  
silhouette slanting down  
follows me into the long night.

**Knave | Joan McNerney**

Full of himself flaunting  
his black leather jacket  
covered with silver studs.

Bling hangs from his bulging neck.  
Flashy zircons, deep cologne,  
tattoos, piercings, purple hair.

Puffed up, he struts across alleys.  
Headlight eyes scoping  
each corner searching prey.

Pushing down anything  
in his way. Sniffing rear  
doors, sniffing out death.

His hands move like claws  
through shadows with  
crooked nails buffed blue.

Lugging a bag of tricks loaded  
with brass knuckles, chains,  
zip guns, switchblade knives.

Opening his cavern mouth,  
smacking wide lips, he drains  
a cool cocktail of ruby red blood.

**About the Author:**

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary magazines such as Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze, Blueline, and Halcyon Days. Four Bright Hills Press Anthologies, several Poppy Road Review Journals, and numerous Kind of A Hurricane Press Publications have accepted her work. Her latest title is *Having Lunch with the Sky* and she has four Best of the Net nominations.

Fire-colored leaves crackle beneath my steel-toes as I follow Charlie to the back of his pickup. A gust of wind blows up the corner of the blue tarp coverin' the body, and I catch a peep of curly black hair out of the corner of my eye. My stomach lurches, and my fingers burn. I wanna sock Charlie in the jaw for askin' me to help him with this, but I don't.

I don't hit him, because I owe him. I owe him big.

'Course that don't mean I gotta like bein' here. "You got a perfectly good backyard, Charlie. Why couldn't we bury Rooney there?"

"That ain't Rooney." Charlie points at the heap under the tarp. "That thing, it belongs here, not in my backyard." He releases the latch on the back of the truck, and the tailgate bangs open, makin' the whole bed jump. Makin' the body jump. My skin prickles as Charlie gets to untin' the tarp with dry, bony fingers.

I look around, tryin' to understand where *here* is. There's nothin' but leaves, old oaks, and a big expanse of grassy terrain. The smell of cigarette smoke hangs in the air, though there ain't a soul around to be doin' the smokin'. If you ask me, it don't look like *anything* belongs here, not even a dead dog.

"Who told you 'bout this place?" I ask.

Charlie whips back the tarp. I stare at the white wisps decoratin' Rooney's muzzle. I expect 'em to move. I expect to see Rooney's chest suddenly rise and fall. It doesn't, despite what Charlie's told me 'bout the dog's habit of comin' back to life now and again.

"My aunt," Charlie answers. "I tol' her what happened with Rooney, and she said, 'You gotta take that demon away from here. Gotta take 'im to Inwood.'" Charlie catches my gaze, and his jaw clenches. "She looked right scared. Crossed herself and everything."

Charlie's aunt is mighty religious, so that doesn't surprise me.

I stick my hands in my pockets, tryin' to look casual, but also 'cause I don't want to touch no dead dog body. Or demon body, for that matter. "I don't know. Rooney looks purdy dead to me."

"Stop callin' it Rooney!" Charlie glares at me, his coal-colored eyes stormy as can be. "Be helpful, and get the goddamn shovel."

I shut up and fetch the tool from under the seats.

"Okay, we gotta dig deep," Charlie says. "Too close to the surface and..." He trails off, and it's like his thoughts drift off to the horizon, never to be seen again.

His worried expression makes my hands twitchy. "Where we gonna bury..." I remind myself not to call the dead dog Rooney. "...it?"

Charlie points to the middle of the field in front of us. "There."

"Alright. I'll take the first round of diggin'," I say.

Charlie nods, and his mouth crinkles, mayhaps in appreciation. "I'll stay here, in case it wakes up again."

I nod, then turn and trudge slowly through the carpet of leaves. As I'm walkin' away, I can feel Charlie's fear radiatin' off him like heat from an overworked engine. Accordin' to Charlie, the dog's woken up three times since it died on Sunday mornin'. It howls, he tells me. It sounds like death, he says.

I think poor Charlie's gone sick in the head. Probly all those fumes from workin' in the factory since we graduated from high school. Turned his brain to stew. Made him start seein' things that aren't there.

Truth be told, I'm a little afraid of him, the way he's been actin'.

Even so, we known each other our whole lives, and this is what you do for friends, right? You bury dogs. And with the dog bodies, you bury arguments 'bout cherry Chapstick-flavored lips that don't belong to you that you kissed when you had one too many beers.

I start to dig.

Ten minutes later, splinters prick my fingers and I've worked up a sweat. The hole's comin' along nicely. It's Rooney-sized, no wider or longer, and gettin' deep. A few shoves later, a cramp snakes through my shoulders, and I know it's time to switch. I leave the shovel in the dirt and walk back to Charlie and the truck.

Charlie don't even notice me approachin'. He's got his eyes fixed on Rooney's body like he's watchin' one of those once-in-a-lifetime comets streak 'cross the night sky. I clear my throat, and he jumps. "Got any water in the cab?"

Charlie nods. "Help yourself."

I chug back half a bottle, then join Charlie at the back of the truck. "It's more'n halfway done, but my shoulders are tightenin' up."

"I'll finish," Charlie says, "but you gotta watch it." He gestures to the dog body. "If somethin' happens, you holler."

"Course."

Charlie sniffs, and then he walks out to the middle of the lot. He peers back over his shoulder half a dozen times as he goes. Each time, I give him a nod, but I don't think it helps none. "Poor son of a bitch is losin' his goddamn mind," I mutter.

I jump up and dangle my legs over the tailgate and watch Charlie work. He's movin' fast and frantic, throwin' dirt all over the place willy-nilly. It's clear he don't wanna be here neither.

Charlie takes a break to wipe sweat from his brow and...I hear a scratchin' sound behind me. It's long and low, like fingernails on metal. Adrenaline whooshes through me, and I look over my shoulder, but there's nothin' there. Nothing but Rooney's dead body, lyin' stone still. The air is still as glass, not a single leaf blowin', no tree branches swayin'.

But I know I heard somethin'.

I hop down and circle the truck. Mayhaps we've disturbed the locals and someone's messin' with us since we're tresspassin'. But my lap confirms we're alone. It's just me and Charlie and the truck and the body.

I check Rooney again. Nope. He's still dead, dead as can be.

I sit on the tailgate again. Charlie's back to work, throwin' dirt, movin' like a drug addict. A few more heaves, and he drops the shovel, and then he's walkin' back to me, quick as a river. That's when I hear a sniffin' sound and then a low growl over my shoulder. The sweat under my shirt goes frost cold, and a shiver skitters down my back. I wanna look, but I don't risk it—half 'cause it'll spook Charlie, and half 'cause I don't really wanna see what's makin' that noise.

"It's ready," Charlie says, and I hop down from the tailgate, mayhaps a bit too fast, 'cause Charlie side-eyes me.

"What's wrong?"

"Calf cramp," I lie. "How we gonna do this?"

"With the tarp," Charlie says. "Carry it over, tip it in, cover it up."

"And get the hell out of here," I add. Charlie guffaws, but it sounds wrong, like he's chokin'.

The body is heavy, and I suddenly understand what they mean when they talk 'bout dead weight. My arm muscles are burnin' when we reach the hole. I use the last bit of energy I got to tip the tarp and guide Rooney's body into the grave. There's a sick crunch when the mass of fur and bone hits the bottom. Charlie grimaces.

It takes much less time to cover the hole than it took to dig it. As we pat the mound down with our shoes, Charlie seems a bit looser. There's a sense of calm that's almost wrapped around him, and I start to think maybe he'll be okay.

"You wanna say anything?" I ask.

"Like what?"

"Like the stuff they say at funerals."

Charlie goes tense again. He makes a noise in the back of his throat and spits on the grave. I wish I hadn't said nothin'.

I trail behind him as we walk back to the car, and it don't feel like we're friends out in the woods, rather like we're enemies. Charlie's anger's thick as molasses. That's when I know he'll never forgive me for kissin' his girl. Not ever. Not really.

In the cab, Charlie tosses back water and puts the truck into gear. "Let's get the hell outta here."

As we roll forward, we jump, 'cause we both hear it, clear as day—howlin', loud as the dickens. Angry, raspy yelps and yips. Low, hungry sounds that belong in nightmares. In the side mirror, I see hundreds and hundreds of glowin' red eyes. Demon eyes.

Charlie steps on it, and we zoom through the trees, through the noises that whip against us like wind, until we reach asphalt and speed down the interstate like we left the stove on at home.

A mile later, I start breathin' normal again, but I keep glancin' back to see if anything's followin' us. All I see is darkness foldin' in as the sun sets. Still, there's this terrible feelin' in my bones, and I'm afraid I'll never feel right again.

But I know it's my own damn fault.

When I kissed Charlie's girl, I bought us two tickets to Inwood—a place you go to bury things, knowin' they're bound to be unearthed as soon as you ain't lookin'.

#### About the Author:

Tiffany Michelle Brown is a native of Phoenix, Arizona, who ran away from the desert to live near sunny San Diego beaches. Her work has been published by Camden Park Press, Gypsum Sound Tales, Fabula Argentea, and Dark Alley Press. When she isn't writing, Tiffany can be found on a yoga mat, sipping whisky, or reading a comic book—sometimes all at once.

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

Nanoo lies hidden behind dark curtains, made from what looks like human hair, long dark strands with streaks of grey. You part the curtains and enter into the gloom: there's very little light, just a faint glow from a coal fire burning low. One high up window with bars, obscured by thick, felted cobwebs.

The room has a smell, chemical and acrid: the sweat of unwashed bodies, urine. On a low bed, there's a heap of skins, and underneath, the shape of a small, shrivelled figure. A claw hand protrudes from under the skin and beckons you forward.

"Come closer, child." The voice is rusty with age, but still carries a power you can't resist. Your feet propel you forwards.

"Don't be bashful! Let Nanoo see you. Come, step into the light."

Nanoo's other hand appears, holding a glass ball. She turns it towards you, and you see that it's an eyeball. Your skin crawls and you fight the urge to run, try to remain calm, not show any fear, any emotion, on the mask of your face. Nanoo feeds on fear and distress. It is her meat and drink.

The claw fingers hold the eye higher, and a beam of light emerges, encircling you. You let your mind go blank. Nanoo is a master of mind reading.

"What do you want? Why are you here?" she snaps, dissatisfied with the amount of information she has managed to accrue during the surveillance process.

"I need you to release me, Nanoo. I've worked for you for fifty years now. The agreement said ..."

"I know what the agreement said, child!" Nanoo is angry. The light from the eyeball flashes red. The treacly tones have changed to angry, grating squawks, like a crow fighting for a piece of bread.

There's a pause. You wait as patiently as you can, barely breathing. You know this is your last chance, that you can't fail: failure would mean spending the rest of your days toiling in the dark. This is your opportunity to use all the guile garnered over the years of working alongside Nanoo's captives, the damaged and desperate, all with their tricks and lies and schemes. This is your moment to put everything you have learned into practice. It's now or never.

"Fifty years of uncomplaining toil – that's what the agreement said. And that's what I've given you."

The eye flashes.

"But why would you want to leave me now, after all this time? Where would you go, little one?" The voice is wheedling, pathetic. "And what would I do without you?"

You're ready for this. One of the real old-timers, Caro, has warned you.

'It's not the harridan – it's the pathetic old woman character you need to watch out for. The guilt trip, guilt-edged, super-triple whammy Oscar winning performance. That's the one we all fall for. So listen out for the wheedle in the voice, the sad squeak, the plucking at your heart strings. She's good. She's very good.'

You nod, drinking it in. Caro has become your sister, the one person you can trust down here in the stinking pit, the conveyor belt of misery you stand by all day, side by side.

'Listen out for certain words – *selfish, haughty, proud, uncaring. After all I've done for you.*'

Nanoo speaks again. The whine in her voice sharpens. "I don't believe you're a selfish girl, Lulu. After all I've done for you, only an uncaring trollop would think about ..."

But you have ready the pieces of dough, stolen from the breakfast morsel, chewed to a paste. Pretending to put your head in your hands for shame, you insert each plug in your ears. Now there is only a faint rumble and the eye, flashing, flashing.

After five minutes, you dip your head and remove the dough. You are beginning to get bored. Isn't this just an old woman rabbiting on? How hard can it be to get out of here?

"Nanoo, I'm going. Give me the key. You made a promise."

The hand holding the eye withdraws. The darkness in the room intensifies.

"You can't go. I won't permit it. Nobody leaves." The voice is harder, distorted with rage.

Caro has told you – asked you. 'Would you? If you had to, would you kill her?' You'd recoiled in horror. You'd never imagined, never thought you'd have to use violence. In any case, Nanoo is immortal, a force of nature, even though she never moves from her bed, directing operations from a prone position. She is never questioned, there is no disobedience. Who would dare to raise their hand to her? Certainly not you, a hopeless weakling whose life has been spent in service, only the thought of the fifty years finally ending keeping you going.

And yet. Here, now, you know you can't do another year, another month, another minute. Your eyes have been focussed on the finishing point for so long. You need your freedom or you will die.

"Give me the key, Nanoo." Your voice is steely, firm.

"Come and get it – here in my pocket." She twitches the bedclothes so you get a glimpse of her scrawny old body, the pocket in her nightdress.

It's a trick, but you can't see how it will be sprung. Instead of reaching for the pocket, you lunge for the eye, taking Nanoo unawares, and the eye rolls to the floor flashing many colours. Nanoo roars, but you are fast, fast and desperate. The key is around Nanoo's neck – Caro has told you this. In a desperate summoning of strength you grasp and pull. The thread breaks, and with a terrible wail, Nanoo collapses on the bed, shrinking, shrinking until she is nothing more than a stain on the bedclothes.

You are weeping as you pick up the eye and the key and make for the gates. The sound of footsteps and Caro is with you, taking your hand.

"I knew it," she says. "I knew you were the one."

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

Jo Colley is a poet and short story writer who lives in the north of England. She has been published as a poet by Salt, Vane Women and Smokestack publishers, and has won several short story competitions. She is interested in fabric, the digital presentation of poetry on different platforms and enjoys making poetry films.

Blog: <https://www.foxyfash.com>

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#### **Eclipse | A.F. Stewart**

Silence in the dust  
Broken over bones  
Quiet in the night  
Underneath the moon

Stillness...  
Not a whisper  
Stillness...  
Not a sound

Blood across the barren world  
Ashes swirling with the wind  
Silence over broken bones  
Quiet in the ruins

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

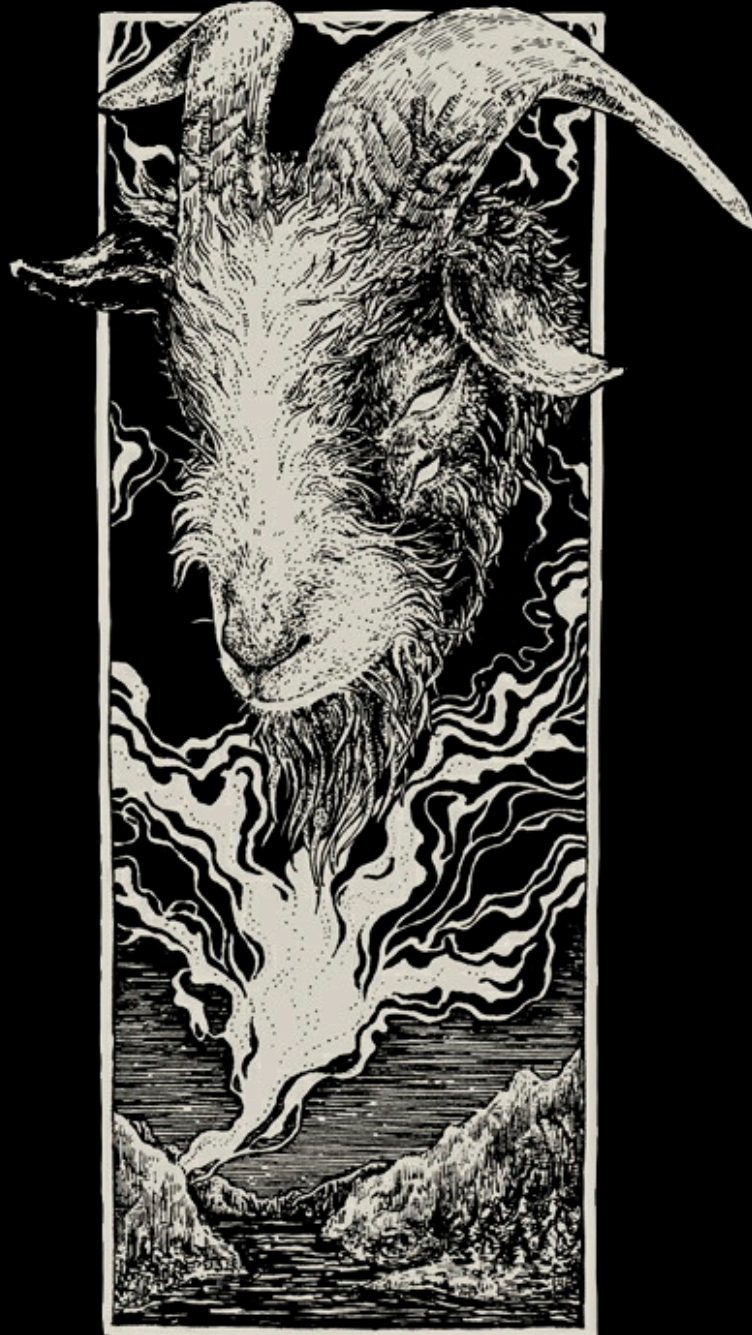
A. F. Stewart was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada and still calls it home. She favours the dark and deadly when writing—her genres of choice being dark fantasy and horror—but she has ventured into the light on occasion. She is fond of good books, action movies, sword collecting, geeky things, comic books, and oil painting as a hobby.

Twitter: [@subscribe77](https://twitter.com/subscribe77)

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# drowned orange

PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION



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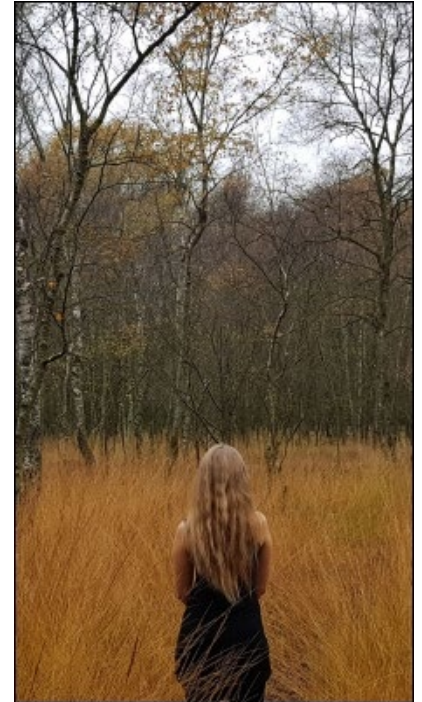
## Featured Artist | *Drowned Orange*

*Hey Drowned Orange, it's a pleasure having you as our Featured Artist! We'd love to know more about you, please tell us who you are and what makes you tick; introduce yourself and your work.*

Hey, thanks for having me! I currently live on a farm in north Germany and besides drawing, I enjoy forest walks and tea. I actually studied graphic design but always leaned more towards illustration. I like to work with bands, but I've also done some book covers.

Before I started using ink and nib nearly two years ago I worked with fine liners, but the professors at my university had no understanding for this medium. So I kinda started it out of necessity and frustration at the end of my studies – fell in love, glued the pen to my hand and spent my last two terms drawing a variety of illustrations based on Norse mythology for my degree.

I've done five group exhibitions. The first being in South Korea at Mini Print Seoul, where I didn't have the opportunity to be there in person. I first got the chance to be at an exhibition in Basel at the Czar Fest - it is possibly one of the most exciting things to watch how people react to your artwork. To be included within these shows was a huge honour.



One of the larger projects I'm currently working on is for a Swedish band that will be released end of 2019.

### ***Q: What are some of your main influences?***

A: Mostly music and nature, apart from that a lot of Art Nouveau, old bookplates and Norse mythology. I also enjoy talking about artwork with different artists and friends. It gives me an opportunity to see from another perspective.

### ***Q: What mediums do you work in?***

A: I would describe my work as traditional pen and ink illustrations. So nib, ink and paper are my favorite tools. Not to forget pencil and eraser. I use a mix of stippling and cross hatching, if you find colour it's usually added afterwards with Photoshop. Overall I'm more drawn towards black and white or muted colours.

Besides drawing I also screen print my work on patches, apparel or print limited editions.

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

A: I would like to try out wood burning. Other than that, I had the chance to try different mediums in University. Besides screen printing, which I still do, etching was my absolute favorite. It was amazing how you could add even the smallest details to the plate. I also tried out woodcut and linocut, which I liked but I always end up with nib and ink.

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

A: To be honest, I'm still not a huge fan of starting all over, but it is something I want to overcome. Right now, there is already an inked piece on my table that didn't work out. I'll try to take a break from it and then figure out what went wrong and start over again. Photoshop is also great to try out different things on a scanned piece.

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

A: Luckily, I don't tend to get long periods of creative block. There is always something on my mind that I want to put down on paper or an old sketch I still want to start. But if there's nothing or I need a break, doing something completely different helps; like going out in the woods, work out or meeting friends. Working on multiple pieces is also a way to keep my brain busy.

***Q: Where do you find your inspiration?***

A: Simply put: nature, music, art and books. I listen to a lot of different genres, it always depends on my mood or the drawing I'm currently working on. I love how the drawing and the music interact with each other. Or how the music will affect the drawing. To me, music and visual art belong together. As for nature, I find a lot of inspiration in all the different forms, plants and the overall depth you can find when wandering through the forest.

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

A: This answer will always change, but a favorite piece is always one that made me conquer fear; one where I tried something new. Taking a step outside one's comfort zone is hard but most of the time can be very rewarding.

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

A: Well there really isn't a favorite piece I enjoy the most. I appreciate the diversity of artwork created by different people and the variety of art one person creates.

If you'd like to contact Drowned Orange for commission work, you may reach her at: [drownedorange@gmail.com](mailto:drownedorange@gmail.com). You can also find and follow her artwork online.

Instagram: [@drownedorange](https://www.instagram.com/drownedorange)

Facebook: [Drowned Orange](https://www.facebook.com/DrownedOrange)

Blog: <http://www.drownedorange.de>

Etsy shop: [Drowned Orange Art](https://www.etsy.com/shop/DrownedOrangeArt)

Ogres need tampons too, I'll have you know. Well, us part-time ones do. Actually, I can only speak for myself, as I've never known another ogre, if there are any others.

I'm a red-blooded woman by day. And, since almost a year ago on my twenty-third birthday, the change happened by dark for the first time and has repeated each night ever since. After the panic and thinking myself insane settled down, the word *wereogre* popped into my head. That's what I call myself, although I've no one I would tell the word to. I want to, but I'm afraid of revealing my secret. I pray it's just a phase.

I usually hit the 24-hour stores only when I need to shop, which of course are open at first daylight. Can't take any chances. But I deviated from my rule once, on a late, autumn afternoon, because I accidentally got careless about my dwindling Kotex supply. So sue me.

As soon as I had purchased my items, I headed to the restroom, one of those isolated family ones, so I could have more privacy.

"Attention Walmart shoppers!" I heard a voice blare over the PA system (even over the sound of one of those new jet-engine-powered hand dryers). He spoke commandingly and it was clear he was holding the microphone way too close to his mouth. "This is your friendly neighborhood terrorist!"

I cracked open the restroom door and saw a man in a black trench coat facing away from me. He was speaking into the PA microphone at the manager's station. There were two rifles strapped to his back; I could see their barrel ends jutting out of the collar of his coat.

"Trust me when I say, you're gonna wanna stay right where your pretty little selves are," the gunman echoed out over the megastore.

I closed and locked the restroom door again.

"Each exit has been rigged with explosives that I have just activated remotely. If you try to leave through any of them, not only will *you* die, but I will shoot my rifle at the *next* lovely customer I see, right between the eyes. Now, I know we don't want that." His last sentence sounded as if he was talking to a toddler in time-out.

Unable to hold myself up then, I fell to my knees.

"I'd personally like to see y'all live through this. But the decisions you make leave it in your hands. Ya see? Like I said: friendly. Now, I'm gonna need everyone to head on over to the frozen food department and...chill." The speakers clicked off in the middle of him chuckling at his own pun.

Muffled screams and commotion of the Walmart-goers and employees seeped through the restroom door. 9-1-1 was busy when I dialed it on my cell phone--go figure. In my hysteria, I hallucinated the bite of rifle bullets ripping through the door and into my flesh. So, I crawled to the far corner of the restroom to be better surrounded by masonry and away from the door.

While bawling, I muttered a few, what-am-I-gonna-do's, and some, I-don't-want-to-die's. I figured I'd just wait it out, hide in there, that is, until the thought crossed my mind that someone may unlock the door anyway or else break it down.

Another anxiety seized me, too: The change! My change. Darkness wasn't far off.

I heard a single gunshot in the distance. I stood up.

I don't know how I conceived the plan that came to mind then; I'm not that clever. Wherever the idea came from, I had clarity about what I knew I had to do, and fast before anyone else got hurt. The hell with my concern about the change and others seeing me in my nighttime form.

Next, I convinced myself that the odds of running into the gunman, until I was ready, were small so I could get up the gall to skitter stealthily to the office supplies department. I snatched a bag of jumbo-sized zip ties.

The change was coming fast. The familiar feeling of burning pin prickings and cramping intensified.

Trying to keep each footstep noiseless, I ran past the Halloween masks on my way to the grocery sections. Wouldn't be needing any of those, obviously, since I'd now fully transformed into the monstrous, horned, green ogre that I was every night.

I made it to aisle thirteen without crossing anyone's path. I'd remembered seeing a Nesquik strawberry syrup display on the endcap there. I'm surprised I had the presence of mind to strip down naked first because, well, how intimidating would I have been. Seeing an ogre in street clothes and a pair of Nikes probably would have ruined the effect. I unscrewed a bottle of the Nesquik and smeared the deep-red goo all over my hands and mouth.

All that was left was for me to find the enemy. The Walmart terrorist.

In one of the most perfectly-timed moments of my life, I turned the corner into the cereal aisle and there he was, standing alone, having himself a little snack. He was eating a chocolate Clif bar--only pricks eat Clif bars--which he dropped when he saw me.

"You've done well my son," I growled in the deepest voice I could manage, "and made The Father proud."

We were eye to eye and he was paralyzed as he gazed into the orange glow of mine.

"Who are you?" he squeaked.

"I'm the minion who told you to gather the innocents here," I lied. I impressed myself with the dialogue that poured out. Who knew I was such a natural actress and improviser? "I was eager for the extra, stolen souls so I took the liberty of ripping a few of them apart for you." I gestured to the fake syrup-blood on my green skin.

I held his eye contact and kept spouting evil conversation as I gently wrapped his arms around a metal support pole--that was so conveniently located--and zip tied his wrists. He was too scared to resist nor realize what I was up to. A puddle of his urine pooled beneath him.

After removing the ammunition from his guns, I threw the clips down the aisle. The detonator remote was in his breast pocket. The friggin' switches were actually labeled armed and disarmed. I flicked the switch, redressed, and made a quick call to the cops before hanging up on them.

I'd never felt more accomplished or alive! But I wasn't about to wait around to be discovered and be shot or become some government lab specimen. Luck was in no shortage because the freight exit I chose wasn't saturated with cops yet.

I ran into the forest for miles, fixed up a camouflaged hiding spot with evergreen branches, and stayed put until first light.

At dawn, I strolled out of the tree line and into the parking lot. I checked. No one was around. I got into my car and headed home.

Funniest thing--can you believe it--I can't fathom why exactly, but the change never happened again after that night. I've been all-woman ever since.

### **About the Author:**

Rachel Kallembach's true love is dark fiction. She'd marry it if she could. She hopes to eventually write the perfect macabre story and leave the land of plain ole junior high literature teachers from Central Illinois and arrive wherever well-established authors do. Her story, "The Disciple's Transit", was published in *Us Magazine for Youth - The News*. Samples of her work are on her website.

Blog: <https://fitfulfearfulphantasmal.wordpress.com/>

Facebook: [Rachel Kallembach](#)

# CAFÉ MACABRE

edited by Leah McNaughton Lederman



a collection of horror stories and art by women

For more information visit <https://leahlederman.wordpress.com/cafe-macabre/>

If my stupid brother Lane couldn't be there on time to walk me home from school, I was going to walk home myself. I hated waiting until he came bumbling up, stupid grin on his face, "Aww, are you mad at me?"

I am in first grade now and I walk by myself because it's just a few blocks.

I announced this at the dinner table in my big voice. Dad said okay, that's fine, but I saw his mouth smushing at the corners and he took a big sip of water real quick.

Miss Cathy, the crossing guard, is Alfie's grandmother. Alfie picks his nose a lot and I think he eats it when no one is looking, but he shares his lunch with me and says I'm pretty enough to marry.

I tell all of this to Miss Cathy in my talking-to-grown-ups voice, and she has the same smushed mouth as Dad. She's nice, though, and doesn't laugh at me like Lane does when I cover my eyes to pass the cement people at the graveyard.

Miss Badu down the street said the graveyard had bad people in it, and too many people prayed to the Jesus statue when it was just a rock made to look like a man. "You pray to a rock and Jesus not there. Bad things move in and you pray to them, give them power. Bad spirits there eat the power."

Dad calls Miss Badu a 'local' and says the word like its sour.

I hate that stupid statue, with its eyes stained dark and its dirty face. Dad says it's just how it's weathered.

The next day Lane is there to walk me home but he yanked my hair, so I use my big voice to tell him I would go with Miss Cathy.

But she isn't waiting at the fence. Stupid Lane made me late and she already left. I look around and see Lane is behind the school playground, smoking with his stupid friends.

It's only four blocks. I am my Daddy's big brave girl and I can walk by myself.

I say this in my out-loud-to-myself voice, faster when I pass by the cement Jesus. I cover my eyes and try not to peek at his blackened face through the cracks in my fingers, but that makes me trip and scrape my knee. My tights rip and turn red where it's bleeding.

I don't like it here. My knee feels hot where the skin opened up but the air is colder. The cement Jesus looks taller now that I'm on the ground. Why can't I cover my eyes? My hands are at my sides stiff like sticks.

Maybe if I yell in my scared voice, someone could help me. But there is no scared voice, just my voice like sandpaper on a fingernail. I count the stones in the sidewalk to keep myself calm but there's a shadow now, like it's getting dark.

I know in my head, in my big-girl heart, why it's getting dark. The cement Jesus wants me. The bad people in the graveyard want me. "Oh, Jesus, Daddy Jesus, help me," I say.

"He's not here," a voice whispers. "Just Prisoner 3264."

Then the trees and grass go slanted, and the whole street looks like it's getting sucked into a vacuum cleaner. The sidewalk under me moves like the conveyer belt at the grocery store, and it's headed toward the graveyard gate.

He's waiting for me. His hands don't move away from his chest because they're made of stone, but his black eyes are looking at me, and I can feel arms, hard like stone, gripping my shoulders.

I try to use my big girl voice to tell them stop but they throw me on the ground. My tights are wet now because I must have peed them like Jana did the first week of school.

The rock hands are on my chest now, even if I can't see them. I'm thinking about my wet tights and my brother smoking cigarettes and my dad waiting on the porch.

I'm not going to make it home. The bad people have me.

#### About the Author:

Leah McNaughton Lederman is a freelance editor and author from the Indianapolis area. Her short stories have been published in various collections, and will be featured in the upcoming all-female horror anthology, *Café Macabre*. Find out more about Leah at her website and on Twitter.

Website: [Leah Lederman](#)

Twitter: [@leahlederman](#)

Glenview Acres. Institution for the Criminally Insane.  
Patient Log File 1-096-3548.  
New treating physician: Doctor B. Dajani

Patient presents with worsening dissociation and paranoid delusions. Increased medication dosage suggested. Consult with neuropsychologist ordered. Will re-visit video case logs from the time of admission to become more familiar with the case.

Patient 1-096-3548. December 21, 2000.  
Admitting physician: Doctor M. Crowley

Sitting behind the oak desk, Doctor Crowley's latest case enters the room wearing the standard jumpsuit and shackles. The burly orderlies assist her to a chair, tip their chins at the psychiatrist, and exit the room. The doctor glances down at the paperwork in front of him and then at the emaciated woman seated on the other side of his desk. Her skin is sallow, her hair is limp and lackluster, and her hands are curled into claws on her lap.

"Miss Williams. Do you know why you're here?" the doctor inquires.

The woman turns her dead eyes to the physician, her expression unreadable. "Because I'm wicked."

"Do you know what you did?"

She twists her fingers together as she stares at her hands, and the muscle in her jaw pulses. "Blood. So much blood. And fire. Delicious, wicked flames. Crisping, cleansing, freeing."

The doctor shakes his head and takes some notes. "Yes, Miss Williams. You committed a serious crime. Do you remember?"

Those ice-blue eyes turn the doctor's way once again, and the chill can almost be felt in the air. "Maybe. Yes, yes, I remember. I think. But it wasn't my fault. She told me to do it."

The physician raises an eyebrow at the statement. "Who told you to do it, Miss Williams? Do you mind if I call you Sabine?"

The woman shakes her head. "That is my name. Is it not? Though that's not what she called me."

There again with the mysterious *she*. "*Who* told you to do it, Sabine? And what exactly were you instructed to do?"

Sabine pulls her lank, blond hair over a shoulder and twists the ends with two fingers. "The woman in black. My constant companion. The pride of the abyss."

The doctor glances down at his notes. "The arrest report shows that you claimed you saw this woman for quite some time until you were finally instructed to kill your husband. Those assertions landed you here. Miss Williams, Sabine, can you tell me more about this woman and what she asked you to do?"

The woman grows visibly agitated, and when she raises her gaze to the doctor again, there's an intelligent spark in those glacial eyes. Suddenly, she sits up straighter and looks directly at Crowley.

"Doctor, I would love to tell you the story." She flashes a grin full of malice and then slouches in her chair as if she doesn't have a care in the world.

"Please, Sabine, the floor is yours." The doctor motions with his hand.

The corner of her lip tips up. "The entirety of my life, I've been followed by a woman in black. Standing at the foot of my bed, taunting me, telling me things no child should hear. It became commonplace. She was my constant companion, there every night to chip away at what made me, well . . . me. And then I grew up and met Harrison."

Harrison Williams, Sabine's late husband, the one gruesomely tortured and murdered by the woman who was supposed to love him.

"He calmed the darkness a bit, but it never left. The woman eventually grew more insistent, her taunts more violent, her instructions more malevolent. I really thought I was losing my mind." Miss Williams laughs ruefully. "But you see, in all the years that I knew her, she never touched me. Until that night."

The doctor flips back a few pages in the file. "What night was that, Sabine?"

"*The* night. The one that changed it all. She, the woman, touched my foot, and I suddenly felt . . . invincible. I knew all. Saw all. I understood. Only the darkness took over. All I could hear was her voice in my head, all I could feel was the slithering and slimy coldness of her presence in my mind. In my soul."

Miss Williams stops talking suddenly, and the doctor takes the opportunity to interject. “So, what do you think happened? Are you saying that this malignant force . . . what? Possessed you?”

“No, doctor. Nothing so mundane. She *became* me. Or I became her. I was no longer in control of my faculties, no longer the driver of my body. The oily presence choked my mind and suffocated my free will. My only thoughts were those she sent my way.”

The doctor taps his pen on the notepad in front of him. “Do you remember the thoughts? Were they a directive?”

The woman licks her teeth, and that unusual flicker comes back to her dull eyes once more. “Why, yes, doctor, they were.”

Her expression turns even more sinister. The woman is seriously troubled, but it’s unclear to what degree and from what malady she suffers.

“Sabine, what did this woman instruct you to do?”

She turns in her seat and crosses her legs and hands, propping her meshed fists on her stacked knees—a posture very incongruous to the appearance of the woman. “Why, what must be done, of course. No woman should endure what s— what I did.”

Even the woman’s speech patterns have changed. It’s not uncommon in multiple personality disorders, but Sabine Williams doesn’t have the other symptoms to make a definitive diagnosis.

“Sabine, is anyone else here with us right now?” the doctor asks.

Sabine dips her head and looks Crowley directly in the eye. No fear, no nervousness. The way she looks up at him with her chin lowered makes her look almost evil.

“Did I not say before, dear doctor? She is always with me.” She cocks her head to the side, and her lips tip up into another smile, this one less threatening, more . . . pleased.

Seemingly unconcerned with the patient and the discussion, the doctor sets his pen on his desk and turns in his chair, pulling a drawer in his filing cabinet and rummaging for something. When he finds whatever he was searching for, he pulls it out, shuts the drawer, and turns back around.

Only Sabine Williams is no longer sitting on her side of the desk. Without making a sound, she’s now looming over the oak surface, hair blowing in a breeze that seems to affect only her.

The doctor pushes back in his chair, but the wheels catch on the rug, making his escape impossible. Suddenly, Sabine’s clenched hands come plunging toward the doctor’s neck. A half-second later, red arterial blood sprays in an arc, coating the woman’s face and arms and saturating the front of the doctor’s chest and the desktop. He screams and gasps and grabs at his jugular, but it’s too late. But not for the crazed female. She slashes and stabs again, embedding the MontBlanc in the doctor’s eye socket. More viscous liquid sprays and pools, and the doctor’s body slides limply to the floor beneath his imposing desk.

Sabine spreads her hands over her face, painting the skin and turning her countenance even more grisly, the red a striking contrast to her pale flesh and fair hair. She slowly and purposefully turns towards the camera in the corner of the room and licks one finger at a time, ending with the insertion of her left pointer and a long, slow suck. The digit springs free with a pop, and then she smiles and winks.

The doors burst open. Orderlies, security guards, and other doctors fill the room, subduing Sabine and trying in vain to save the physician. The last things that can be heard are the woman’s maniacal laughter and the medical director’s order to shut down the surveillance.

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Dr. Benjamin Dajani sits at his desk, slack-jawed and sick to his stomach. He can’t believe what he just witnessed. Sabine Williams isn’t just a mentally troubled woman. She’s evil incarnate. And now, she’s his responsibility.

His interview with her a half an hour ago was inconclusive, which is what prompted him to find the video recording of her admission and not just rely on the file notes. But now that he’s seen them, he’s not sure he wants anything to do with the case or the woman. Screw his job. His life is worth more.

Closing out of the file on his laptop and locking his desk drawer, Benjamin decides to see the director and let the chips fall where they may. Packing up his messenger bag, a sudden gust of wind hits him from behind, followed by a feminine purr. Before he can even turn to look, strong, vice-like hands grip either side of his head, a long tongue glides up his cheek, and lips brush his ear.

“Say hello to Harrison and Doctor Crowley for me—and all the other men in Hell.”

Then a crack, a sudden flash of pain, and then . . . nothing.

**About the Author:**

Rayvn Salvador is a lifelong bibliophile who left her eighteen-year IT career to live her dream: getting paid to read and write. She lives in Florida with her hellion kitten and her incredibly supportive beau, dreaming about the Midwest's changing leaves as she perfects her yoga poses on the beach. Look for her next releases—*Your Move* and *The Relic*—coming soon.

Facebook: [Rayvn Salvador](#)

Twitter: [@RayvnSalvador](#)

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**Dark Soil | Nina D'Arcangela**

Plunging, scooping, the sound of dirt sliding off each shovel as it's tossed to the side. Another plunge, another scoop, more shoosh – the pile grows larger, the hole surrounding their boots deeper, the men more weary. The scent of dry dirt giving way to the earthy aroma of moist, dark soil.

Removing his cap and scratching his head, he asks, "'Ere, guv, don't you think this looks more than a bit odd?"

The other spits, digs, then replies. "Blood well is, son."

Digging deeper, the dirt turning firmer, becoming more dense. Each shovel still plunging; a foot braced on the back lending force to the spade as it slides into hardened ground. Loose dirt scooped upon the belly of the trowel tossed above as it slips off the metal edge – the hole growing with each effort.

Removing his cap, wiping sweat from his brow, he asks, "Take a butcher's. Tell me that ain't too wide."

The other spits, digs, then replies. "Blood well is, son."

Tree roots tangle and snag, yet dig further they're told, so they do. No longer plunging, only scraping a hardened surface painted putrid with residue – ground now removed, the scent is strong, almost fetid; a pungent odor.

Removing his cap and squinting in the dim light, he says, "Weird innit? Strange that there ain't nothin' but wooden planks, eh, guv?"

The other spits, swings, then replies, "Blood well is, son."

Hefting the crimson coated shovel over his shoulder, he glances at the body lying near his feet, takes in the breadth of the pit they've dug, then turns to the man standing above him.

He spits, stares, then says, "Ain't fill in' 'er in, am I, guv?"

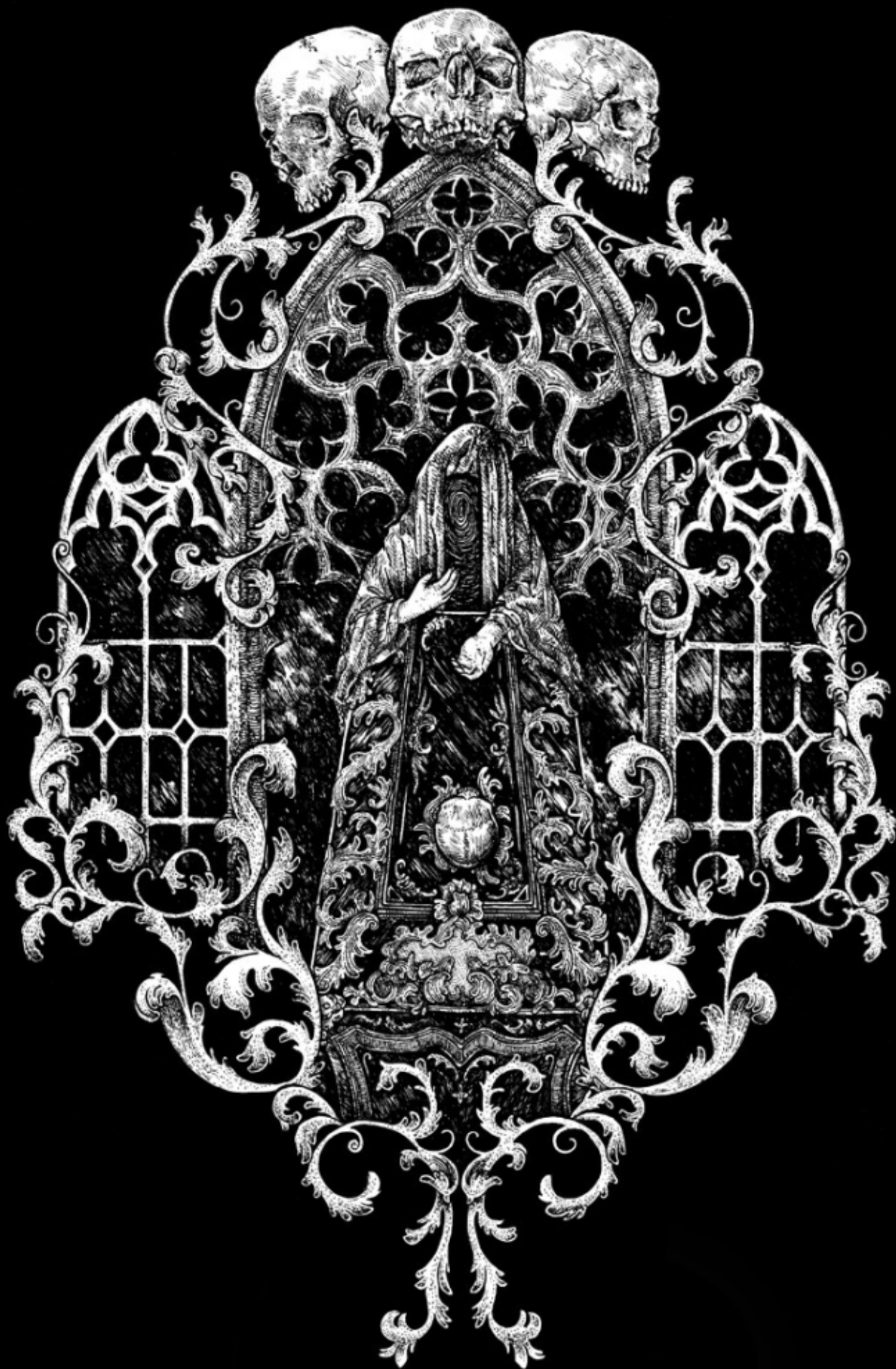
One pistol shot fires. "No, I believe not."

**About the Author:**

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair and dread. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old graveyards. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications* and *Phrenic Press*, a co-founder of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

“Snake! Snake!”

The old man's reedy voice cuts through the crowded train. He pulls himself into a ball, draws his feet up onto the seat and wraps his arms over his head. A couple of women scream and follow his example, lifting their feet off the floor and pulling their knees into their chests. A tremor of panic ripples through the commuters, and those closest to us press as far away as they can. The other passengers follow his terrified gaze to look at me. I study my reflection in the window, feigning indifference, but the weight of their attention is stifling.

My sister Lara slips out of her seat and kneels in front of the old man. She turns to our fellow travellers, raises her hand and lowers it palm down as if physically dampening down the tension. “Calm down, everyone, there's no snake,” she says. “I'll handle this--I'm a mental health professional.” She has no way of substantiating this, but they all seem to believe her. It's far easier for them to leave the old man in Lara's hands than to listen to his lunatic screech, or worse, to do something about it themselves.

Lara looks the old man in the eyes and speaks to him in a low, steady monotone. I can't hear what she is saying, but whatever it is, it seems to be working. His yells subside into a meaningless mutter before stopping altogether. Lara strokes his shin, tentatively at first but with increasing confidence as he responds to her touch and gradually unwinds himself.

I don't know what irritates me more—Lara the timid little mouse, which she is most of the time, or the confident in-charge Lara, an act she pulls out every now and again, usually when I am not in a position to take back control.

Lara returns to her seat beside me. There is a smattering of applause on the train, which she acknowledges with a smile and a nod as if she were royalty.

I lean in and whisper into her ear.

“Nicely done. Looks like you've learned a trick or two from me on how to mesmerise people. Since you seem so intent on taking over from me, you have to kill him now.”

Lara's smile does not falter. “Get fucked, Maxine,” she whispers back.

“I'm serious, Lara.”

“He's a crazy bag-man—nobody's going to believe him.”

“We've been through this before. Imagine what could happen if he gets together a posse of his loony mates and comes after us. I'd do it myself, but...” I slide my sleeve up a couple of inches and show her the thick strip of skin sloughing off my arm, the fresh skin beneath pink and vulnerable.

“We don't need the attention? Speak for yourself, ya freak.” She is no longer smiling. The train slows, then stops, the hiss of the opening doors startling the more herpetophobic passengers. Crazy bag-man gets off. Lara sighs and rocks in her seat for a few moments. “I'm just going to make sure he's OK,” she says. She propels herself after him.

\*\*\*

Fear is the universal emotion. We're all afraid right now – me, the old man, even my sociopathic sister, Maxine. It's my job to make sure that the fear doesn't make one of us do something stupid.

I was being straight up when I told her I was just looking out for the old guy. I know what it's like seeing things that aren't supposed to exist, although I don't have the dubious luxury of being able to explain it away as the product of mental illness. I step it up, drawing level with him and taking him by the elbow. He squeals like a girl and flaps out of my grip.

“Don't touch me! I saw you talking about me. You two are in cahoots.” His face crumples in accusation.

“Look, what you saw, or what you think you saw...”

“I know what I saw. I have friends, you know. We'll find you. We'll find out where you live, and we'll hunt you down. You'll see.” He scuttles off, pausing from time to time to look over his shoulder and point a knowing finger at me.

It's probably an empty threat. Probably. But his words echo Maxine's a little too closely for my liking. I continue to follow him at a more discreet distance.

\*\*\*

I can bring the Change on myself if I want to, but I rarely do. I hate the way it disorients me, warping my perception and senses. Every full moon I can feel my human self and my snake self bleeding into each other. I'm scared that one day I won't be able to change back, or that I will wake up and find myself become some unholy hybrid, neither one thing nor another.

Or that I won't wake up at all.

But I have to do it this time. I tried staying in human form once when I was shedding my skin, just for kicks. It was bloody and excruciating. In snake form, it's almost pleasurable, like scratching an all-over-body itch.

I strip naked and stand in front of a full length mirror, trying to see myself in snake form. It's a game I've played ever since my first Change, a game I never win, like trying to catch your reflection moving independently.

It always starts in the eyes. I watch the whites of my eyes turn black.

\*\*\*

I'm crap at this. If Maxine were following the old man, she would be silent and virtually invisible, slipping through the shadows like smoke, no matter what form she was in. I stand out like dog's balls. When we were kids she tried to teach me to move like she did. We even made up snake names for ourselves, calling each other Slither and Squeeze. But I could never get the hang of it. I think it was when we both realized that we could never be the same no matter how hard I tried, that the hate first got added to our love/hate mix.

The old man pretends he doesn't see me, leading me down a maze of side streets and alleyways until we come to a darkened dead-end behind a row of restaurants. Skip bins overflow with rotting vegetables and rancid meat. The man turns on me, snarling, his back to a wall and a knife in his hand.

I could easily run away. Adrenalin jolts my heart, making me gasp and pant. But before I even know what I'm doing, I've dashed the knife out of his grasp and clamped my hands around his throat. He falls backward onto the ground and takes me down with him.

He tries to fight back, flailing at my eyes with his filthy fingernails, but I have a longer reach than his. I pull my head away as if avoiding a bad smell, and his attack becomes more of a caress as his fingertips flutter against my neck. His eyes bulge and redden, his tongue protrudes, and his struggle becomes weaker. I press my knees into his chest to force the last gasps of breath from his lungs. It is over in minutes.

Somewhere in the back of my brain an impulse tells me that now, more than ever, would be a good time to run. But I stand over his still body for more perilous minutes, trying to sort out how I am feeling.

Not guilt. Not revulsion, although I should be nauseated at the sight of this bloody-eyed corpse, its head pillowed on a mound of slimy cabbage leaves, a foul dark stain seeping from its trousers. I feel... exhilarated. Omnipotent. And some kind of primal, visceral sensation that I have trouble identifying at first, it's so incongruous to the situation.

It is hunger.

The flight instinct finally wins out. I turn for home.

\*\*\*

Lara tries to make me gorge myself a few days before each full moon to make sure I don't get hungry enough to escape and kill something when I'm a snake. I have to admit, she's saving me from deep unpleasantness; one time I came to after a Change to find myself throwing up a half-digested dog, and I'm not keen to repeat the experience.

She says she does it to protect innocent people, but that's a crock of shit. There's no such thing as 'innocent people'. I think she's just afraid I will throttle her in her sleep.

She's not the only one. She's always going on about how hard done by she is having to be my keeper, that she never gets to have any kind of normal life. She has no idea what it's like to be me. One of these days she's going to piss me off once too often, and if I carry enough human anger over into my conscienceless animal state... well, I won't be held responsible for what happens then.

\*\*\*

I like Maxine better when she is a snake. All of her human quirks and complexities are stripped away and she becomes a pure, simple creature of the earth.

And she is so beautiful. I can sit all night and watch her muscles work beneath her dappled skin, feel her power as she contracts and relaxes, coiling herself about my body. She likes to climb up me as if I am a tree trunk, although she has become too heavy for me to hold her up for long.

I don't want her to have the satisfaction of knowing that she was right, not yet, anyway, so I tell her while she is in the form of the beast. She won't understand now and won't remember later.

"I did as you asked, Maxine. I killed him."

She flicks her tongue, tasting the air in front of my face, and I stroke her head as if she were a cat.

"I won't do it again. Next time something like this happens, you're on your own."

It's an empty threat. Ours is the ultimate co-dependent relationship. Blood ties us together tighter than any promise.

And now that I've had a taste of killing, I might just volunteer for the job next time.

\*\*\*

Something has changed in Lara. She is short-tempered and nervous, and has taken to chewing on her nails like she did when she was little, sucking the blood from her fingertips when she gets down to the quick. Like an over-anxious mother, I run through the possible causes in my mind—boyfriend trouble, drugs, that time of the month—and discount them each in turn. She won't tell me what's wrong, of course. That's the most annoying part of it. Usually she's only too eager to dump on me with all her problems, but just when I want her to talk, she clams up.

The full moon is still two days away. But, with strength I didn't know she had, she pushes me into my room and locks me in.

By the end of day two, I am ravenous.

When she finally lets me out again, I'm too hungry to have a go at her. I grab the peace offering from her hands—fried chicken and fries and a big bottle of coke—and fall on it without speaking. I'm halfway through it before I realize that she's not eating. She turns pale when I offer her some, and clutches at her distended belly. She retches and leans forward, bringing up her last meal on the floor.

Whatever she last ate, she had almost finished digesting it. All that remain are two little white summer sandals, the cheap plastic polished by stomach acid. They contain a pink pulpy mess that was once a pair of human feet.

\*\*\*

All I can do is stare at the stuff on the floor. I want to throw up all over again, but my stomach is empty. Maxine drops her drink and it flows in a bubbly brown river to join the pile of vomit. “Oh my God, Lara, what happened? What did you do?”

“I don't know!” And it's true. The last couple of days are a blank. I remember sliding the bolts shut on Maxine's bedroom door, and then... next thing I know, I'm standing in a queue at some random fast food joint, feeling queasy and bloated and in a hurry to get back to Maxine.

“You Changed, didn't you?” Maxine accuses. “How... how could you? You can't Change. You have to stay human. You have to look after me.”

Of course. It always comes back to her. Never mind what I might be going through.

I've never seen her so mad, and for someone who elevates rage to an art form, that's saying something. She seems to shimmer as her eyes darken, her body narrows and elongates and her legs fuse into one thick tube of scaly muscle. Still in mid-Change with her arms reaching out for me, she slides across the floor, moving impossibly fast for her size. She opens her mouth almost to a ninety degree angle to expose her fangs. My perception lurches sideways, and I just manage to catch a glimpse of my own feet retracting into a serpentine tail before she slams into me.

We intertwine. She tightens and I flex until we are fused together like some living Gordian knot. Some detached part of my human brain tries and fails to remember which one of us was called Slither, and which one Squeeze.

Someone is screaming, but I can't tell whether it is her.

Or me.

#### About the author:

Tracie McBride is a New Zealander who lives in Melbourne, Australia. Her work has appeared in over 80 publications, including the Stoker Award-nominated anthologies *Horror for Good* and *Horror Library Volume 5*, and she is an active member of the Horror Writers Association. Her collection *Ghosts Can Bleed* contains much of the work that earned her a Sir Julius Vogel Award.

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"This is your life. Did you choose it, or did you let someone else make the decisions?" The preacher had a voice that would alight on the air and be carried through the chapel even without the microphone. The microphone added a hint of foreboding that made one want to behave lest they hear the condemnation of the voice coming at them. Despite my rebellious nature, it always managed to sneak into my thoughts, especially when I had to weigh the pros and cons of anything. I have to admit that voice played a huge role in my decision making concerning my husband too. Like the beat of an African drum, it was hard to resist once it got going in my head.

You see, my husband disgusts me. Literally. He goes to work every day, comes home, his shirt full of greasy lunch and lipstick smudges on his collar. Fat oil-slicked fingers dive head first into the jar of peanuts he keeps on the old junk table next to his raggedy recliner, an orange plaid eyesore with the sunken center from his large butt being stuck in it for so long. His blatant, impatient cries for dinner are always muffled by the game blaring from the television. I pretend to ignore him until I slap a plate of pure fat beside that jar of peanuts. The slurps, clicks, and snaps of his tongue on his teeth rattle my nerves. When I look at him, I no longer see the svelte man I married, only the beer bloated belly topped with a mashed potato face, gravy running down the creases of his lips and green peas stuck in the beard above them.

I don't remember when The Voice first told me how to deal with Hank. It was a gentle greeting that gained in strength as time passed until it became a metronome for my thoughts, ticking out the minutes of my days.

"This is your life." Tick.

"Is this what you chose?" Tick.

"This is your life." Tick.

Tick. Tick. Tick. "Your life!" Tick. Tick. Tick.

Then it changed. "This is your life," became "Get it back." Still with the insistent clicking as it changed direction. Every day, every moment. Tick. Tick. Tick. "Get it back. Get it back!"

Until I did.

That ragged recliner still sits there next to the old junk table, though it is now crimson, rather than orange plaid. The jar of peanuts, now spotted with crimson dots, remains on the table waiting for fat oil-slicked fingers that will never again dive into it. A crimson pillow fills in the sunken spot nicely. The knife used to slice up its owner is tucked cleverly inside. The metronome with its insane ticking is gone, replaced by The Voice whispering "Well done" in my dreams.

## **Pink | Stephanie Ayers**

Jenna felt weightless as her body flew through the air. She could feel nothing, smell nothing, say nothing; her whole body was paralyzed except her eyes. Those, she could move. Quick, fluid rotations revealed an apartment of sorts, but the lack of lighting allowed for too many shadows. The creeping light made the creamy walls look dingy, and she caught a glimpse of the flower on the brown couch she landed on from the corner of her eye. It looked out of place within the dull, blank canvas of the room around them. Small dark reddish-brown blotches decorated the wall in every direction she could see, their haphazardly applied pattern a curiosity her mind tried to focus on until she found one close enough to inspect. Its crusty stage revealed what it was—blood.

She knew she was going to die, just didn't know how or when. Her eyes strained as far into her peripheral vision as they could go. Beneath a crop of furious pink hair, a sinister smile on a beautiful face stared back at her. She'd forgotten the Pink Killers were still at large when she'd chosen the pink ballet dress for the award ceremony, and again when she used the flat iron to straighten her dark curls. She matched their victim profile perfectly.

Her eyes widened in horror as a scalpel flashed before them. She watched, her mind screaming, her voice nonexistent, as a thin red line stained the pink taffeta on her chest. A scream gurgled within her bowels as the vision of her heart pumping in latex-covered hands filled her sight.

If only she hadn't missed the bus.

## **Burning Joan | Stephanie Ayers**

"Jesus!"

My voice is clear and strong despite the flames licking beneath me. Heat tickles my feet. Smoke clouds mar my vision of the cross on the steeple my eyes refuse to leave.

"Jesus!"

Salty rivers run down my face. My chest heaves. Flames dance along the edge of my vision, still locked on the cross.

"Jesus!"

An intense craving for just a drop of this sweat to my tongue overwhelms. I am water, yet I cannot quench my thirst.

"Jesus!"

My voice is no longer strong, but it is still clear. One, two, three. Panting, gasping. Every breath hurts.

"Jesus!"

I am liquid, pooling at my own feet. My lungs scream for air. One, two, three. Gasp. My lungs shred with pain.

"Jesus!"

Puddles in my eyes smear the cross, yet they remained locked. Smoke scatters away, no hope to calm my chest. Invisible flames lick from the inside, though no outside flames have touched.

"Jesus!"

My last breath, my voice disappears, my thoughts come to an end.

My spirit soars, expanding in the air on its white wings, hovering just above my bent head, a coo escapes as I swiftly climb to the sky, free from the torture at last. Pure and clean as a dove, I soar to Heaven where my Jesus is waiting for me.

### **About the Author:**

Stephanie Ayers creates twisted tales and fantastic realms one page at a time. She is a coffee guzzling, word whispering, world building creative ninja living in Ohio with her husband and her last child. When she is not writing, she enjoys flea markets, football games, and exploring with her family.

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## **A Part of You | Sonora Taylor**

Travis and Tristan looked at their mother, who lay dead on the floor. They smiled at each other, each looking into a reflection of the other as they grinned at their twin.

"That was easy," Travis said.

"Dad'll be thrilled," Tristan added. "He was right – the tea got her in just one sip."

"Let's go tell him. He'll be proud of us for –"

Travis stopped and stared at Tristan. Tristan stood frozen except for the blood trickling from his eyes. They looked like single threads spooling from each iris. Tristan's mouth fell open, and a waterfall of blood joined the streams from his eyes.

Travis began to scream, then felt a burst in his stomach. He gripped his sides, but instead of flesh, he grabbed bone. He looked down and saw two skeleton arms shoot from his stomach, casting aside his hands like flies.

Before he could scream again, another burst came from his throat. He felt a large, smooth orb move from his neck. A skull cast a glance in his direction, then turned and dove towards the blood that pooled from Tristan's body. The hands cupped the blood and the skull began to sip. Skin and hair began to grow around the bones. Before Travis lost consciousness, he saw his mother's chestnut hair curl over her reborn shoulders.

"You can't kill me," she said to the lifeless forms of her children. "You came from me, and I'm a part of you – one you'll never be able to destroy." She grabbed her mug of tea and walked out of the kitchen. "Now, let's see where your father is."

Chelsea hurried through the parking lot at Trader Joe's. It was always crazy on Saturdays, and she usually tried to avoid the hubbub of suburban moms buying healthy snacks for their precious dears. However, she'd run out of her favorite soap that morning, and knew she'd need more before the weekend was over.

The parking lot was a quagmire of vans, shopping carts, and people. Chelsea tried to keep her composure as she walked through the lot. A couple bickered as they walked by her, arguing over something trivial. A child screamed in her cart as her father tried to sweet-talk her into behaving. Chelsea gripped her soap and closed her eyes as she tried to stay calm.

"Watch out!"

Chelsea looked towards the voice, then felt sharp plastic whack against her legs. She cursed, and a woman in a blue knitted poncho pulled back the cart that hit her. "I'm sorry," the woman said. "I was lost in my own world and didn't even see you."

Chelsea glared at the woman as she rubbed her aching knees. The woman had straight brown hair, as dull and faded as her gray leggings. The woman pressed a button and unlocked the doors of the van next to them. Chelsea looked towards the van and saw a line of stick figures on the window. She tried not to roll her eyes. Stick figure families were so sickeningly charming. *No one cares how many smiling kids you have*, she thought.

"Do you need something?" the woman asked. She had the slightest hint of irritation in her voice. She had some nerve, being the one who hit Chelsea in the first place.

"No," Chelsea said. She walked off without a word. All she needed was to get out of the parking lot.

\*\*\*

Camila checked her hair in the mirror before pulling out of the parking lot at Trader Joe's. She hadn't even seen that girl with the messy blonde bun and the perpetual frown. She wondered what was wrong with her. Hitting her with the cart had been an accident – an honest mistake. Camila sighed as she pulled out of the lot and turned on the radio. The girl wasn't her concern.

She drove down the road. The strip malls and condos disappeared behind her as she made her way towards her favorite spot: the lake behind her parents' old cabin. It was her favorite spot to be alone and catch her breath after a busy morning chasing after the kids.

Camila parked her van and took in the sparkling lake in front of her. The surface lay still, with no one around to drop rocks in its waters or cast lines in search of fish. She smiled as she opened the trunk. She had a box of crackers and a block of her favorite cheese waiting for her.

Camila set the grocery bag on the ground, then opened the door that doubled as the floor of the trunk. She lifted the limp bodies of the two children that had been running through the woods near her apartment. They should've known better than to wake her up with their shouts. Once they were in the lake – and once she'd washed her hands – Camila ate her snack and stared out over the water. The surface bubbled a little as the bodies sank, but it soon stood as still as it had before.

Camila got to her feet and brushed stray blades of grass from her leggings. She approached her van, then dug through her purse. Before she got in, she stuck two new stick figures on her van's back window.

#### About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, *Please Give*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *Mercurial Stories*, and Camden Park Press' *Quoth the Raven*. Her story, "The Crow's Gift," will be featured on "Tales to Terrify" later in 2019. Her second novel, *Without Condition*, is now available on Amazon. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

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**Moribund Dreads | *Lori R. Lopez***

How well I know them!  
Every shy precious grin  
Every grimace on their little faces  
The nicknames they hate  
Each complaint or rejection they bleat  
Each burden they must bear  
Along their route to school  
The daily scoldings and blame  
Whether public or private  
I've been watching  
Keeping track  
Why wouldn't I? They're so  
Darling, fragile, vulnerable — even now  
It used to be easier  
Before they carried phones  
And have been warned  
Countless times about me  
I am the stranger to whom  
They shouldn't speak  
Not that they might  
I from the darkness creep  
Known by something other than Fear  
Halloween is my favorite  
But any day I could reach out  
I walk the night, brittle, ancient  
Creatures run from my step  
The way deep Chocolate melts  
Down a street, flowing like shade  
Into pavement cracks and pores  
As blood pools a murder scene  
But I did not make it happen  
Was not the inspiration  
My tread is light in the world  
Though not in the sense  
Of radiance or mirth unless  
You have a macabre sense of humor  
Like me. I feed on their woes and toes  
The skittish frights of innocents  
Moribund dreads of parents  
Seasoned torments and flaws of elders  
Afraid, so afraid of me  
And why shouldn't they be?  
I stalk their young and  
Thin the herd. A fateful  
Acquaintance to meet, I wait for  
My chance, for the unsuspecting  
The least healthy, the more anxious  
The undernourished . . .  
The weaker, less protected, unvaccinated  
My name is Death.

## Empty Rooms | *Lori R. Lopez*

Hollow and drab, no life contained  
in the midst of walls. Their somber hues  
lie sullen. Paled by grim-filtered moonlight,  
ghostly shafts split Night in twos.

The screams! The howls are tantamount  
to a lingering bagpipe-and-bugle Taps —  
a foul organ dirge that wails on and on  
at The Mournful Arms, where nobody claps.

Echoes bounce, traveling a maze  
of lonely tunnels, from doors and rooms,  
the decrepit chambers that vault-like sealed  
each resident. A graveyard of tombs.

This lost hotel down a tangled route  
of abandoned blocks overgrown by debris;  
the trash of uncivilized denizens,  
who now roam in disheveled reverie . . .

A land of ruins, a jungle of relics.  
A towering, derelict, twilit hotel  
haunted before the gangrene demise  
of a fetid embrace that eventually fell . . .

Limbs the first to topple off when  
naught through channels gush or flow,  
supplies cut off in these difficult days,  
leaving blood nowhere else to go.

A fate foreshadowing the end of cities —  
the collapse of nations into nether  
from war and famine, from days that all  
they can talk about is the weather.

An eyesore, never a classic or jewel,  
repossessed in an eerie wake  
by those with nothing left to lose.  
What more could the Reaper take?

How distant the lives once blissful led  
on a surface submerged to this underzone.  
Neither flesh nor bone clinging to spirits  
gone to decay; no-one answers the phone.

Occupants recline, or pace inner sanctums;  
chew bedposts, claw the pattern from walls,  
and circulate in mothballed fashion  
the cryptic confines of groaning halls.

This balloon for some concussively popped,

while others lived out their allotted time  
ere missiles rained or tempests rattled,  
born to a far less vicious clime.

The Vacancy Sign beams a crimson neon,  
while ashes descend like snowy dooms . . .  
and Bellhops await the next to fill  
this mausoleum of empty rooms.

### **Monstrous | *Lori R. Lopez***

Mayhem wears a distinctive cloak  
Riding the hills on a moonless eve  
When decent folk have the sense to stay  
Inside and shudder at what they believe  
Madness scowls from the deepest corners  
Or cackles out of nowhere, a sweep  
Of jesterly mischief with dagger or club  
On tiptoe does the foul jester creep  
But Monstrous is the worst of the trio —  
A stalag-tooth grin of malicious glee  
Eyes like red planets veined by decay  
No mercy, no warning or chance grants he  
In this world there are places not to tread  
If you value well your safety and health  
Where naught that's good may ever spring  
Do not trade your life out of quest for wealth  
If you must risk the shadows; if you should find  
Yourself in their grasp on a blind-dark night . . .  
Stick close to the edges and bate your breath,  
Lest one or the others might take a bite!

### **Nocturnal Embers | *Lori R. Lopez***

When I close my eyes the world falls away  
I plunge into a night eternal  
Treading on the brink where I can still return  
Still sense the light just beyond  
A welcome gleam, the glimmer of truth  
On the fringe of consciousness and dream  
Before sinking to a black sea  
When I close my eyes, I risk not finding  
The way back, being lost forever in that dark  
A grim state of absolute repose. Blind reverie  
The edge too far. A tumble into nothing  
Insomnia is this panic in reverse  
A desperate longing for sleep, instead of  
To wake. The fear of not resting  
Turned into a frightful waking dread  
It's unshakable, and sometimes  
I can't tell which side is up or down  
If I cross the divide and can't feel anything  
Solid, familiar, to guide me

Left to wander and grope like a dancer  
Without stage, ghostlike in a bleak fog  
I'm sure I would miss  
These colors, these sights, even the noise  
Were the vacuum complete  
Permanent, without borders, nightmarish  
No walls, no surfaces, no contact  
Only space. Miles and miles of empty space  
That might swallow me whole  
A treacherous gaping maw  
While this sightless soundless journey  
Of the soul, this quest of the spirit  
Leads to nocturnal embers of a voracious  
Black fire spreading to the top, crackling  
Yet invisible, burning Life's oily pools  
Of emotional gravy, my La Brea Tar Pits  
Eked from dross and indifference  
Rampant within Society's embrace  
Harboring shadow selves that follow  
The footprints we lay down, the tread we  
Reveal to the world  
A history of fumbling forward  
Stumbling in retreat, graffiti tracks of  
Glow-in-the-dark stretches. Nocturnal embers  
Warm me in the cold of vast universes  
The starless planes where Night Elephants roam  
As inky leotards of shapeless people perform  
Without steps or feet, without floor  
In the hollow stark reaches and confines  
That inhabit the dim from which I emerge  
To find my way home.

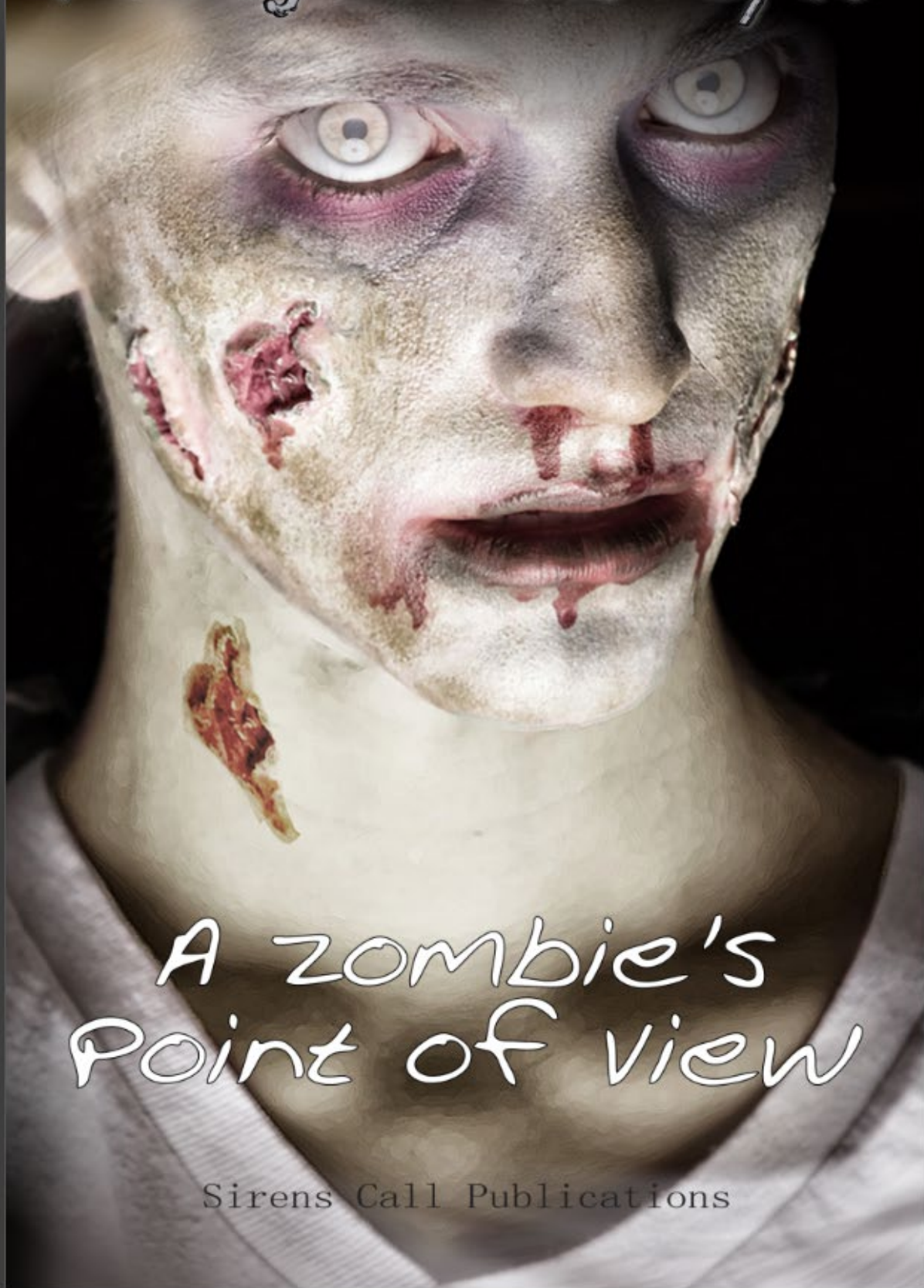
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Lori R. Lopez is an award-winning author, poet, illustrator, and wearer of hats. Poems have appeared in three H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, The Horror Zine, The Sirens Call, Weirdbook, Bewildering Stories, California Screamin' and more. Books include The Dark Mister Snark, The Strange Tail Of Oddzilla, The Fairy Fly, Leery Lane, An Ill Wind Blows, and Darkverse: The Shadow Hours (nominated for an Elgin Award).

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# Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's  
Point of View

Sirens Call Publications

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"I can't stand this fucking dust! It's everywhere!" Aubry shouted. The house was spotless, but to her, it was still filthy. She had stopped inviting anyone over, because she couldn't stand the thought of anyone sitting on her sofa, walking around with their dirty shoes on her perfectly polished wood floor, or using her pristine toilet. Every day, after work and on the weekends, she dusted, scrubbed, vacuumed, and disinfected. It was never enough.

Her cat, Indy, scrambled under the bed. He knew what was about to happen and wanted no part. Aubry shouted obscenities as she went about cleaning, taking sips of vodka in between. She slammed chairs around, screamed at Indy for tracking his litter around the house, and ended with a crying fit as she sat in the middle of the kitchen floor with a bucket and sponge.

She had shaved off most of Indy's black and white coat a few weeks ago to minimize the wispy tumbleweeds of his hair she kept finding under everything. The poor cat had endured her holding him down and taking away his precious fluffy fur. Even after all that, she still yelled at him as if he were the one who made every mess in the house. Since was the only one around, he was an easy target.

Something about tonight was different though, and Indy sensed it. He was not willing to venture out to even use his litter box or eat the last of his Fancy Feast. There were times in the past where she wouldn't even feed him if she had company over, for fear they would smell his food or make a giant stinky turd, as she called it. He would have to wait until everyone left to eat, and that was if she remembered. He was happy guests no longer came around, because he hated going without food, although, she'd been forgetting to feed him lately again. He heard her in the kitchen, and crawled deeper to the back of the bed to wait it out. She was wailing and banging stuff around. He hated loud noises. He used to try and comfort her by crawling into her lap for her to stroke or purr while twirling around her legs, but he'd walked on her wet floor once, and that ended badly. Now, hiding seemed the easier choice.

Aubry stood against the counter and finished the last of her drink. She was waiting for the floor to dry. She inspected her hands, which were pink from the scalding hot water she used to hand clean the floor. Her nails were brittle, something she had become accustomed to. The band-aid smell of original scented Lysol permeated the air. After all the cleaning, she now had to make sure she was clean too. It was a tedious and lengthy process, but one she would never skip. She had nightmares about forgetting to bathe.

She peeled her clothes off and put them straight into the washer and made sure not to touch anything on her way to the shower. The skin on her body itched fiercely. She got into the shower and began sloughing off the dead skin with a big brush. Large flakes fell like snow into the tub. She knew she probably shouldn't use hospital grade disinfectant soap to clean herself, but she did it anyway. Dry brushing hurt, but if she didn't do it, the dust would be worse. *It would be so much easier without skin.*

She soaped up, then stood under the hot water until her whole body was red. After she got out, she dried off carefully with a fresh towel, and brushed her teeth. As she looked in the mirror at her pink face and tangled mop of hair, she noticed dust on the walls behind her. *I should have never painted the bathroom this dark color.* Then she noticed dust on the mirror itself, and also on the ceiling. Her heart began to palpitate and she threw her toothbrush down in the sink. She stomped from the bathroom, grabbed the duster, and began dusting everything all over again. A guttural noise came from her throat. *Fuck this. I'm going to do something about all this dust!*

Aubry had gathered quite a few items from her job as a nurse at the hospital. She had bottles of Betadine, alcohol, jumbo cotton balls, and various bandages. She laid them all out on her bed. A tremble had set in as she realized what she was about to do. Half a bottle of vodka sat in the kitchen. *I'm gonna need that.* She only put socks on, went to grab the vodka, and brought it back to her room. *Where did I leave those box cutter blades? Oh, yes, the spare room! I used them after painting.* She inhaled sharply, "They'll have to be sterilized, of course. No problem."

Indy heard her in the bedroom talking to herself. He also smelled the vodka. He prepared himself for a long night huddled in the darkness. He hoped he didn't have to hack up anything, because she'd hear him and then punish him. That might be the only good thing about his missing fur, he hadn't done that in a while. Hacking up hair balls meant he would endure a night of insults, shouting, and a possible smacking.

Back in the bedroom with her box of blades, Aubry laid an old comforter onto the floor. She soaked cotton ball after cotton ball in Betadine and began to slather the blood brown liquid onto her arms, torso, and legs. She wouldn't be able to get her back, but this would have to do. The iodine smell was overwhelming to many, but she loved it. It was the smell of disinfectant. *Fuck you, germs! And fuck you dust!*

Indy stifled a sneeze. A strange overpowering smell was in the room. It made him feel sick. He wasn't sure what it was, but figured she spilled a bottle of that stuff she used to clean with. It smelled similar. He hated the smell, but now he had no appetite and he was thankful for that.

The vodka made her feel numb, but when she made the first cut, she bit her lip hard enough to pierce it. She kept shaving piece by piece, layer after layer. *I'm a giant human truffle*. She poured alcohol on her flayed arm and screamed. She then started on her other arm, starting at her shoulder and then slowly peeling her skin away. The pain was constant and intense, but she was determined to do what she had to do.

Blood covered everything and was making it hard for her to finish. She needed to finish. *But the pain*. Her slick hand slipped more than once and cut deeper than she intended, causing blood to spurt. She knew she was probably going into shock. The dizziness was terrible. *Oh, Well*. She got most of her torso except her breasts, then started on her thighs. Thin flaps of her skin lay all over like pale vegetable peels. She didn't even notice that she vomited. The blood saturated blanket under her had grown cold. Her body finally gave up and she passed out.

Indy smelled blood. And lots of it. This worried him and he army crawled from the back of the bed and peeked out into the room. His pupils grew wide and his ears flattened. If he had had hair, it would have been bushy. *What kind of creature is that? Is it dead? There's blood everywhere*. The scent made his empty stomach growl. He crawled all the way out to investigate.

He recognized her face as he sniffed around her hair. She moaned, but did not open her eyes. Her breathing seemed to be slowing and he sensed she was dying. When her body began to twitch, he jumped back and hissed. He waited until she was still again and licked his paw clean of the blood. The taste made his mouth water. He crept closer and took a slice of the meat that lay next to her. He dined on several more pieces until his belly was full.

She never woke back up. Indy had no one to feed him or give him water. Thankfully, the toilet lid had been left up and he was able to drink from there. Something he'd never been able to try. He also jumped up onto the counters, slept on the sofa, tracked litter to his heart's content, and cleaned himself on the coffee table. All new things for him. When he was hungry, he strolled into the bedroom and took a few nibbles of the decomposing flesh.

After several days the smell was too bad, even for Indy. He had no other food source though, so he continued to eat the parts that were still somewhat palatable. He chased the flies around the house and batted the maggots around until he got bored. Finally, after over a week and a half, someone came calling.

The doorbell rang several times. Indy jumped when they began to bang on it. He began to meow loudly. He could see the shadow of several people through the living room windows. He ran to the door and began pawing at it. He meowed over and over again. Then he heard voices.

"Do you hear that? It's a cat, I believe. Sounds distressed. I think we need to go ahead and go in."

"Agreed. From the smell, I would say so."

Indy sensed he needed to move out of the way. He ran and jumped onto the sofa and waited. He heard several loud noises coming from the front door and then it flew open. Several people, men and women, came into the house. They were holding some objects in their hands and shouting stuff. Indy buzzed around their legs and meowed his heart out. They checked different rooms, but it didn't take long to find the room they were looking for.

Flies and maggots were everywhere. The smell was toxic. Several of the policemen and policewomen gasped at the scene before them. What appeared to be the rotting body of a woman lay on a soiled comforter. They covered their noses and got closer.

"What the fuck?" an officer said.

"I have no idea. Look at the shit on the bed. What is that stuff?" Another officer asked.

"I see bandages, alcohol, and that stuff they use during surgery. What went on here? Jesus!"

"Was she skinned? It looks like she could've been skinned!" an officer gasped.

"How can you tell? The body is so mottled and grotesque! Maybe her skin sloughed off?"

"Well yeah, some of it, sure. But look, there's razor blades close by. A whole box of 'em. Look at her body. Some of her skin was definitely shaved off."

"What in the fucking fuck? Why?" a female officer asked.

"Guess that's up to forensics and the detectives, mi amiga. They'll be here soon. Oh, we got a puker!" One officer bolted from the room.

Another male officer came in holding Indy, "He's been meowing up a storm! Poor little guy, he's probably starving. Can we get him some food?"

"We can't touch anything in the house, but I'm sure animal services will feed him. That guy will get adopted right away. Cute little fella. Or do you want to keep him? I think they'll let you after they check him out," the officer laughed.

"Maybe. I've always liked cats, but my wife, not sure how she'll feel," the officer said.

"Call her and ask her."

"Yeah, maybe I will. The little guy deserves a good home." Indy purred in the officer's arms and tried to rub his head against his chin. "Needs a bath though, he smells like pure death."

"Good thing you have gloves on. I'd say he probably slept next to her body and was out of his mind with grief for his master. Who knows what he saw? Or what he ate for that matter."

"Yeah, who knows." the officer shivered and gently placed Indy down before getting out his phone.

## **Chopped | *Vivian Kasley***

The three judges sat awaiting the plates that would be put before them. The first round was appetizers. The basket ingredients had been curated earlier. They couldn't wait to see what was done with each one. They watched with intensity as the four chefs before them opened their baskets. They pulled out the contents of their baskets and gasped in horror.

A tall ugly woman with wild dark hair dressed in a cheesy evening gown spoke, "Ok, contestants, let's see what you can do with your ingredients of human buttocks, black garlic, tomato jam, and Greek yogurt. Remember to make an extra plate for us to have for the chopping block. You will have thirty minutes on the clock, if you cannot complete your plates in said time, you will be Chopped. You may begin."

No one moved. One chef fainted, but had been stood back up by one of the other chefs. They stared at one another and back down to the meat before them. Gagging ensued and the three judges began shouting, "Enough lollygagging, let's cook! You were chosen specifically for your skills. Time is ticking! You've cooked grosser stuff than that!"

The four chefs reluctantly began butchering the meat and slowly going to the small pantry. Soon, pots were boiling, pans were sizzling, and the deep fryer was bubbling. The aromas made the judges mouths water. One chef dropped his battered buttock chunks in the deep fryer and another seemed to be making soup of some kind. Another had tortillas on the grill. One stopped working.

The chef stood unmoving, butcher knife in hand, and tears spilling over his cheeks. The tall ugly dark-haired woman walked over to him and told him to continue, but when the chef refused, he was dragged from the room by one of the judges. The other three remaining chefs continued with shaking hands.

"Well, that was a huge mistake! Only 15 minutes left on the clock!" the tall ugly woman cackled and the judges laughed too.

With only minutes to go they scrambled to finish up and make enough to plate. When time was up, they waited before the judges for each of their plates to be reviewed. They stared back at the distorted faces of the judges. All three of them looked mutated and disfigured. Drool hung from their salivating mouths. They were dressed in what looked like formal wear from the eighties.

The first chef's plates were set down in front of the judges. The tall ugly woman asked them what it was. "Speak up, so we can understand you!" She growled.

"It's, um, human buttock chicharrons with a spicy tomato jam dipping sauce and a cucumber salad with a black garlic yogurt dressing."

"Looks good," the judges said.

They ate like animals and even slurped the dipping sauce. Then they looked up and gave comments. "Very good, but the cucumber salad tasted a little under seasoned. Salt, maybe?" They all nodded. One of them said they thought it was delicious, and would have to fry their own buttocks at home. The next chef's plate was brought out and set before the judges.

"And what is this?" The tall ugly woman asked.

"Buttocks tacos with a tomatillo tomato jam pico de gallo. I used the yogurt to marinate the meat."

"I see, I see. Very creative. But how's it taste?" The judges dug in. Food dripped down their chins and onto their clothes. "Very good. Very good. We like it. The meat is very tender and your pico is perfectly executed." They all nodded.

The last chef's bowls were brought out, "Last appetizer dish. What do we have here?" the tall ugly woman stuck her finger in the bowl and tasted, "Oh, that's spicy!"

The chef replied, "I made a buttock chili with beans, quick pickled jalapenos, tomato jam, black garlic, and mixed the yogurt with some La Crema for the topping and sprinkled some cojito cheese on top."

"Oh, very, very, yummy! We like it very much!" They all nodded as they slurped. "This is a perfect dish, one of our favorites." One of them added, "My only criticism would be, it's a bit too spicy, but other than that it's divine."

The tall ugly woman came around the judges table and announced, "Ok, the judges have all tried your first dishes, a pretty strong round I'd say, but someone's gotta go. So, who will be Chopped? We must let the judges deliberate. Halbert! Halbert, come and take these chefs away!"

A large bald brute of a man covered in blood came from the dark doorway, he was naked except for a long butcher's apron, which was also covered in blood. His lower lip was overly large and drooped. He lumbered toward them with a large ax, pointed toward the doorway, and grunted. The chefs cried and held hands, but did as they were told. They were brought through a long dark hallway and back into a room with an overwhelming foul smell. There, they were shoved into three folding chairs. Immediately they started gagging violently and Halbert starting laughing.

He stood at a long metal table, picking his bulbous nose and eating whatever he pulled free. The three chefs looked around the dimly lit room, but there was no mistaking what was hanging in the room around them. Human body parts in different stages of decay, including the body of their former colleague who was dragged away earlier, were hanging from various large hooks. There were slabs of ribs, legs, arms, heads, and various organs. The three chefs covered their mouths to stifle their screams. Halbert choked on his laughter when they began puking through their fingers.

The tall ugly woman came back and told Halbert to bring them all back in. He grunted and motioned for them to move, which they eagerly did, and they were brought back through the long dark hallway and made to stand before the judges. The judges looked at all of them and clucked their tongues. The tall ugly woman was amused and had her hand on top of a metal lid that covered one of their plates.

The three chefs stood sweating and pale. One of their dishes was under that plate. *What would happen if they were chopped? What would happen if they won?* The tall ugly woman spoke, "It's time to see who will be on the chopping block! Are we ready, Chefs? Judges?" The Judges nodded and she lifted the lid dramatically, then gasped. "Oh, I didn't expect that!"

They all stared at the plate with the taco on it. No one said anything at first. The chef who made the tacos began screaming and holding on to the other two chefs who looked relieved. They pushed the losing chef away from them, an apology in their frightened eyes.

The judges shouted over the screaming, "We're sorry, but your taco just wasn't enough to keep you here, your competitors stepped it up a notch and outshined you!" Then they looked at the tall ugly woman and nodded. She grinned, showing yellow rotting teeth before shouting, "You've been Chopped! Halbert! Halbert!"

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

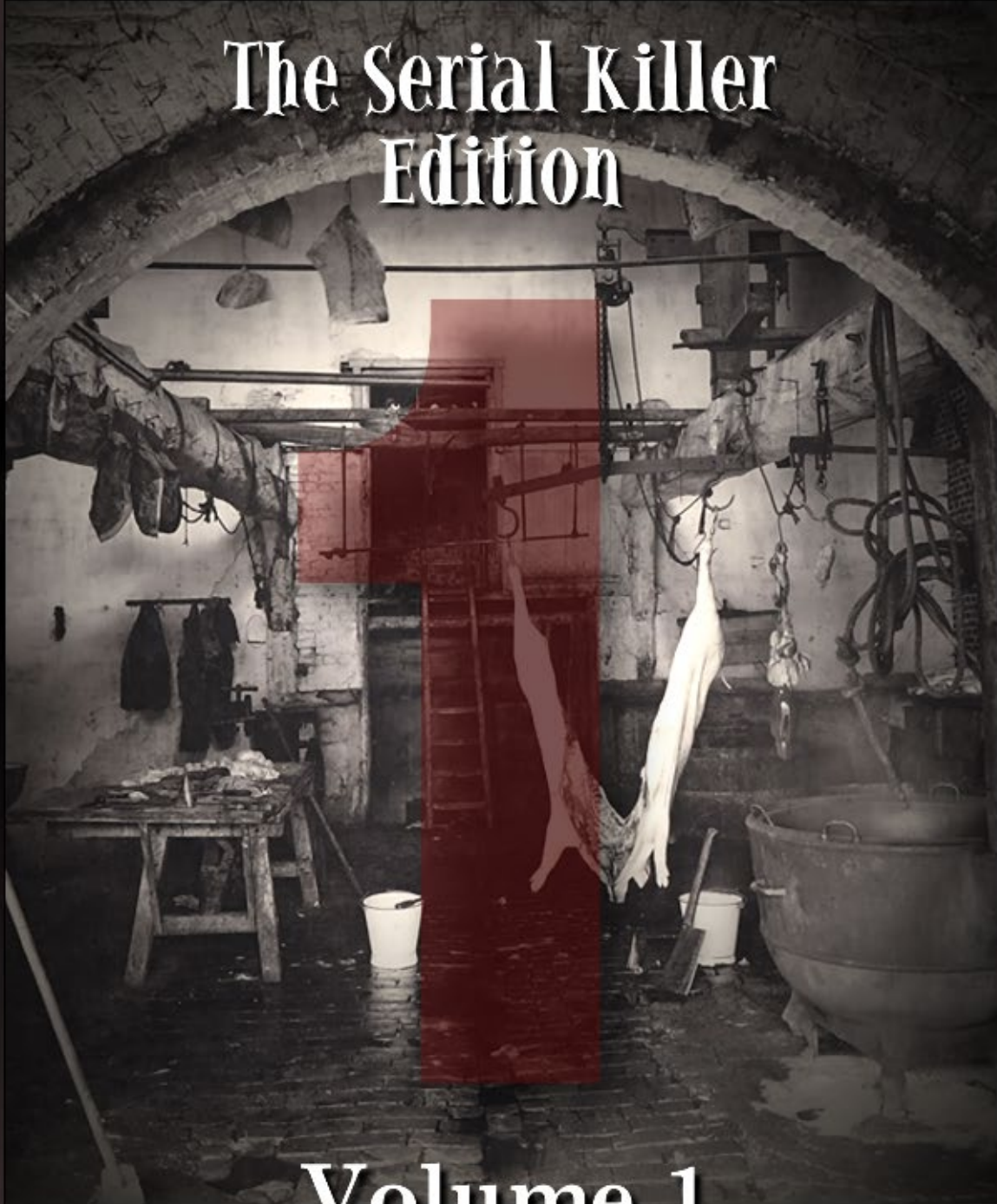
Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the extremely strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for several years before she left to write and travel, but still substitutes. She's published work with Gypsum Sound Tales, Dark Moon Digest, Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, and Sirens Call Publications with more on the way. When she's not spinning a new twisted tale, she's usually enjoying time with her other half and fur babies or reading a good book.

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What drives someone to become a Serial Killer?  
Eleven authors spin tales of atrocity telling us just that.

# Slaughter House

## The Serial Killer Edition



## Volume 1

Sirens Call Publications

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As I approached the dimly lit lane of sparse street lights incandescing across the slope of the hillock, I noticed the last glimmer of the reddish hue disappearing behind the distant hills leaving the horizon with a deep dark aura. The houses in the street were far apart. My destination was the last house before the woodland paved way for the sublime pine trees. In the bygone days, its white painted walls shone against the twilight's gloom until that drunkard oaf gambled all his fortune away except the skeleton of that house. A lone cricket's chirping resonated across the otherwise hushed path. The sound of my footsteps on the dry, soft fallen leaves of autumn tuned in to the rhythm of the whistling cool fall breeze.

I knocked on the door. I saw the knob twisting, and the door opened with a squeak. "My goodness Nigel, what happened to you? You look skin and bones. And, what's wrong with the power? The street lights are on." If I had not anticipated him opening the door at that moment, I would have never recognized him. He looked like a ghost carrying that lantern in his hand. "Come in Flint, come in," he said.

I stepped inside and sat on the couch. Old houses had their own quirks and oddities and that one sure had its own share of strangeness. It was noticeably chillier than outside. The old furniture stood there like tombstones in a graveyard. Nigel put the lantern on the center table and looked up at me. What a haggard desperate look that was! His eyes did not stay put on me for long. It wandered beyond me as if looking over my shoulders to somebody else. I turned matching the movement of his eyes; no one, nothing, except the dark shadows that had engulfed the house in its entirety.

"What's up with the lamp? Why are you not switching on the lights?" I asked.

"She likes it this way, dim and shadowy," Nigel replied.

"Who is she?"

"I don't know. Sometimes she wails in my dead wife's voice—sometimes she whispers in my ears and sounds exactly like my dead mother."

"What in heaven's name are you talking about Nigel?" I did not even try to hide the irritation in my voice. I thought it was becoming too much. Nigel had always been by nature freakishly uncanny, but his lunacy today seemed excessive. *I would try to talk to him tomorrow morning about getting some help*, I thought to myself.

"Coffee," he asked.

"Sure," I replied. He went to the kitchen and returned with two mugs and extended one towards me.

In that dim lambency, I noticed the open window. A few fireflies glided along the trails of the pouring moonbeams. My senses inundated, I tried to acquiesce this new world of darkness. Suddenly, Nigel started again, mumbling something with a strange intonation:

"Moments after twilight's decease,  
They rise from the depths of bygones once buried,  
Sucking the fervor from forlorn memories  
Of doleful melancholy and existence wearied,  
For they have tales unfinished to pursue;  
To maraud the sinners and make them rue."

"What was that?" I asked, startled at his sudden impulse of bizarre poesy.

"It's a poem Zayna once wrote," he said, looking quite distracted by some thought.

"When did you start reciting her poetry? You barely uttered her name when she was alive," I made no effort to sugarcoat that. He was ruthlessly heinous with her. Though, I was no saint myself but his atrocities towards her were of another level.

He seemed to completely ignore my comment. His gaze turned to those flickering fireflies. He said, "You know these filthy little creatures are not as ethereal as they seem to be. Many of them are vulpine blood seeking femme fatales." After a pause, he continued, "Very cleverly, she accurately mimics the patterns of mating signals to lure in the male. Mistaking them as fancy flashes of courtship, he steps into her nefarious trap. Then she waits, allowing the male to come closer and closer and closer. Slowly, she fastens her sharp

mandibles around him, and in a ruthless twist, she bites into his skin. Blood dribbles out forming a thick grisly coating around her mouth. His blood is milky, white. She drinks that blood, his blood. Then, she turns to the meaty bit. Hours later, what remains of him are scattered bits of exoskeleton and a pair of eyes.”

Nigel did not stop there. He said, “And, you know what’s worse?”

“What?” I asked, making the exasperation in my voice as clear as possible.

“It’s worse if she does not kill him at once. It’s worse when she sucks just enough out of him to make him linger. There are blood seekers who savor their prey rather than devouring them at once. She will suck your blood and spare you enough time for your vessels to fill again only to suck them once more.”

Before I could respond to his freakish lunatic talk, my eyes drifted to the swirling clusters of fireflies. They were becoming denser with each passing moment as more and more fireflies poured in through the window, pushed by the sudden gusts of tempest winds outside. One by one, they started to cling to one another; the cluster transmogrifying into a scintillating silhouette of a maiden. At first, I thought my eyes were playing tricks with me. It had to be some weird fortuity, an effect of the dark and the shadows. Then followed a shrill, so sharp it felt like it would pierce through the vessels inside my brain. I clasped my ears, my body crouched. Everything went quiet for a few seconds, then my ears slowly became attuned to the chirping of crickets outside.

“What on earth is wrong in here?” I squawked.

“I told you. Sometimes she wails in my dead wife’s voice.”

The voice did sound familiar to me. But, it was not Zayna’s. It was of somebody else. That night, her scream had the exact resonance. I remembered running away from that voice without bothering to look back, not even once.

“It sounded like Maureen,” I muttered.

“Who?”

“Maureen.”

“That chick from high school?”

“Yes.”

“Is she dead?”

“No! I mean I don’t know, was never in touch after school. Jesus! Why would you say that?”

“I only hear dead women in this house.”

For heaven’s sake! What was I talking about? I suddenly realized. The darkness was driving me mad. And on top of everything else, was that lunatic Nigel. It was just a cumulative chirping of insects.

“Dinner?” Nigel asked. I nodded. Nigel got up and disappeared into the dark kitchen. Moments later, we sat on the dining table. The room remained engulfed by the gloomy shadows of two tormented fiendish minds.

First, I noticed it in my peripheral vision, a dark human-shaped apparition. My eyes fought against my numb nerves as they, with utmost stealth, tried to fathom it. She was a woman, or rather, some grim nebulous form of woman. She stood near the kitchen door. No, she didn’t really stand; she floated in the air, her feet never touched the ground. Then, there was a fast dark movement, and it disappeared behind me. My senses told me it didn’t disappear, it was floating right behind me. Nigel’s eyes confirmed my surmise. I froze like the dead in a coffin.

It took some long seconds for my senses to grasp the miasma of horror. My face grimaced, and I flinched in shock. I ran towards the door. It was locked. “Goddamnit Nigel! Open that damn door,” I cried out, my body shaking uncontrollably.

“No, no, no, my friend—don’t run away, don’t—because you can’t,” said Nigel, rather calmly.

“Did you not see her?”

“I saw her—I keep seeing her, hearing her, every moment, in between moments—she is latched to my entire being and now, yours too. I was like you once—running away from her voice, her calls, her being. I was a dullard—don’t be a dullard. She runs in my blood—do not run—she flows in your blood too. She will make your blood sweeter, bit by bit, till it’s ready.”

“Open the damn door Nigel,” I cried. He unlocked it with a sigh and stepped aside.

I ran and ran and ran, never looking back, not even once. Nigel did not lie. Her murky presence had followed me around. Only sometimes, during the darkest of hours, she would make herself seen, in glimpses, dim, disturbing glimpses. But, she always loitered in the corners, floating in the air, her black gown flapping with the breeze. The sudden zephyrs of breaths on my neck, the soft whispers in my ears were vinous fixations. Then, there were those calls, calls of sweet cajoling. The air would whisper its beguiling spells. There was a fancy so strong and bizarre in the phantasmagorias of her repressing of my body, my mind that every cell of my body swayed to her dark tunes. At times, my mind mulled over the female firefly, slowly chewing off its male prey for I too felt being slowly digested by some vile gastric juice.

But, I was not giving up. I would fight it, drown it, bury it. I have buried things before, things dead and gone, gone forever. After all, they said it was all in the mind. The mind was the graveyard where laid buried the ghosts of bygones. I was ready to start afresh. And so, that evening, I invited her in. Fay had been working in my office for over a year by then. There had already been between us, the glimmer of a kindled relationship, and that was my escape. She was young unlike the shadows and smelled fresh, a far cry from the miasma of the whilom past.

There were three consecutive knocks on the door. I twisted the knob, and the door opened with a squeak. “Come in, Fay. Glad to see you.” I said. “My goodness! You almost scared me. Your skin looks so pale against the dark, bloodless. Hope this will help,” she said, handing me over a bottle of crimson red wine and a card. We sat on the couch. I was about to open the bottle when she oh so gently touched my hand and pointed at the card. “I wrote it myself,” she said. I thought we were way past the age of puerile nuisance. I opened it nonetheless. Fireflies! Could it be just a coincidence, or my path had been intertwined with all the firefly aficionados by some damned star-crossed intervention. It read:

Like orbs of the dead, withered, decayed but sprightly,  
Winged through the trails of darkness, grim and wildly,  
We visit, for we are lovers, forever, infinite,  
Searching for aloofness in the dark to unite.  
Love, dead or alive, you dare not deny, mislead or shame,  
As for a maimed heart, love is venom, evil and bane.  
Bygones are never far, nor is the realm of death,  
They lurk in the depth of soul, and forever in your living breath.

I finished reading it and looked at her. She smirked a devilish grin, or perhaps smiled, I could not tell anymore. Dusk slowly faded, passing on the Tartarean crown to nightfall. I sat with her in the somewhat dazed, sensual and somber air of the room, drenching in vinous muddles. There had been a sudden splurge of fireflies in the area around my house in the recent days. As more and more fireflies entered through the window glistening in their own fluorescent auras, I wondered how many vulpine blood seekers were lurking under those veils of perfidious mating gestures.

### **About the Author:**

Debapriya Ambuly has a master’s degree in English literature and always wanted to pursue a career in teaching. She considers the opportunity to teach literature to the young minds as a blessing. She is a nyctophile, a lover of the night, as she believes that it’s only in darkness that the most beautiful of lights can truly be seen.

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

"But I don't want to go among mad people," said Alice.  
"Oh, you can't help that," said the cat. "We're all mad here." - Lewis Carroll

Catherine Cat Dean held Frankie as close as she could, her face buried deep in his chest. She loved the smell of soap and the finest cologne emanating from her one true love. Her heart swelled with love as she wrapped her arms around him. She had never loved anyone as much as she loved Frankie. He snored as he slept, a habit he'd had since he was very young. She tweaked his ears, and he growled as he turned away from her. She rubbed his belly in response, and he curled into her shoulder, content as can be and completely oblivious to what was going to happen to him in the morning. Cat felt so guilty over his future she fed him his favorite swordfish dish for dinner that evening.

Frankie was going to have his balls snipped.

Frankie, or more accurately, Catsahaulics Cinco de Meow of Frankincense and Purr, had already fathered several prize-winning kittens from a number of pedigreed Ragdolls Cat had specially selected. Only the finest Ragdolls would share Frankie's bed. Ne'er would a local stray diddle with her pwecious Fwankie-Wankie. The laid back Ragdoll had spread his magnificent seed for cat-kind, and Cat had the Blue Ribbons and First Place trophies to prove it. It was time for her resplendent pussy to retire and enjoy the golden years beyond his short stint as a stud.

Hence, the snipping. No respectable plastic surgeon in the state would dare to give Cat the surgeries she needed for both herself and Frankie so she was forced to rely on a back street cosmetic surgeon who wanted to be paid in cash. Whilst poor Frankie would be rendered an it after his neutering, Cat couldn't allow her best breeder the humiliation of castration. Oh, no, she insisted the surgeon insert fake testicles called Ballz into her cat's nut sack. Of course, the surgeon knew this surgery was done more to appease Cat's guilt feelings than any real humiliation the cat might have felt over being rendered unmanly, but at \$250.00 per nut, he wasn't complaining.

The surgery didn't stop there, though.

This surgeon also transformed Cat from an overweight, jowled fifty-three year old woman to his finest masterpiece. Not content with the body she was born with, she sought to nip it here and tuck it there until she looked beautiful beyond belief. Today, Cat treated herself to another eyelift and cheek implants.

She paid good money to transform her own face and body into the image of Frankie. Catherine Dean wanted more than anything in the world to look like a cat.

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Cat took multi-vitamins each morning to look and feel her best for her latest surgical enhancement. She felt healthier than ever! Her body hummed with energy! She took dance lessons so that she would lose the clunky gait she grew up with. She exercised more and lost that spare tire she'd taken years to grow. The over-the-counter diet pills she had been taking helped whittle away those extra pounds and she wanted to show off her new, streamlined and feline body. She felt like a cheetah, all sleek and graceful. Granted, liposuction did most of the work but Cat made an effort to do her Pilates and eat well.

As Cat left the drugstore after purchasing her monthly supply of Lose It Fatty!, diet pills, she nearly collided with Joanne Brockheimer, an acquaintance Cat knew before she first went under the knife. Cat didn't acquire friends, since she rarely let anyone get close enough to know her. People frightened her. She disliked feeling judged and falling short of other people's expectations, so she took herself out of the modern world. Joanne was an exception, but Cat barely tolerated her. Joanne and Cat compared surgeries. Joanne had so much plastic surgery done she set off the scanner at the local Piggly Wiggly.

"Good morning, Cat. You're looking as ... *fine* as ever." Joanne looked down her snub nose at Cat. After a half dozen face lifts her skin took on a sheen like that of an overstretched balloon. Botox had wiped every expression from her face, giving her the drooling visage of a plastic baby doll covered with an inch-thick layer of makeup. She droned on, her voice a nasal whine caused by her deviated septum no amount of surgery every seemed to fix. "So you're off for another lift, dear? You need to go easy on the Botox. You have that startled look you get from surgeons who don't know what they're doing." She waved one manicured hand over her face. "I had my eyes and chin tucked. You can't even see the scars. Jean-Pierre is so impressive. I'm only forty-five years old and I don't look a day over thirty."

"In dog years." Cat muttered.

"What was that?" Joanne didn't give Cat a chance to respond. "You really should give Jean-Pierre a call, but I know you can't afford him. So you've had to settle, although I don't think Jean-Pierre would approve of making anyone look like a cat. He's above that sort of thing."

Cat wished she could completely avoid Joanne but the woman insisted upon mingling with her if only to chat about silicone versus saline and the emotional benefits of chin tucks. She walked away, calling over her shoulder, anything to give herself distance from the annoying woman. "It's nice talking to you again, Joanne, but I must be off. Things to do and people to see."

"TTFN!" Joanne waved her fingers as she teetered down the street on her five-inch heels, her superior attitude following close behind. Cat sighed as the woman wiggled her way down Central Avenue, marinating in her perfume as she walked.

"I hate the living..." Cat groaned.

Cat preferred her dozens of felines to that peculiar species known as homo sapiens. Cats were honest. They didn't ditch her at the last minute for dates, leaving her sipping dry white wine at a restaurant table in full, embarrassing view of everyone else in the place. Cats lived life on their own terms and they didn't answer to anyone. They were very selective about who they let into their lives, whether feline, animal, or human. They did not have ulterior motives, unlike her good-for-nothing uncle who cozied up to her before her wealthy mother died, hoping for a piece of the inheritance pie. When he didn't get it, he left Cat alone at long last. She felt relieved but disappointed that yet another man let her down.

Frankie never let her down. When Cat felt lonely, Frankie made his way to her lap. When Cat needed a good cry, Frankie was there, purring and rubbing against her until the tears stopped falling. She returned the favor, and she was always there for her favorite kitty. When Frankie wanted a cuddle, he jumped in her lap. When he wanted his breakfast, he awakened her at 5:30 am each day with a tap of his claw on her face. She happily fed him the best cat food money could buy. When he wanted attention, he dropped books on her head or stood in front of her computer staring at her until she gave in to his demands. She spoiled her cats, especially Frankie, and they in turn gave her the love and attention she craved.

Cats were straightforward, unlike humans. They were also not judgmental. Her father and younger sister criticized her over her clowder of cats. They fussed about the smell and recoiled when one of the twenty kitties approached them. Her sister Prudence complained about allergies, although she owned a cat herself. No one, not even family, could talk Cat out of her hoard of felines. Things were so bad between Cat and her family that they stopped coming around to visit. They stopped calling and they didn't even bother to check in. Cat didn't notice she received no birthday cards until her birthday had passed by four days.

No one human missed Cat, and she missed no one as well.

She hoarded the little beasts that were her only friends. She nuzzled them and talked to them and brushed their fur. The only reason Cat bought a Kindle reader over a Nook was because kindle was the term for a group of kittens.

But living in a houseful of cats had its problems.

She culled her hoard of cats over the past few weeks by digging the corpses out from beneath mountains of trash, but she ran out of room in her backyard. Since she spent so much on cosmetic surgery, she ran through her inheritance quickly. Money was tight. Towards the end of the month she ran out of cash again and couldn't afford food to eat, although what few dollars she did have went to pay for cat food. Her pretties would not suffer starvation! Still, her stomach rumbled endlessly, leaving her with only one option. She enjoyed their dark meat, although it was a bit stringy. It was then that she noticed the change.

Her skin felt softer and more elastic. She could swear her eyesight had improved, especially her night vision. Even her hair became more lustrous, much like a lion's mane. Her body became more limber so she could prance about her apartment like the cat she wanted to be. She was obsessed with cats. She wanted to look like one. She wanted to *be* one.

Never again would she bury her cats. No, she ate them. After all, you are what you eat.

She stopped at a storefront and looked at the televisions in the window. They were attached to a special camera that showed her face on every screen. Twelve Cats smiled back at her. Her bosom swelled with pride at her unusual look. Her almond-shaped eyes called attention to her face. Two years ago she bought special contact lenses with slitted pupils so she would look even more feline. Whenever she wore them, people's heads turned, but she didn't realize she bordered on the uncanny. Her catlike appearance made people feel uncomfortable, but she thought in her delusion they admired her.

They didn't. They mocked her behind her back. Children pointed fingers slapped away by mothers who couldn't resist gaping themselves.

Cat saw none of this. She knew she stood out in the crowd and she would have it no other way. She liked her unusual appearance, despite not liking people. She enjoyed the reactions she received but she rarely addressed anyone who showed the slightest bit of interest. The only reason she put up with Joanne was because the woman had known her before her surgeries. Cat knew she looked better than Joanne.

And now she walked into her cosmetic surgeon's sleazy secret room in his basement, ready for her latest feline transformation. Frankie would also become a new man, so to speak.

"I'd like to keep Frankie for the day to monitor him." The surgeon said. "Anesthesia is a tricky thing. So much can go wrong. When Frankie is fully alert and beginning to heal, he can go home."

"Thank you, Doctor. You take such good care of us. I don't know what we'd do without you."

The surgeon smiled his million-dollar smile, which was no exaggeration since he earned in the seven figures.

"And now you, Cat. This surgery will finalize your slanted cat's eye look. The cheek implants will angle your face, making it more feline." The surgeon clapped his hands and grinned with delight. "You are truly a work of art, my masterpiece. I rarely get an opportunity to be so creative. I am indebted to you."

Cat knew if anything, she was indebted to him because these surgeries were not cheap, but she wanted to look like her Frankie. She'd noticed many cat owners looked like their charges, and she wanted to take that look one step further. "Do you think I need another hairline reduction to make my forehead look bigger?"

"Not at the moment, but you will need that in a month or two. And I love the color! You and Frankie have the same beautiful auburn mane."

"It's called Desert Sunrise and the color blend was made especially for me." Cat beamed with pride as she ran her fingers through her shoulder-length, layered hair. The style matched Frankie's. She liked her thick hair. The new color was so much more

alluring than her original mousy brown. She knew men and women alike envied her for her lustrous hair. Her hair got as many stares as her unusual face.

"Let's get you prepped, put under, pulled, and tucked, my dear. You and Frankie will have much to be proud of before the day is over." The surgeon gave Cat instructions as to how he would proceed. By the time she was in his operating room, lying on his most comfortable table, she daydreamed of accepting the Grand Prize in the next Stellar Kitties Cat Show looking so much like Frankie people's heads would turn.

The surgeon placed a mask over her face. "Count backwards from 100."

"I smell burned toast."

"That's different. Most people smell pizza. The anesthesia is doing its work now. Count backwards from 100."

"100... 99... 98... ninety..."

Cat dozed.

\*\*\*

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Cat," the surgeon said. "You did very well. Frankie is also recovering. Both of you are just fine. You're as healthy and as strong as a lion."

"And now I can go home with Frankie?"

"Absolutely. You're my best patients. Always recovering quickly and you're repeat customers who pay cash, the best kind."

Of course, the *repeat customers who pay cash* part was most important. "Thank you so much, doctor. I'll rest a bit and head home. May I have a mirror?"

"Of course." He handed Cat a large hand mirror. "You are stunning."

Angry purple bruises encircled her eyes and colored her cheeks, but she knew they would fade in a day or two. Her face had swollen more than usual but like the bruises, the swelling would diminish in time. Her surgeon was a genius with very talented hands. She hated driving to the bad part of town and hiding in a small, dark room in his basement for her surgeries, but he was the only cosmetic surgeon in the region who was willing to perform her transformation. Her eyes angled upwards even more sharply than before, enhancing her catlike and intense expression. Her cheekbones, fuller and broader, gave her the heart-shaped face she wanted so much but didn't have until now. Her bee-stung lips smiled above her pointed chin, pleased at what she saw gazing back at her from the mirror. Her transformation into a cat was almost complete.

Cat couldn't rush home fast enough. When she passed a butcher, her stomach rumbled. If only she had enough money to afford a steak! But no, she was broke again until next week. Her brood would bask in the light of her evolving beauty and she would treat them to their favorite Mariner's Catch cat food. Two declawed legs marinating in a ginger-tamarind sauce awaited her. Pickings were slim but they would have to do. This one died only a day ago so it was relatively fresh. She would broil it until the skin was crisp, just the way she liked it. She worried the Advantage flea medicine she gave her cats a week ago would taint the taste of the meat, but they tasted like chicken.

Cat walked through the door to her apartment with Frankie in tow in his cat carrier. Her clowder of cats perched all about; on the couch, on the rug, out of sight on her bed, in the bathtub playing with a spider, under the kitchen table, in the sink waiting for Cat to turn on the tap so it could drink. The ones out of sight ran into the living room when they heard the door open and close. When they spotted her, their hackles rose. Bodies tensed and tails fluffed as they backed away from her.

She opened the cat carrier and Frankie sauntered out. He looked up at his mistress, recoiled, and hissed.

"Frankie, what's wrong?" She reached out to smooth his ruffled coat, and he lashed out with one paw, slashing her wrist. She cried out in pain, cradling her hand close to her chest. Frankie moved backwards slowly, body rigid and tense, and hissed again as if he saw something - or someone - unfamiliar.

That's when Cat noticed the silence. The purring that was a constant hum around her had ceased. Twenty cats stared at her, eyes wide, as if they didn't know what they saw. Teeth bared, they slowly approached her, in a pack, backing her into a corner.

They didn't recognize her.

In one great big wave, they leapt upon her, yowling and hissing their distress. They protected their territory as only cats can. Claws lashed out, tearing tender skin amid shrieks of pain. Teeth tore at her skin. The coppery tang of blood filled the air. By the time her cats had finished with her, she was even more unrecognizable than she already was.

Years of surgical perfection had been wiped away with a sweep of claws and gnashing of teeth. Frankie had gnawed off her perfect nose. New cheek implants exposed to the air beneath torn flesh. Pointed earlobes that cost \$500.00 sported teeth marks. In the end, Cat became part of her cacophony of cats in ways she never imagined, but unlike her cats, she had only one life.

#### About the Author:

E. A Black's short stories have appeared in *Zippered Flesh 2*, *Zippered Flesh 3*, *Teeming Terrors*, *Midnight Movie Creature Feature 2*, *Heart of Farkness*, *Wicked Tales: The Journal of the New England Horror Writers Vol. 3*, and more. She won a Best Short Story mention on *The Solstice List@ 2017: The Best Of Horror* for *Invisible*, which appears in *Zippered Flesh 3*.

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### **Rising Moon | *Lydia Prime***

As it wears off, I'm worn down  
walls are spinning all around,  
my skin is crawling, or was that bone?  
Belief is still that I'm far from home.  
Chest compressions,  
breath in sessions.  
"What comes next?" I try to ask.  
Voice so calm, "Put on your mask."  
Bile; spewing out my soul.  
Shallow breaths take their toll.  
Crack here, crack there – something new,  
skeletal fragments puncture through.  
Bloody tears spill down my cheeks –  
soak in sweat; my body wrecks.  
My mirror's near but I'm scared to look,  
decaying since the last one I took.  
Claws displayed, now covered in fur.  
The moon is full; scented blood my lure.  
Into the night I seek my prey,  
I must feed before break of day.  
Stalking, running,  
thrashing, chomping.  
Unsuspecting meat so tender –  
hides from me, though I am clever.  
I sneak up upon terrified face,  
devour the heart, leave no trace.  
Racing adrenaline;  
was it me or was it them?  
Hunger cured, I take my leave.  
Moon's glow fading – end of eve.  
Before long the sun will rise,  
my body twists back to size.

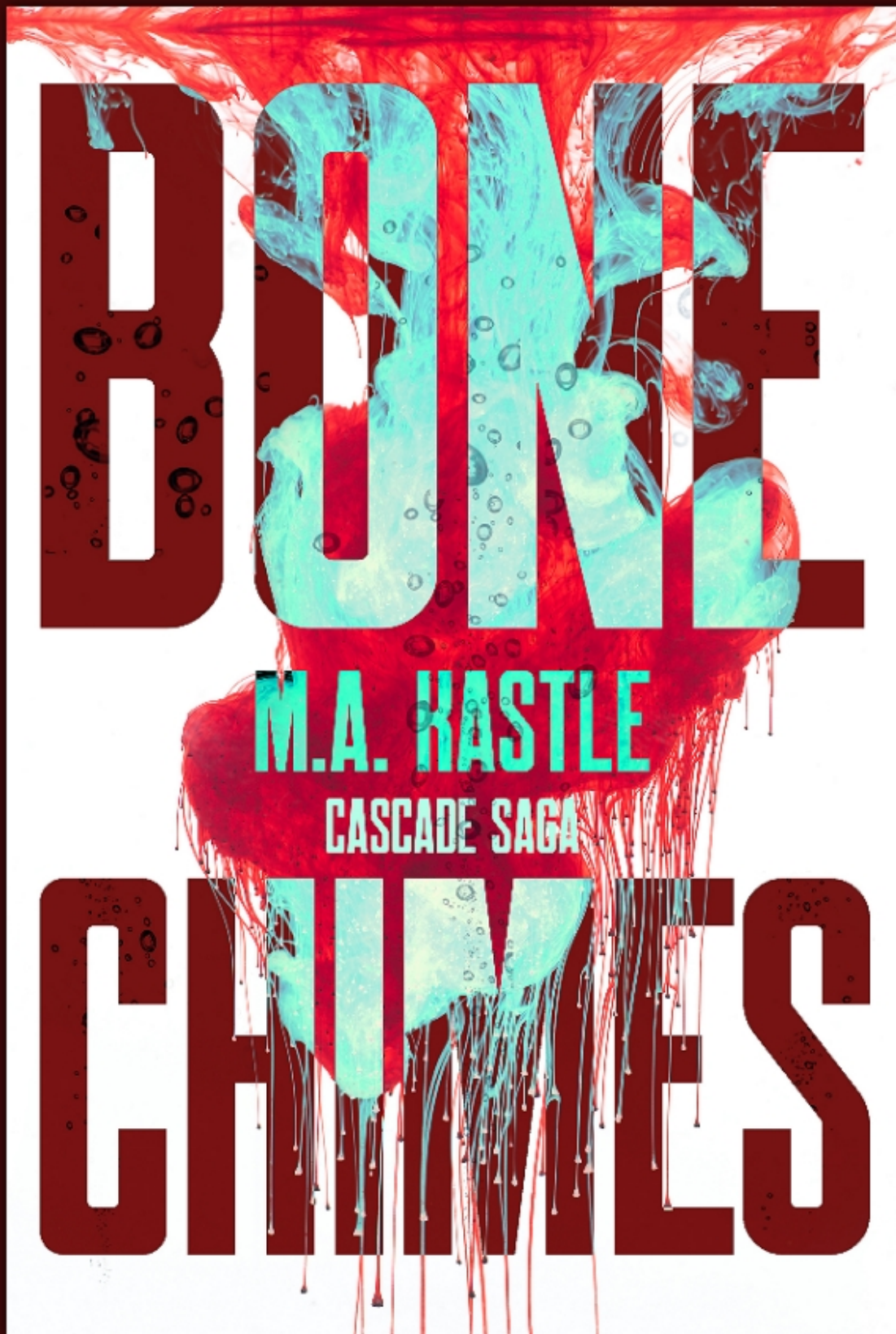
#### **About the Author:**

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 behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

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

Facebook: [Lydia Prime](https://www.facebook.com/LydiaPrime)

Will the ultimate sacrifice be enough?



Available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble,  
Kobo and iTunes

Emily lay in the throes of paralysis, the dream fresh and real in her mind.

Dr. Ferris' honeyed voice served as narrator to her nightmare, his questions echoing over the strange landscape. Part of her sensed the office beyond her closed eyelids. The scents of leather, wood, and old books filled her nostrils. The other part of her saw only hues of black, white, and gray. And, it heard the voice.

"Where are you?" Dr. Ferris said.

A young girl materialized before Emily. She seemed more like a doll than a human being. In her hand was a fat rat. She held it by the tail.

A tree stood behind the girl. Roots slithered around one another until they formed a human skull. Emily's tongue grew fat and useless in her mouth at the sight.

"Where are you?" Dr. Ferris said. His voice had taken on a hint of urgency. "Answer me."

"The tree," she whispered.

The eyes of the skull had grown. They were almost the size of a man. Something squirmed in their dark sockets. The doll-like girl looked up. Her large eyes found Emily's.

Emily's heart sped up.

"Can't move."

"I'm coming," Dr. Ferris said.

The doll moved forward. She grasped Emily's wrist with her empty hand.

"You have to move," she breathed. "Move or you'll die."

Emily's heart seemed to have leaped into her ears, drowning out all sound. The girl's lips continued to move but not one word spilled from them.

She pulled Emily toward the skull.

Dr. Ferris's voice broke the spell then. Like a peal of thunder, it rang out over them.

"I'll be there soon!"

The girl and the tree vanished. Emily's eyes fluttered open.

Her face lay on the office's beige carpet, her body spread-eagle on the floor. No one stood in the room. The door was closed.

Emily pushed herself to her feet. Framed diplomas on the wall proclaimed the office as belonging to Dr. Emil Ferris, the man treating her for narcolepsy.

She turned to the desk. Dr. Ferris' bloodied body rested in the chair behind it, his throat cut from ear to ear. He was still dead.

For the second time that day, darkness rose at the corner of her vision. She staggered backward and collapsed.

The girl awaited her return, rat in hand. Only, when Emily looked again, it had transformed into a clock.

"Not much time," the girl said. "He's coming to kill you."

"W-who?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't know. He came for Dr. Ferris. As usual, you're in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"What do I do?"

"Only one thing to do."

She gestured toward the skull.

Emily shuddered. "I can't do that. Not again. You know what happens when I go in there."

"Why are you so afraid? You die at least three times a day."

"Those are attacks. I can come back from those."

An unseen door opened. Cool air brushed Emily's cheek and stirred her hair.

Footsteps, muffled by the soft carpet, entered.

"He's in the room," the girl said. "Too bad you can't bring him in here."

Paralysis spread throughout Emily's limbs once more. Like the tree, she was rooted to the spot.

"There you are," a male voice said.

Footsteps crossed the room and halted beside her outer body. Warm flesh touched her skin as an unseen hand slipped into her own. He appeared before her.

The man possessed a lanky build and sandy-brown hair. Strange eyes peered into her own. These weren't windows to the soul. They opened on a mind which had long since fled reality.

"Are you like me?" he said.

She opened her mouth but no answer came.

"You can hear me. You brought me here." He leaned forward. "What's the matter with you?"

Tears flowed from Emily's eyes. He lifted her arm and let it drop.

"You can't move, can you? You're afraid."

He circled her, prodding her with one finger. Then, he turned to the girl. She shivered under his gaze and disappeared.

"You aren't like me," he said to Emily. "I get angry. Sometimes, I get so angry, the blood just...flows."

He peered past her and into the eyes of the skull.

"What's that?"

Moving away from her, he stepped to the brink of the socket.

"What's in there?"

Before he could turn, Emily rushed him. Her small frame collided with his back.

For a moment, he teetered on the edge. Then, he grasped at empty air and plunged into darkness.

His screams echoed in her ears when she opened her eyes.

A new body lay upon the carpeted floor.

#### **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 Intern at Crystal Lake Publishing.

Blog: [Frighten Me!](#)

Twitter: [@nachingkassa](#)

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#### **Sticks and Stones | *Lydia Prime***

Sticks and stones and cobwebbed 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 cobwebbed 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 behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

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“Base to security, I’m starting my walkabout” she reported into her walkie-talkie, waiting to hear back from the security desk before she went down the steep exterior stairs, feeling instantly invigorated by the crisp air. The other night managers took the artificially lit underground tunnels to travel between the far flung buildings of the once bustling psychiatric institute. She preferred to walk in the moonlight admiring the gothic architecture of the abandoned structures. Her favorite route took her along the pathways encircling the crumbling but still intimidating walls of Building 5, the forsaken forensic annex. The structure should really be demolished, but it was so solidly built that the dynamite and heavy equipment needed for the job was prohibitive. Over time the vines have taken over and the overgrown spruce trees formed another barrier and home for the ravens and squirrels that were the only sentries remaining. Most everyone avoided this corner of the campus, just as they avoided the dark history it contained.

As she drew closer to the barricaded front door, the hair on her arms bristled, and a cold breeze brought the smell of rot. She felt no fear, just intuition that she was being watched, looking up she waved at the ashen face staring down from the bars of the top floor window. The moonlight highlighted the black ooze dripping from the window ledge in rivulets that mimicked an escaping serpent. Everyone else thought the ghost was Henry, a patient that killed himself the day they were scheduled to move into their brand new unit, rather than leave his home of 30 years. They all felt sorry for Henry, thinking he must be lonely all by himself, but that was assuming he was the only ghost left behind, but she knew there were other souls unable to leave the prison, even in the afterlife. The ghosts were not the only people trapped, many of the staff, her among them, were haunted by the things they witnessed or participated in, often not knowing better.

The specters failure to wave back, and the tortured look on his gaunt face, was not of loneliness, but of unrelenting fear. That fear shot out in waves, imploring her to let him out, and she felt as helpless now as she did many decades ago when she was just a young and impressionable student nurse. She had tried to help Timmy, reported the abuse, but it fell on deaf ears, the administration would not believe that a doctor could do those things. She was labeled a troublemaker and he was sentenced to seclusion for his safety, since surely he must have hallucinated such things, or dealing with some Freudian impulse. Though they tried to make her doubt herself, she knew better. His teenage face looked fearfully at her from the barred window of the seclusion room shattering her resolve and she would break the no-contact rules and hold his hand while he sobbed. She tried her best to keep an eye out and prevent the doctor from taking Timmy for private therapy sessions, but when he caught on, the manager was forced to schedule her to opposite shifts. Over time Timmy stopped standing at the window pleading for the never forthcoming help, and started hiding in the corner wearing 5 or 6 pairs of pajamas as a shield. One Saturday morning she walked in and found his room covered in so much blood, she knew that no one could survive. Guilt ridden she transferred to another ward after the funeral, trying to erase Timmy’s face from her nightmares. Soon time and other troubling events filled her mind, as did the drudgery and joy of life, love and family. Her abilities as an empath made her a great nurse, but drained her of so much energy, that sometimes she had to retreat and forget, escape into feel good books. Nothing ever totally erased Timmy’s face and story for long. Since her promotion last year, when she finally was given access to the skeleton keys that opened all the abandoned buildings, she had been an infrequent visitor to Building 5, hoping to see Timmy, but usually only meeting up with Harry or Juanita, the housekeeper that died in the kitchen fire on the second floor. Their apparitions never scared her and their emotions never consumed her, but another fear oozed from the walls, making the floor slippery and heavy with residue.

Tonight she wanted Timmy to know that the predatory psychiatrist was finally dead and he could finally rest without fear. Though the doors to Building 5 were padlocked, she brought a master key and wanted to leave the obituary for him to read. The putrid smell of decay assaulted her nostrils but she trudged up the stone steps to the third floor. The moonlight lit the hallway past the nursing station to observation pod 3 and to the ill-fated room 14. Though the blood had long been mopped from the floor, she swore she could still see it pooling in the corner. Calling his name, she waited for him to appear, but nothing happened, even Harry did not show up tonight, which seemed odd, as did the heaviness in the air. She placed the obituary on the floor when she heard sobbing coming from the seclusion room at the opposite end of the hallway. Cautiously drawing closer she saw Timmy, peering in a window, shifting from foot to foot. He turned and looked at her, but the look was not of terror, but of glee, the sobbing was coming from within the room.

Edging yet closer, Timmy let her stand beside him, so she could see what was making him so happy. The air smelled of bile, the walls were oozing black blood, and she swore that the floor was pulsing, but she did not feel any trepidation. Looking at the figure huddled near the window she sensed extreme fear and powerlessness, but of someone used to causing those emotions not receiving them. Dr. Lyrics looked at her imploringly and started to rise toward her but stopped as she grinned at Timmy and opened the door with her key. There was going to be a new ghost of building 5 and judging by the growing clamor behind her, he would not be alone for long.

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

Roxy Thomas writes horror, paranormal and suspense by evening and is a psychiatric nurse by day. She lives with her husband, 2 cats and a dog on 20 acres in Alberta near a national park where the bison roam. She has published a personal essay in her city newspaper, non-fiction mental wellness pieces in a small town weekly, and short stories in an on-line café.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

Sheila followed the tour director leading the group down into the narrow entry of the gao, the nickname for the medieval dungeon her 'Singles Travel UK' tour group explored. Slick stone stairs wound into a cold dark, shocking against the sticky wet of her sweaty shirt. Where other girls glistened, she beaded up droplets. None of the other ladies on the tour had wet stains on their low back or armpits. None of the others looked like they'd run a marathon even though they'd been in a nicely air-conditioned coach most of the day.

They'd all paired and grouped off the first day, just like in high school. The dashing man found the loveliest of the middle-aged single ladies to dance with at the pubs, drink pints with, and giggle about local accents. The ladies left without a gent, since there were three ladies for every man, gaggled around like geese, shopping and ogling men.

Sheila didn't fit with any of them, though the tour guide invited her to sit, he was always careful to flash his wedding band in her direction.

As they made their way through another damp castle and now into another damp dungeon, she heard the ladies tittering at the nasty stories he conjured. She was too far back to hear them.

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Lily hadn't been much to look at. Scrawny. A hawkish face that her mother blessed since it meant she'd not be swept away by some fool boy with naught but a plot of land to work and a peat shack to call his own. But mother died years back and she didn't feel blessed.

She owed her hands' swiftness to the Lord, her needlework, and her eye for dye-craft.

Dyeing is hot work. The laundresses didn't help her. They didn't want to be stained.

She toiled alone, heat rising from the boiling pots of dye. Fingers bleeding at night in her room, stitching up the fine garments the ladies wore at play. Sometimes, she cried, but if anyone heard they never said anything.

\*\*\*

Sheila stepped into the gao, a tall stone room with an arrow slit window casting little light on the horror within. Sure, the walls hung with recreations of torture devices that the castle curators staged for tourists. The gimmick worked. All the couples and the gaggles pressed in on their guide who assured them that the machines of pain were just for show.

But Sheila felt something so heavy on her chest, she fought the urge to cough.

If she had someone to talk to she'd ask, "Did it just get colder? I mean, even colder than a dungeon usually is." Then maybe they'd laugh and clasp hands in solidarity against the fear of such a place.

But she had no one.

\*\*\*

Lily labored for her lord, always productive, even grateful to be out of the fields. But talent didn't make you friends in a castle. The hens pecked all the time. Laundresses complained she sweat too much in her clothes for such light duties. The cooks gossiped she didn't eat hardy enough to be so spry. And the mayor of the castle thought a woman of her years shouldn't be working for such a young court, like her crepey skin and sagging jowls might be catching.

If she'd had family, she'd retire to her children's cottages. Grow old in the peace that family can bring.

That's what others did when they reached forty years.

But she had no one. No matter how often the mayor pushed her, she shrugged and kept to her dye, letting the salt of her tears mix in.

\*\*\*

"And here, you'll have to take turns, since the room is small. Gather round."

They all did, Sheila included. They leaned forward as their guide stood in a space no bigger than a shower stall.

"The real horror," he said, "is this," then pointed to an oddly shiny grate in the floor. "This is where they put the people they wanted to forget about. Obilettes are tiny rooms, some tall enough to stand in but not sit. Some like this one only big enough to squat in. The souls they stashed here were people they wanted to suffer a long time."

Sheila leaned forward peering into the grate as the others flashed selfies in the little closet of a room around the grate in the floor.

"Do you mind?" Bernard, the guide, pointed to the others all lined up for a photo. Sheila made her way back to the end of the line.

\*\*\*

It had been a terrible year. Lambing had been poor, bringing more dead than live ones. The crops bitten through by locusts in mid-summer meant the harvest would be thin. But worst of all, the lady of the castle suffered from a bleeding, painful pregnancy. Lily knew, though she'd never borne her own, such pregnancies boded ill for the babe and the mother.

Women died in childbirth often. It was expected that a healthy young lord might have two or three wives if ill luck struck. But this Lord loved his Lady. Pined for her and suffered along with her, counting every pain, cursing God and then repenting with tears and scratches to his face. He cast about for answers. For some assurance that she'd live.

The holy men told him if everyone in the castle prayed at their work, she'd live.

Lily wanted her to live, not because she'd ever see the Lady or the babe. No, she wanted the twining tension of the castle to ease around her for it felt like a noose around her neck.

She prayed as she stirred dye pots. She prayed while sipping her stew and chewing the crusty bread. She prayed over each stitch.

"Please God, give them safety."

But at night, she'd slip in her own prayer.

"Please God, bring me peace. I'm so alone."

Outside her thin sheet of a door, the wooden floor creaked.

\*\*\*

Finally, Sheila was left to stand in the gao's oubiliette chamber. Bernard shepherded the others away to sip coffee on the castle green with the tourists. They didn't notice they'd left her behind.

She was used to that.

She kneeled down on the grate. Tourists had thrown straws and wadded papers into the oubiliette, a disgusting, disrespectful thing, but it allowed Sheila to see how shallow the hole was. How little space a person would have if they were forced in there. The cold breath of the gao wrapped around her, making her shake, but she couldn't resist pressing her ear against the metal grate.

Listening for echos maybe.

Then she heard one.

"Alone."

\*\*\*

The Mayor dragged Lily before the Lord, still in black mourning garb for his wife and son. The whole court followed, a grim procession hissing accusations behind their hands. In the court chamber, the Mayor accused her with razor words.

"When we were told to pray for the Lady, she prayed for herself."

They gasped then like a single selfish prayer might end the whole world.

"I didn't mean anything," Lily said, quietly. She kept her face turned to the floor, as she always had done. As was expected. "I prayed all day for the Lady and child. I prayed over every stitch."

"Liar," a cook croaked. "I heard you grumble over my bread at breakfast when the Lady labored."

Lily never grumbled, but that didn't matter.

"She's a hag, Lord. Never married," the head washer-woman said, with a curtsy.

"She sewed for the Lady. Maybe there's magic in the stitching."

Lily shook her head, but denial was a breeze in a hurricane.

"Witch."

Once the word is said, there's no taking it back.

"Put her in the gao until the Bishop comes," the Lord said. His eyes were fierce pockets of rage, but he clutched to his crucifix with white knuckles. "We're not animals."

\*\*\*

Sheila heard a whisper. It touched a piece of her hidden away so long.

"Alone."

\*\*\*

Lily squatted in the gao, licking the stones for dew, humming to herself. The jailer brought bread, once a day. There had been twelve breads. Sometimes the Bishop didn't come for months.

"Alone," she rasped and reached her pale fingers through the grate. She'd always been alone.

\*\*\*

Sheila felt the brush of ice against her fingers as they clung to the grate's metal lattice. She turned her head and pressed her lips to the space, speaking into the cold.

"I'm alone, too."

The icy fingers of the thing within, the lonely dark thing squatting there, reached out and brushed her cheek.

Then it blasted past her, pushing her back, blowing her hair into a halo around her head.

All she could think was, "I'll never be lonely again."

\*\*\*

Back at the coach, Sheila walked up the narrow aisle. They'd all paired off leaving her to sit alone.

"Where were you, Sheila? We almost left without you," Bernard said, a haughty look tightening his features.

She smiled rubbing her raw, dye stained finger.

#### About the Author:

Donna J. W. Munro has spent the last nineteen years teaching high school social studies. Her students inspire her every day. An alumni of the Seton Hill Writing Popular Fiction program, she published pieces in *Every Day Fiction*, *Syntax* and *Salt*, *Dark Matter Journal*, the *Haunted Traveler*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Astounding Outpost*, *Door=Jar*, *Spectators* and *Spooks Magazine*, *Nothing's Sacred Magazine IV and V*, *Hazard Yet Forward* (2012), *Enter the Apocalypse* (2017), *Killing It Softly 2* (2017), *Beautiful Lies*, *Painful Truths II* (2018), *Terror Politico* (2019), and several *Thirteen O'Clock Press* anthologies.

Website: <https://www.donnajwmunro.com>

Joshua wiped his bowl and a spoon clean with a dirty dish rag he found next to the refrigerator. Mom was out again and he wasn't sure if she'd come home last night. He pushed some junk mail aside on the table and set his bowl down in the new space. There was a box of cereal in the cabinet called Genie Os. He filled his bowl and set the box in front of him. Joshua liked to read.

*Genie Os, new, improved and full of essential elements*, he read. On the front of the box was a photo of a blue guy in a belled turban posing with an old school oil lamp. His bare shoulders were dusted with glitter. Joshua giggled through his mouthful of cereal. He turned the box around.

*Genie O believes in the plight of children. Too many children in the world don't have enough food, clean water and love to thrive. That's why Genie O has designed this special cereal full of beneficial additives to help young lives become better. Genie O believes in making a difference, one youthful life at a time. This cereal is distributed freely to children in need, all over the world.* Underneath this warm paragraph there was another photo of the genie in his silk turban, smiling at him.

*Mom must have got this from a food pantry*, thought Josh. *I wish she'd quit going to those. Pantry cereal sucked.*

He shoveled another spoonful into his mouth and bit down on something hard. Fishing around, he poked through half chewed cereal to pull out the hard bit. In between his thumb and forefinger he held a shard of thick glass. He set it down next to his bowl, and chewed the rest carefully before swallowing. He poked around his bowl looking for more glass. Finding none, he took another bite.

"Your wish has been granted."

Josh stopped chewing and looked around the room. The television was off. He didn't think anyone was home. He listened, decided he had imagined the voice and swallowed. He scooped up another bite and looked at it. Pale rings of beneficial additives floated in the watery milk his mom made from powder, but no more glass. Through it, the gray metal of the spoon made the liquid swirl like fog. He ate it. From somewhere in the house, he heard the tinkle of bells.

"Mom? You home?" No one answered. Josh stood up. From outside he heard the mail truck drive up to the front of their house. The letter box squeaked open and the truck drove away. There was no other sound. He walked around the house, looking in all the rooms and peeked out the front window. He could see the mailbox hanging open. None of the neighbors were out yet. No one was home. Josh sat back down.

His cereal bowl was piled high with Genie Os, spilling out onto the table. He didn't remember pouring that many. He got the pitcher of reconstituted milk from the counter and poured more. He'd only had a piece of cheese since last night and food pantry cereal was better than no cereal. He scooped a spoonful up, examined it and stuffed it into his mouth.

He found no more chunks of glass, but halfway through the bowl he noticed a steely colored shadow through the milk. He fished around for it with his spoon, dropping more cereal onto the table. The object eluded the spoon until he finally just reached in and pulled it out with his fingers. It was a fragment of metal.

He held it up with the grimy black crescents of his fingernails. The edge was too shiny, like the metal had recently been twisted away. A strand of hair was snagged on the jagged edge. A drop of milk ran down it to drip on his faded pajamas.

"Gross," he said. He set it on the table next to the chunk of glass and picked the cereal box up looking for a complaints number. Genie O smiled back at him. He was giving Josh a thumbs up that felt new. Josh shoved the junk mail the rest of the way off the table onto the floor, emptied the bag and sifted through with his fingers.

Scattered throughout the bloated rings he found more twisted metal bits, hair, chunks of the thick glass and a silver chain. He pulled the chain up, scattering cereal. At the end dangled a cross. It looked just like the necklace his mom liked to wear.

"Mom!" Josh knew she wasn't home, but yelling for her made him feel better. Somewhere in the empty house the sound of bells tickled the empty space again. Josh looked to the Genie Os box as a tremble of ice crawled out his hairline and down his spine. There was no blue man on the box.

"Mom! Mom!" Josh thought he saw a movement down the hallway near his bedroom and he started backing toward the front door.

"Mom!" His cry was getting shrill, threaded with tightening panic. Outside, a car pulled up at their house and he heard a door slam. Inside the house, laughter echoed in the vacancy. He ran for the door, fumbled with the lock and jerked it open.

His aunt was standing there, holding the spare key. Her eyes were swollen and wet. As soon as she saw him, she opened her arms and he ran to her. She buried her face in his hair and started crying.

"I'm so sorry about your mom, baby. I'm so sorry." He pushed her back and looked up.

"What about my mom?"

Behind him, the sound of bells cut off as the wind blew the door closed.

### **Pain Relief | *Angela Yuriko Smith***

"You think you know about pain? I know about pain."

He held up his palms. They were lined with dirt and chapped. His nails were framed in flakes of dead skin, ending in black crescents.

I took my time unscrewing the cap off the bottle I held and let it drop to the ground. His mouth twisted as he sucked his bottom lip, thinking. His hands dropped back to his lap.

"Why do you want to know about my pain anyways? You ain't gonna do anything about it." His eyes fixated on the liquor. I let the light catch it so it shone amber.

"I can give you pain relief." I tipped the bottle again, letting a trickle run down my chin. I liked the desperate look in his eyes as his world narrowed.

He licked his own lips in pantomime and pushed layers of his tattered sleeve up, exposing a forearm latticed in scars. The skin was less grimy there.

"Here's some pain for you. Every time I lose something, I keep the memory in my flesh. I cut myself," he said. "That's a lot of memories." He ran his fingers across one of the bigger lines.

"What do you cut yourself with?"

"I got a knife. You gotta have a knife 'round here. I'll show you." He pawed at his neck with stiff fingers and pulled at a string tied around his neck. A decent sized hunting knife in a worn black sheath was dangling at the end of it. I held my hand out.

"Can I see it?"

He sucked his lip in again, thinking, before he pulled the string over his head and placed it in my hand.

I cradled the bottle in the crook of my arm and slid the knife free. The blade was hash marked with scratches. The tip was snapped off.

"So what did you lose to make so many scars?"

"Everything. I lost everything I ever had. Shitty parents, shitty wife, shitty kids... I'd get ahead but I got backstabbed every time. Nothing left for me but cut reminders and try to forget."

I held the bottle out and swished the contents before I handed it over to him. He grinned.

"I knew you were gonna help." He took a deep swig, sloshing it around in his mouth before swallowing it.

I dropped the sheath and it landed at his feet, the string spreading serpentine on the stained pavement. He took another swig and bent over to pick it up. I bent over too, above him, close enough for his body stink to invade my nose.

The knife pushed in to the small hollow that hid where his shoulder and neck connected. It slid in, already familiar with this flesh—a final memory that would never scar. He fell forward on one knee, propped up by the bottle, before he collapsed. He gave a gurgled sigh as blood and booze mingled into the cracks beneath him.

"No more pain," I said.

### **Efficiency | *Angela Yuriko Smith***

A vampire, a werewolf and the Loch Ness monster walked into a bar looking for hookers and they were not disappointed. There were hookers available to suit every fetish. Zombie corpse rides, vampire snuff girls, orgasm phantasms (used to be called succubi) and the usual furry contingent leaned against the walls and sprawled across stools all over the place. The Brew & Chew was one of the seedier dives in the underworld, and that was saying a lot.

"See what you're looking for?" asked Loch Ness. He sighed and shook his head. "Doesn't matter where we go. I'll never find anyone for me."

"Ugh. Just ugh." The vampire looked sidelong at her friend. "It's not that we never find anyone. It's that you're too damn picky. Don't look for the perfect one. Take what you can get... as long as it's not herpes." She snickered and then noticed a sexy wraith making eyes at her.

"Guys, I think I'll jump off here," she said. "Leave the door unlocked but don't wait up." She sauntered off to indulge in phantom fishnet and ectoplasm dazzles.

"She's just self-centered, that's all there is to it," said Loch Ness. He turned to the werewolf. "Is it my fault there are never any Nessies? Is it my fault I'm utterly alone?" He noticed the spatula his friend had brought along.

"Why'd you bring that? Are you planning on spanking someone with it?" Loch Ness let himself smile for a brief second before returning his frown securely to his face. The werewolf shook his head.

"No, I don't want to spank anyone. That's not my thing. I'm all about efficiency." He leaned against a corner of the bar and surveyed the room.

"Efficiency?" asked Loch Ness. "What the hell does that have to do with looking for hookers?"

"This is the way I see it," said the werewolf. "Vampira is too easy. She'll jump on board any train that whistles at her. She spends so much time on the trains she never arrives anywhere. You refuse to get on any train at all. You never leave the station, and therefore also never arrive anywhere. But me? I'm an opportunist. I always get where I want to go."

He spied a tender looking Siren draped across the jukebox. She batted her eyelashes at him and bit her lip seductively. He gave a low growl and smiled.

Loch Ness watched the exchange and sighed. He knew what this meant. He would sit by himself the rest of the night and then wind up getting everyone home and cleaning up the messes. Eternity really sucked.

"Where is it you want to go?" he asked, trying to delay the inevitable desertion. The werewolf was combing his claws through his hair and smoothing whiskers. He tucked the spatula in the back of his pants.

"Dinner and a show, my friend. Learn to play with your food and you'll be less picky," He flashed a toothy smile, white canines glowing blue in the black light. "Efficiency." With that he strode off towards the Siren. Behind him, Loch Ness sighed again and sat on a nearby stool with a huff.

"I'm a freaking vegetarian, you asshole."

#### **Whole Hearted | *Angela Yuriko Smith***

"Have some soup," said the girl. "I put my whole heart into every pot."

The boy had run away from home and was starving. The soup simmered in a cast iron cauldron. He held up the bowl she had given him.

"Is it ready?"

"If you are," she said. "I'll give you my heart if you give me yours."

"You can have it if you feed me," he said. She was pretty.

"Deal," she said, filling his bowl. He slurped noisily, not seeing her trade the ladle for a knife.

"Now for your heart," she said.

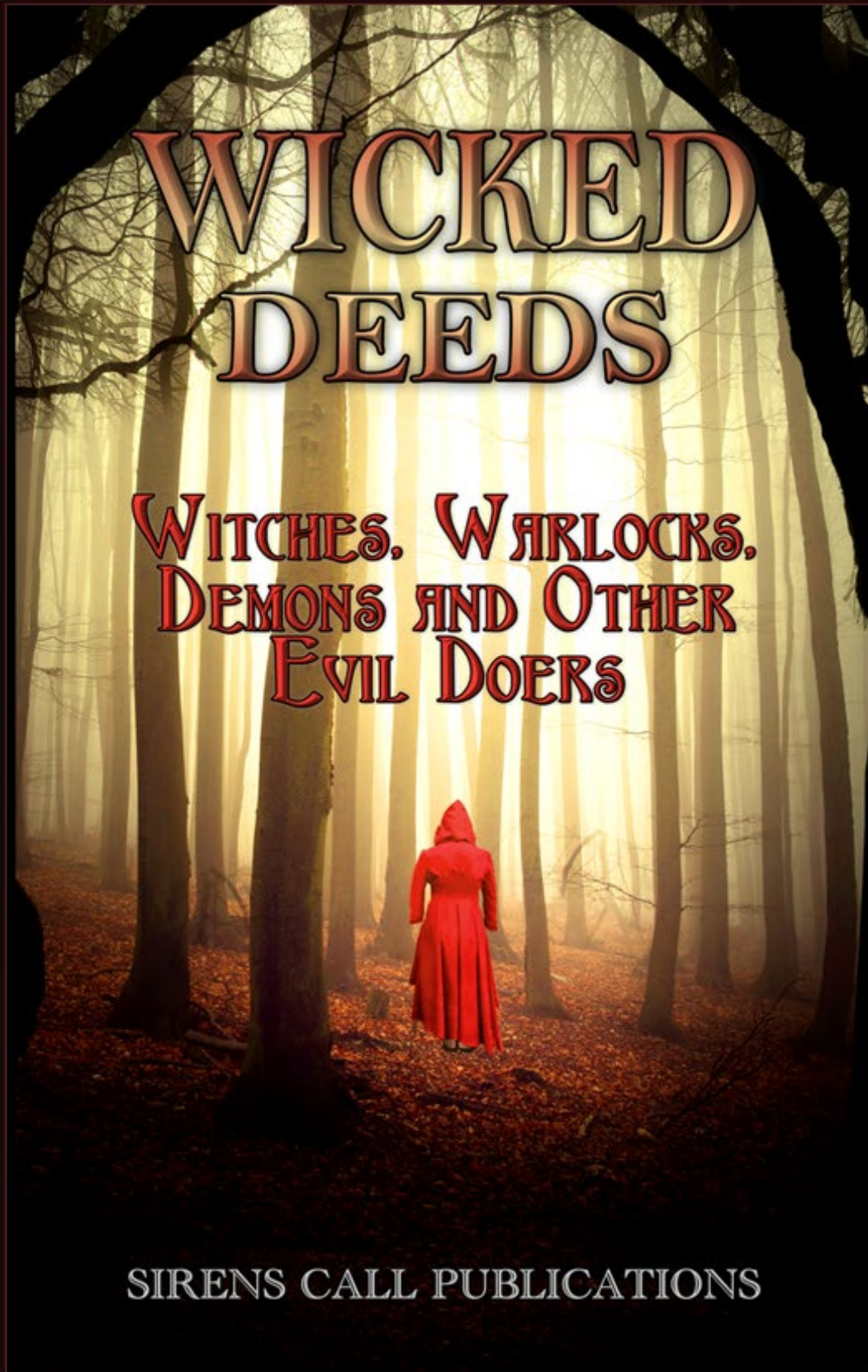
#### **About the Author:**

Angela Yuriko Smith's work is published in print and online publications, including "Horror Writers Association's Poetry Showcase" vols. 2-4 and "Where the Stars Rise: Asian Science Fiction and Fantasy" anthology. Her first collection of poetry, "In Favor of Pain," was nominated for an 2017 Elgin Award. Currently, she publishes *Space and Time Magazine*, a 52 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction.

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

Blog: [angelaysmith.com](http://angelaysmith.com)

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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

In the night he comes for me while I peacefully sleep. He disturbs my dreams. He resembles a demon, a beast and a wolf. He whispers in my ear, "Adele, my name is Duncan." I wake in a sweat, my heart racing as I breathe heavily.

It has been a year since this creature entered my life. With him he brings constant torment and unrest, yet he is hard to resist. My safety can only be assured during the day, for he never ventures during this time. He lurks in the shadows of my dreams, never allowing me to see his face in complete light. He reveals little of himself and that which he says could be a lie. Yet he is very persuasive and can lure you into his world where all is dark.

The morning has come and I am glad it is day. The sun shall keep him away from me. I put on my pretty white dress and brush my long ebony hair.

After breakfast a black carriage waits outside to take me to a suitor. As the carriage brings me towards him, I know the suitor is not the man my heart desires. He is tall and very young. He wears the finest suits and hat. We will dine with the most superb cutlery, eating poultry and the sweetest desserts. There will be silence; we have nothing to say. I feel like running away. I search for true love, yet in seeking it, all I find is torment.

The day is coming to an end, my suitor waves goodbye and it is a cold farewell.

The carriage takes me home to my mother's warm smile and she hugs me. My eyes fill with tears as she recognizes my absence of love yet again.

I enter my bedchamber and I look around in fright. Will the demon come tonight? I slowly drift into a nightmare. I hear him whisper to me.

"It is Duncan."

But he's nowhere in sight, except for a trail of blood on the cold ground. I

follow it to a gothic gate that opens as I approach. A staircase leads to a dark dungeon. I am shrouded by darkness. I stumble on the stairs, cobwebs clutch me and I rush into Duncan's sharp claws. He grabs my waist and my heart clatters in my chest. Duncan lowers his claws to my upper thigh and scratches my skin as he tears my dress. He presses his chest against me, his hair coarse, his odor sour. He tantalizes me with his knowledge of history, literature and philosophy. The conversation with him leaves me elated.

Nearby, a table sags under the weight of any sort of food one could desire.

Duncan grabs the meat and pushes it in my mouth. I eat ravenously. He places rice and dates into my mouth. I ask him where I am.

"Macabre origins onus," he says.

"Leave me alone. Free me!" I plead.

"No, it is impossible," he whispers. "Follow me."

We arrive at a room with red walls and gold ceilings. He takes a sweet from a dish on the table and puts it in my mouth. I experience a sense of pleasure on my tongue. His sharp claw circles my nipple. I awake.

My mother meanders into my bedchamber carrying my breakfast.

She tells me of a possible suitor that I could visit today.

"I'm tired. I've been looking for love for years, only to find pain! I want to stop looking for a while. I want to forget love," I say.

Mother places her hand on my shoulder, smiling warmly.

"I don't want to see a suitor today."

"Very well," she says, leaving my bedchamber with a gentle smile.

I peer out a window for most of the day. I feel alone.

Night emerges. I am sleepy; I need to go to bed early. As I sleep, I hear a whisper.

"It is Duncan."

His claw traces the side of my face and neck. He reaches for my nipple; caresses it, leaves small scratches. I scream as his sharp claws shred my dress. But my heart races as I feel desire. I lie in front of him naked. Every angle of my body is visible to this evil being; yet it excites me.

This monster can never love me; he can only give me fleeting moments of delight. This monster is not my true love; he is an illusion of happiness. Does this evil spirit even know how to love? I hope to one day find a good suitor, one that really cares for me. This monster from the pit only cares for his pleasure. Yet I cannot end my desire for him. I shut my eyes. He kisses my lips. I awake.

I am tormented throughout the day. I dislike Duncan for all the suffering he causes. I think of him and the passion we have. He is an evil spirit that may enter thousands of women's dreams in one night. What can I do to be rid of him?

I hasten to our library, looking for literature on ridding an incubus. I desperately search and I find a prayer. I recite it before going to bed.

"I withdraw all invitations and permission to all incubuses. I command you to leave my dreams and allow me to rest."

He is gone for eight months. There is peace. I am taken to meet many suitors.

One by one they all go wrong. One of the suitors is abusive, the other fills the time with mindless conversation. One is too young, the other too old. One doesn't see me as fit to be his wife; and, many whom I don't see as fit husbands. To be with them would be a waste of a life.

I cry myself to sleep. As I drift off to dream, I hear a whisper.

"It is Duncan."

My heart beats faster. I am aghast! We are in a room filled with naked people and they all touch one another. Duncan tears at my dress. We sit on an antique chair; the couple sitting opposite caresses one another.

I ask Duncan, "Why won't you free me? I never want to see you again!"

"I can't. You keep calling for me."

I realize this is true. Perhaps it is my loneliness or it is the lure of darkness that makes Duncan hard to resist. The forbidden that makes it so enticing. He cannot resist my call either. But there is misery in this evil.

Each night as I drift to sleep, I am frightened to dream.

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

Helen Mihajlovic is a published author. Her short story 'The Prince of Devils' can be read online in the magazine Blood Moon Rising. She is grateful for her editor Tanya Dewhurst and story adviser James Duncan.

### Cradle Song | *Brittany Hause*

small & low, small	lie down low, lie
& low i'll sing	down low child
these words	here be
to you child small	side me lie down
(& low)	low &
small (& very low):	close your aching eyes:
the way the little cory swims	you hear how softly every beetle
with his belly near the ground	makes his passage through the ground
that's how	& with
i'll sing you softly child	what quiet conscience all
as i hold you in my	the little earthworms
arms to keep you	gather round
close (you are so small)	to kiss us both goodnight
so let me sing	as we rest cradled
my loving low—	here below—
every morning,	roots embrace us,
every evening	never wake us
i will sing	from our dreaming
my loving low	here below

### Log Book of the Deep-Sea Vessel *Archias of Pella* | *Brittany Hause*

fathoms—5k—  
in the stammering flashtube beam  
a sudden bloom of jellies . . .  
already I detect the onset  
of a soul-deep sea-change

fathoms—6k—  
sent spiraling off course  
by the playful brush  
of a passing serpent's tail,  
your words come back to me in waves

fathoms—7k—  
gleaming on the cornea  
of the rising kraken:  
a moment's panorama  
of lives I'll never live

read-out inconclusive—  
forams' grainy rustlings . . .  
my thoughts turn to your hands, your face  
in the final seconds  
before the dark pours in

#### About the Author:

Poems by Brittany Hause can be found in a variety of online and print magazines, including *Abyss & Apex*, *Star\*Line*, and *Grievous Angel*; "log book of the deep-sea vessel *Archias of Pella*" first appeared in *Eye to the Telescope* 29. Brittany blogs about SFF poetry at *specpotpourri* and can be found on Twitter.

Blog: [Specpotpourri](http://Specpotpourri)  
Twitter: [@BrittanyHause](https://twitter.com/BrittanyHause)

I hate parties. You stand there trying to look interested in everything at the same time, when inside you're so bored, filing your nails would be more stimulating. Even if someone talked to you, you could barely make out what they were saying over the pounding music, bass always set too loud.

Then the door opened and he walked in. Everything stopped – sound, movement, breath. The man was drop-dead gorgeous and everything about him was dark – hair flowing over his shoulders, eyes of inky night, and expertly tailored, well-fitting clothes over a superbly muscled body. He was my dream man. And his eyes were on me. *Me*. The wallflower. The geek.

He moved with cat-like grace as he entered the room, stopping in the center of the floor. He smiled, and his whole being shone with a moonlit aura. Charisma flowed off him in waves. He hadn't said a word and yet people were turning towards him, moving to him as if they were pulled by some invisible force – and I was no exception.

My body moved of its own volition. I couldn't stop it. This wasn't right. Magic? A trap of some kind? My instinct told me to fight. Fight the beast, beautiful as he was. I tried to stop moving inextricably towards him, but even though my mind was my own, my body was not.

A throng of bodies surrounded him now, some of them ripping their clothes off and I could hear plaintive cries of "Me, take me" and "Please" as they reached towards him, never quite touching his immaculate black clothing.

All this time, he had never once looked away from me and held my eyes locked to his, the whites of his eyes filling up with a dark abyss that sucked me into it. I fought with my mind, my will, to be free from his pull – blocking mantras, wall building – trying to stay calm. As I got increasingly closer, I still had no physical control.

Bodies moved aside like a parted sea at my approach and he reached for me with his left hand, pulling me close against a body radiating so much heat, I thought it would burn clean through my dress. At his touch, the lust and need for him overwhelmed my whole being and I lost the will to fight, closing my eyes in surrender. His crushing kiss was so hot I thought my lips would blister, as he ravaged my mouth with his tongue. It was forked. As in Devil.

As he released me and stepped back, his satisfied laughter echoed through the room, and as it faded into silence, I could open my eyes. And I truly wished I was blind.

He had vanished – the monster having had his fun – and I was standing in a scene from Hell, drenched from head to foot in rapidly cooling blood. It dripped down the walls, joining the dots in modernistic spatter patterns of carnage. Blood soaked my hands. At my feet, a man's severed hand twitched, the dying nerve endings finally getting the message. A carpet of carmine painted body parts scattered the room and as the smell of ruptured entrails reached my nose, I vomited onto the already slick floor, numbly wondering how I was going to get to the door without stepping on any blood, the paralysis of shock setting in fast.

They told me later that a CCTV camera had captured me moving slowly towards the center of the room, then stopping. Something had hit the camera lens. When the lens cleared, it was tinged red, and in time to see me vomit on the floor, covered in blood and surrounded with dead bodies. They found skin and gore under my fingernails. There was no-one else left alive in the room. They didn't know how I'd done it. And neither did I. But I knew who was responsible. I can still feel his heat, his lips, his tongue; hear his laugh.

I'm never getting out of here. I'm not insane. I wonder if he does hospital visits?

#### About the Author:

After winning a national fantasy TV story competition when she was 9, Shelly has read and been thoroughly entertained by the supernatural ever since. She has recently been inspired by two published writer friends to let her imagination out to play after proofing several short stories and novels for them. She lives in rural Oxfordshire with her other half.

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Facebook: [Shelly Redd](#)

# WITHOUT CONDITION

A NOVEL BY  
**SONORA  
TAYLOR**



Available on Amazon

## A Murder: Magpies in Mourning | Adrienne Dellwo

The cawing of the birds died down at last, and Maggie dared to leave her hiding place between the two boulders. How long had it been, she wondered, how long had the magpies gathered, calling to all the woods about the death of one of their own?

*Thirty, maybe forty minutes*, she thought, stretching her cramped legs. The warmth of the autumn afternoon had tapered into the chill of evening while she'd hid. But at last, they'd left it, left the one on the ground that Maggie had killed. She wanted nothing more than to get out of there, before darkness obscured the fork in the path she depended on to get home.

Somehow, though, she couldn't leave it there. Sighing, she knelt down next to the dead bird. Brushing away fallen leaves, she used a stick to dig a hole in the soft earth. She pushed the bird into it, still using the stick, expecting the corpse to be stiff. It wasn't, and when its head flopped unnaturally on its broken neck, her stomach lurched. As quickly as she could, she pushed the loose dirt back over the bird, hiding what she'd done.

As she stood, wiping her hands on her jeans, something in the woods flickered, a white flash catching the corner of her eye. She whipped her head around to look, but saw nothing there.

"I'm sorry," she muttered at the mound. That was true. "I didn't mean to." That was a lie.

She'd seen the bird just after picking up the rock, had wondered if she could hit it, wondered if the rock was big enough to kill it. Aimed. Thrown.

And just as the rock had left her hand, the bird had looked her in the eye and said, "Hello."

She'd heard the stories but hadn't believed them, about an old witch who lived in these woods and had a talking magpie, named Maggie, as a familiar. How she'd trained the bird to attack anyone who came close to her house. How the witch had died before the bird, and Maggie had gone on to have children, who she'd taught to speak.

But that was all impossible, Maggie knew. Witches weren't real. And she'd spent enough time in the woods that if it were full of talking birds, she'd have known it before now.

Wouldn't she?

The older kids had made it up to tease her, because her name sounded like magpie.

Right?

She'd always hated that story for using her name.

"It was just a stupid bird," she said to herself, trying to shake off the goosebumps the memory of its speech created. *It was smart. It spoke to you. And you killed it, for no reason at all.*

Then the second one had come, had seen it lying there, and started its loud caws. Signaling to others, who joined in its vigil.

A white flash again flickered at the edge of her vision. She ignored it, turned her back on the mound, and trudged up the trail. Moments later, another flash, and a whoosh of wings above her head. She couldn't stop herself from ducking, looking, hands flying up protectively.

And that's when she saw them. Dozens of magpies, perched in the upper branches of the towering pines. Looking at her. They hadn't gone away at all, they'd just grown still. Silent.

"Hello," one of them croaked, echoed by uncountable voices.

"Mmmmmaaaaaggie," another said.

She bolted, flying blindly down the path, not trying to pick out where it branched toward home, not thinking about where her feet took her. Just trying to get away.

"Maggie, Maggie, Maggie." The cacophony built behind her, and then the woods were alive with the flash of white wings and tail feathers, the black of the birds lost in the deepening twilight. She erupted into a clearing—one she'd never seen before—and an instant later, the birds descended.

A riot of feathers filled her vision, circling, swooping, flapping. She threw up her hands to shield her face just as one of them flew into her back, followed closely by another grazing her head. She yelled in surprise, and it seemed to drive the birds on. They pressed in tighter, so she couldn't move, then lower and lower, forcing her to the ground, where she curled in a fetal position, protecting her head, screaming and crying as they buffeted her with their wings.

"Maggie!" one of them screamed, right into her ear.

Then the pecking started, sharp beaks first encountering the canvas of her shoes, the denim protecting her legs, the flannel on her arms. Then one found a finger, another the back of a hand, as others rained against her skull, ripping out chunks of hair. Instinctively, she shifted her arms to cover the places under attack, but that just opened up new flesh—an ear, a cheek. She shrieked as she felt soft flesh punctured, then ripped away.

Blood filled her ear, trickled down her scalp. Her shirt in tatters, beaks gouged her side, her belly. One pierced near her spine, sending burning agony in all directions as it found a nerve.

On and on it went, long past when her jeans were ripped to shreds. Long past when she grew still. Silent. Long past when the soil beneath her gratefully consumed her blood.

One by one, the magpies retreated to the tree tops, until only one remained. It pecked, pulling something red and wet out of a cavern in the soft flesh under her arm. Strutting forward, it looked into the remains of an eye then pulled at a few strands of bloody hair obscuring what used to be her face, until the strands gave, hanging limply in its beak.

"Maggie. Good-bye," it croaked, taking wing and disappearing into the night.

#### About the Author:

Adrienne Dellwo is a novelist, indie filmmaker, and freelance medical writer. She lives in Washington state with her husband/creative partner and two teenage kids who still seem to like her. She's also a huge geek, does a little acting and singing, and drinks far too much tea. Adrienne has three published novels and more on the way.

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#### Seeing Shadows | *Scarlett R. Algee*

I still remember the first time I saw one.

I couldn't have been more than six, maybe seven. It was my first day out of school for the summer and my granny was dying in our second upstairs bedroom.

I wasn't supposed to be in there. She'd taken sick the night before and Mama, knowing what was coming, had banished me to the back yard to play all day while she and Daddy and my Uncle John Ray hovered around Granny's deathbed and talked in whispers. I didn't know why they were so quiet or what the faint, funny smell was that hung all in the house, but a boy can only play by himself so long, and after a while I just came back inside.

I could hear Granny breathing before I got to the foot of the stairs: start and stop, start and stop, a rattly sound that carried. Somebody was crying. I think it was Daddy.

I'd crept out of bed enough at night to know where the stairs didn't creak. I went up and peeked in the door. Mama stood to one side of the bed, reaching down to stroke the wisps of gray hair back from Granny's forehead. Daddy sat in a straight chair on the other side with Uncle John Ray standing beside him, wedged into the corner with his hands tucked into his armpits. Granny was turning ashen, skin stretched right across her cheekbones, breathing hard and fast.

She took in a shuddery breath and let it out slow, and I saw the shadow.

At least it looked like a shadow. It worked out of her mouth, out of her nose, a cloud of black particles like dust. It slid out of her with that last breath, trailing ragged streamers, and I screamed.

Uncle John Ray swore. Daddy bent over in his chair with his face in his hands. Mama ran to me and swept me into her arms and pressed me into her.

"Hush, Jimmy Earl. Hush, Jimmy Earl. Hush."

The black cloud swirled up to the ceiling and disappeared. I kept screaming. They hadn't seen it.

\*\*\*

In the middle of August, Uncle John Ray took heat stroke out in the cotton field.

He was muttering and twitching when Daddy wrestled him into the house and onto the couch. Froth flecked his lips. Mama yelled at me to go get cold water; she and Daddy got John Ray out of his clothes and half wrapped in a wet sheet.

Daddy took off to town after the doctor. Mama laid a wet towel across Uncle John Ray's forehead and started sponging him down with a rag. He stopped muttering and got still, but the twitch stayed in his fingers: I fanned him with one of the cardboard fans the funeral home had put out for Granny's service, and tried to hold his hand, but his skin was red and dry and hellfire hot, and he shook too bad for me to keep a grip. His hands were huge, compared to mine.

We fanned and sponged. Uncle John Ray shook harder, his eyelids spasming open to show white, and Mama started to cry. He was her brother.

She changed the towel across his forehead and he growled in his throat, then whined. It was a high hoarse sound, and while Mama tapped his face and made shushing noises, his shadow started drifting out.

I dropped my fan and watched. It was darker than Granny's had been, the tiny black motes more tightly packed. It moved slower too, out a little and back in. Fighting. Hesitating.

John Ray's whine cut off all at once, and in the silence his shadow swept out of him. It broke free in a rush and hurried upward, hovered at the ceiling, vanished.

He wasn't breathing anymore. I clenched my jaw and curled my fingers into fists. This time Mama was the one who screamed, but I knew she hadn't seen that one either.

\*\*\*

There were no deaths for a while after that. I went to school and played baseball and played with Rufus, our old red coonhound, and almost forgot about seeing shadows.

The weekend after I turned ten, Rufus was hit by a county truck. The driver never stopped. I crawled into the ditch where Rufus had landed and wrapped my arms around his bloody head and begged him not to die.

He'd never been good at listening.

For a long time I sat down there holding his head, waiting to see the shadow crawl out of him and fly away.

It never happened. I didn't know why not.

\*\*\*

My friends and I made our baseball field from a narrow empty lot next door to the Baptist church. The preacher was a tall big-boned man everybody called Brother Paul, and sometimes on Sunday afternoons after church he'd come out to the edge of our lot and watch our games, with his tie loose around his neck and his suit coat slung over his arm.

Seeing him out there one Sunday after Rufus died got me thinking about the shadows. When our game was over, I walked up to him and said I needed to ask a question.

His eyebrows went up—my people were Presbyterian when we bothered to be—but he let me come sit in the church to talk. It was a cool dark place, and rainbows striped the floor from the little colored glass windows.

Brother Paul listened while I told him about what I'd seen from Granny and Uncle John Ray. I was sure he'd bring up Hell—Daddy always said Baptists were awful keen on Hell—but he just made this low rumbling noise in his throat, like he was thinking about it and working up his mouth. Daddy always said Baptists liked to talk, too.

"Well, Jimmy Earl," he said after some quiet, "I can't rightly claim to have answers to all of God's mysteries, but it may just be you saw their souls going up to Heaven. The Good Book says we flee like shadows. They were in a hurry to get home."

"What about Rufus?" I asked.

Brother Paul went quiet, then rumbled again. His shoulders worked under his shirt. Finally he said, "Well...there's no need for dogs to have souls, Jimmy Earl." He chewed his lip. "They can't sin. They don't have to be saved."

That wasn't an answer. I got up and walked home.

\*\*\*

But I thought about souls a lot after that, especially the ones I didn't see.

Like Daddy. The year I turned fourteen, the cotton failed. He plowed it under and went to work at the cannery out from the other side of town, catching a ride back and forth every day with a member of the Baptist church who worked the same shift. When a massive heart attack dropped Daddy in his tracks mid-shift one day, I was in third period English. I didn't get to see his soul-shadow leave, didn't get to see if it rushed up or sank down.

I didn't know if they ever went down, toward Hell. For Mama's sake I tried not to think about that.

Mama sold the plot we'd grown cotton on and went to work at the cannery. I started working after school and on weekends for Seth Carver, who grew wheat instead of cotton; he gave me odd jobs while I waited to get old enough to drive a grain truck, and I tried not to get caught staring at his daughter.

She almost made me forget about seeing shadows, too.

\*\*\*

I was sixteen when the accident happened.

Seth and two of his farmhands were in a silo walking down the wheat when they broke through the crusted top layer and sank into the settled grain underneath. Six hours later when the rest of us got them out, they were blue-faced and limp, with wheat kernels packed in their mouths.

For weeks afterward I could barely sleep. I kept imagining sinking into loose wheat like quicksand. I wondered if they'd screamed, or if they'd prayed. I wondered if their shadows had been able to get free, and if they'd risen to the ceiling of the silo, or if the soul dust had been lost, scattered in the wheat.

\*\*\*

The first two times I asked Seth Carver's daughter Audrine out on a date, she said no. The third time I asked, she said, "Well, if it'll keep you from looking so pitiful, I'll go."

Six months after our first date, when I asked her to marry me, she said yes. She didn't say whether I looked pitiful or not.

I was nineteen when we got married. Audrine was twenty. A year later, our Sally was born, and as I sat next to Audrine's hospital bed and held my daughter in my arms, searching her little scrunched face for some trace of myself and finding only my stick-straight eyebrows, I found myself thinking that this was it. No more death, no more shadows. Audrine's mother had held onto her land. I had a good job driving a grain truck. I had a wife, a daughter, a future.

I should have known it wouldn't last.

\*\*\*

When Sally started to cough, we thought it was just a cold. She was eight months old; the weather had been damp.

When she started whooping, we knew we were wrong.

Audrine took her into town to the doctor. Sally got her nose swabbed and her finger pricked. She had a fever. She got medicine.

She didn't get better.

I'll never forget that Tuesday night. Audrine was cleaning up from supper and I was in our bedroom, standing over Sally's crib, watching her fitful sleep. Lord knew none of us had gotten much of that lately.

I tickled her chin. She hiccupped awake and started to cough and cough, and suddenly I was remembering Granny and her death rattle. Uncle John Ray's too-hot skin. Their souls coming out of their bodies in shadows and disappearing in front of my eyes.

Sally gasped in air with that horrible high sound, like Uncle John Ray had made. Her little lips were gray, drool slipping from her mouth. I tried to sit her up and thump her chest.

Then I saw her shadow.

It wasn't tattered like Granny's, or sleek dust like John Ray's. The darkness seeping out of Sally's mouth was almost solid, black as soot. It didn't stream off. It struggled, sliding back when she gasped again. It didn't want to leave.

I couldn't let it leave.

I laid her down and grabbed a pillow off the bed and put it over Sally's mouth. I pressed down. I had to keep her soul in.

"Sally?" Audrine walked into the room. "Jimmy E—*ohmygod!*"

Audrine shrieked and threw herself on me. "I'm trying to help!" I shouted, but she wouldn't let me shake her off. She clawed my face and snatched the pillow away, and I watched Sally's soul-shadow thrash out of her mouth and break away, up, up, faster than any I'd seen, and it was gone.

"I was trying to help," I said weakly. "I was holding it in. She could've lived if you'd let me hold it in."

Audrine slapped me and ran from the room. When the sheriff arrived, I told him about my baby's soul. He just looked at me with pity in his eyes and reached to handcuff me.

"I was trying to help," I said. "I was trying to help."

\*\*\*

I got sent to a psychiatric hospital. Audrine got a divorce.

It's not too bad here. They listen to me when I want to talk about the shadows. About how I was trying to save my baby girl. I do what I'm told. I don't bother anybody. I take the pills. I get to use a spoon that's metal and not plastic. Anything can hold an edge.

I made up my mind when Mama visited and told me Audrine had remarried. I don't know what I'll do yet. Maybe my throat. Probably my throat. I think that would take a long time.

Maybe I'll get to see it. I want to see it, the shadow coming out of me, see how thick my soul dust is. See where it goes and if Brother Paul was right.

I want to see my baby girl again.

I want to see if everybody really hurried to get home.

When I opened my front door to the man in black, who was propping my storm door open with his shoulder and holding a crisp black envelope in gloved fingers, my first thought was that it was far too early in the morning to be selling anyone anything. My second was that I'd mislaid my glasses in stumbling out of bed at seven-thirty and couldn't tell if his suit was pinstriped without squinting. And my third, very distinctly, was *oh, no hat and coat, it's January, he must be freezing—*

Oh. No wonder he was here. It had happened after all.

*Let's just mutually agree to hire out hitmen for each other if we ever show signs of becoming our mothers,* my best friend Kay had messaged me on ICQ. We'd both been in our mid-thirties then, both single, busy on opposite continents yet still finding time to grouse together about our aging moms and what we considered their far-ranging paranoias. I explicitly remembered grinning at my screen and gleefully typing, *Okay! I can get behind that.*

The man in black still stood there, saying nothing. I took the envelope from his fingers: glossy, with a red wax seal. That had been the signal Kay and I had agreed on, the signal that the time had come, that four decades later we were finally—gasp, shock, horror—turning into our mothers after all. Kay had texted me about it just last week: *Lila, I'm afraid it's getting close. I just asked the postman if he'd like a scarf to stay warm, and he's not even organic.*

This man in my doorway certainly was. In fact, I was pretty sure, if I squinted, that his lips were turning blue. This north wind had a bite, after all. I ran my thumbnail along the flap of my envelope, around the seal. There was nothing in it, of course—that wasn't the point—but curiosity made me stop myself from opening it. "I assume someone's held up the other end of the deal?" Kay and I had agreed on that, too. She'd be first to go; she was younger. It was only respectful. She must've called in on herself.

He reached into his coat. I tensed, which made my back cramp, but all he pulled out was an identical envelope, its seal broken. He put it in my other hand; it definitely wasn't empty. Tucking my own envelope between two fingers, I pulled this one open. Photographs. On paper. I hadn't realized people still did that. I wondered if anyone still used ICQ.

I edged out the topmost one. It was all I needed to see: the outstretched arm, the pool of blood. I'd made Kay that bracelet for her thirty-fifth birthday; I'd recognize it anywhere. So. It was time.

I stood back from the door. "All right. Come in."

The man in black finally blinked. "What? Why?" he asked, and I had to smile. Eastern European accent. Kay hadn't forgotten that detail either.

"Young man"—I winced; I sounded exactly like Mama had—"I am seventy-nine years old and I'm *not* dying on my front porch, nor in my robe, and it's nineteen degrees outside, so *kindly* come inside and let me change into something suitable before you catch your own death."

He blinked again, but when I turned away from the door, he followed. "I'll make coffee in a few," I said over my shoulder, and limped up the stairs, smiling, humming a little. Too bad I couldn't message Kay to thank her for saving me from myself. This was really what friends were for.

#### About the Author:

Scarlett R. Algee's fiction has been published by CultureCult Magazine, Thrice Fiction, Pen of the Damned, and The Wicked Library. Her short story "Dark Music" was a 2016 Parsec Awards finalist, and she was contributing editor of the podcast-based anthology *The Lift: Nine Stories of Transformation*. She lives in rural Tennessee with a beagle and an uncertain number of cats.

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**fighting the inevitable | *Linda M. Crate***

an evening  
chase  
amused him,  
but she was running  
for her life  
she didn't realize  
was forfeit the second  
he chose her;  
she kept running but in the end  
her legs failed her—  
in the shadows of the white moon  
he followed after her  
undetected by human ears  
she could sense yet not see the  
creature of the night;  
and when he stepped from the darkness  
into her line of vision  
she thought to fight only to find  
her blood extracted from her throat  
all the more quickly—  
she slapped out at him, she screamed,  
thrust her high heels into his feet;  
but the vampire did not stop until she was dead.

**you only deserve my thorns | *Linda M. Crate***

you effectively pushed me away  
made me a monster  
now you ask me to be a dream,  
but i have fangs and claws now;  
i will destroy you with these talons  
my banshee rage will wail against your ears—  
with my phoenix wings i will burn you,  
and my vampire fangs will drain  
every morsel of blood;  
my werewolf teeth will rip apart your bones,  
and in my kraken rage i will drown you;  
i wanted to be life and living  
but you dragged me down into the realm of death—  
so if it is a goddess of death you want  
then this is what i will be  
i only give roses to those who deserve  
my flowers,  
and all you deserve, my dear, are my thorns.

**have to save yourself | *Linda M. Crate***

you want an angel,  
a savior, a saint to save you;  
but you have to save  
yourself—  
the light must come from within,  
and you swung wide open into me;  
altering me with your  
darkness and death  
if you expect those loving eyes  
to save you then you are mistaken—  
i am the nightmares  
you gave me,  
and i will devour you until there is nothing left;  
my dreams are for the dreamers  
you won't steal inside of me and take my power  
no one will own me.

**the werewolf's moon | *Linda M. Crate***

in the full moon's shadow  
the beast stood  
claws of sharp ebony  
thicker than the darkest midnight wing,  
and fur matted and brown as oak  
the monster stood in waiting;  
always there was someone foolish  
in the wood to devour  
always there was someone  
willing to take a risk they ought not—  
didn't take long for him to find  
the man skulking about in the woods  
on the night of his curse,  
and his golden eyes sharp as those of an owl  
keen the movement of his quarry  
dance with a dark delight  
as the danger is still unknown to his prey;  
still the man  
draped in his bliss of ignorance  
kept walking—  
the beast followed slowly, at first,  
until the man turned and noticed;  
running at full speed  
yet the beast still walked in complete patience  
knowing the battle was already won  
that this man would not escape him  
he kept walking until the man was spent  
laying against a tree  
without a prayer or hope to spare him,  
and his screams laced the air  
as he was torn to pieces.

**a body without hope | *Linda M. Crate***

underneath the treasure chest  
of stars sprawled against an ebony  
song of night  
whose lyric spilled clouds across  
a silver psalm of moon  
there was a storm brewing  
in a peaceful meadow

once there stood a girl  
beautiful and blonde  
her life was stolen by the fangs  
of a monster  
beautiful yet cruel,  
and he is being hunted by the men of the town;  
but they do not know he is leading  
them to the hungry maws of his brethren—

suddenly the townsfolk  
realize all too late  
that the predator is still the predator,  
and they are still the prey vulnerable and weak  
before him;  
and his fangs take the life of yet another  
whose screams die dead in the air  
a body without hope of being found swallowed  
by the darkness of the vampire's eyes.

**About the Author:**

Linda M. Crate is a writer whose works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is the author of five poetry collections and a forthcoming collection entitled *More Than Bone Music* through Clare Songbirds Publishing House. She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018).

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

The sun struggled desperately to shine through, but the fog was winning. It often did at Orehu Lake. James wondered if it had been wise to ignore the villagers' warnings. Every explorer and scientist who had visited the lake had disappeared. The people of the nearby village believed it to be something supernatural, but refused to tell him exactly what that might be. James thought it more likely that anacondas, venomous spiders, caimans, and jaguars were the cause.

Still, he couldn't resist the temptation to sneak out in the early hours of the morning, while his guide was still sleeping, to see the lake at first light. As eerily beautiful as it was, he was beginning to question his decision. Though he was no stranger to navigation, and an expert survivalist, the mile long trek from the tiny village through the rain forest to Orehu Lake was treacherous. He knew better than to take the risk. But age would soon slow him down, and trips to exotic locales seeking out previously undiscovered species would be relinquished to his memory. Perhaps that knowledge made him brave. Perhaps it made him reckless.

Either way, after nearly getting lost and a close call with a large venomous spider, he stared out over the lake, barely able to see the surface through the fog. He was chilled despite the heat and humidity. James had never been a superstitious man, not even in his youth. In every story about Bigfoot or chupacabras, he saw an opportunity to discover a new species of bear or wolf. The stories were exaggerations at best. He came to Guyana upon hearing rumors of some kind of water spirits attacking humans. James was excited by the prospect of discovering a new variation of arapaima or fresh water shark.

But this place felt different.

"I guess if a mythical creature were to be found, this would be the place," he said to himself.

James turned to make his way back, hoping to reach the village before his guide woke up and reprimanded him for wandering alone. He jumped back, startled. Though he hadn't heard anyone approach, he found himself face to face with a beautiful woman. He stumbled backwards, tripping over his own feet. She grabbed his arm, catching him just before he hit the cold water. Her grip was strong, and she pulled him up as though he weighed no more than a small child. She pressed her body against him, her lips barely an inch from his. He felt his cheeks redden. The chill he felt moments ago vanished.

"Thank you," he said, his voice unsteady. My walk back to the village would have been quite uncomfortable had I been soaking wet."

She looked over his shoulder at the lake and shook her head, as if answering a question he hadn't heard. He looked back, but saw only ripples on the surface of the lake.

"You would not have made it out. The lake would destroy a man like you."

She released her grip from his arm and James resisted the urge to rub where her fingers left red imprints on his skin.

"I will show you back to the village. You should not be here alone." She hesitated, then added, "You should not be here at all."

He followed her into the forest.

"Is it really so much more dangerous here than anywhere else in the area? I've spent countless hours in dangerous lands. Sure, I've had some close calls, but I've never been badly hurt. The other villagers refuse to tell me why they believe it's so dangerous out here. I know I'm just a pale-skinned outsider, but I'm sure I can take care of myself."

She stopped so suddenly he nearly ran into her. He thought she would turn to face him, to chastise him for being out of his element, as so many had done before. Instead she reached down gracefully and picked up a beautiful green viper. She carried it with her, its body gently gliding against hers, coiling around her arm. James gasped and his eyes flew open wide. "That's a *Bothrops atrox*, a labaria," he whispered, afraid to make the slightest movement lest he startle the reptile. They strike fast and repeatedly, and are easily agitated. A bite can kill a person if not treated quickly. And yet, she treated it as though it were a lost kitten. He watched the way she moved, so naturally it was as if the fog that had covered the area around the lake hadn't dissipated, and instead condensed, becoming human; becoming her. There was a fluidity he had never seen in humans, nor any other creature of the land. It reminded him of the way eels or stingrays could glide through the water, only she could glide through the forest.

After a short time, she stopped again and knelt by a small stream. The snake wound its way down her arm and disappeared into the thick underbrush. She continued on her way, and finally spoke. "Had you been alone, you may have seen that serpent. You may not have. But it is far from the most dangerous thing in this place. The people of the village are protected, as are their guests. I heard you were under their protection. If you were not, I would have left you to the lake."

"But what can a lake do? What harm could it possibly cause?"

She kept walking, and James was sure she had chosen to ignore him. But, eventually, she replied.

"I can tell you the story, but it comes at a price. When you know the truth, the village will no longer protect you."

"Tell me."

She gazed at him, sizing him up, but for what he wasn't sure. She sighed and shook her head.

"Many generations past, the elders of the village made a pact with the Orehu of the lake. Orehu are water spirits. They are akin to what your people call mermaids, but far more powerful. There are many kinds of Orehu. Those of this lake must consume human flesh and blood to survive. Long ago, they would use powerful magic to lure villagers to them. They see humans the way humans see fish or deer; sometimes lovely to look at, but also lovely to eat. They did not distinguish between good people or bad, guilty or innocent, young or old. They consumed what they could lure.

"Some in the village sought to wage war on the Orehu, to exterminate them. But the elders believed in respect for the land, sky, and waters, and for all inhabitants of these places. Like the Orehu, the elders had powerful magic. They met at the edge of the lake and made a pact. The elders gave their word that the villagers would leave the lake untouched, and gave the Orehu the ability to transform so they could walk on the land as humans. Some of them would act as protectors of the village. In return, the Orehu could have any outsiders who came to the lake, and the village would send their criminals, and those who were near their death time, to the lake to sustain the Orehu.

"This is why, when the village has guests, they perform the ceremony to make you a member of the village, so long as you follow their laws."

James chuckled. "So, I'm not safe from the mermaids anymore? Well, I suppose there are worse ways to go."

"You don't believe me." It was a simple statement of fact. There was neither judgment nor offense in her tone, but there was something else. Something James couldn't quite discern.

"I believe in science. Likely the villagers were being killed by some of the deadly creatures of the forest, and the elders invented the story to keep them from wandering off and becoming jaguar food. Besides, if the lake is so dangerous, why were you out there? Weren't you worried about the mermaids?"

"I am not of the village, nor am I an outsider. The lake itself protects me."

They walked the rest of the way in silence. When they arrived in the village, the woman led James directly to the home of the head elder. When she spoke to him, it was as though they were equals, not with reverence and respect like the villagers.

"He was at the lake. He knows of the pact with the Orehu."

The elder nodded solemnly, then looked at James, his eyes filled with mourning.

"You may remain in the village as long as you like, but you are no longer one of us. You do not have our protection." The old man gestured to the woman. "And you do not have the protection of Dhara."

"I understand," James said respectfully.

"No," the elder replied. "You do not."

That night James barely slept, waking at every sound. He knew this to be his body's defense mechanism to sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings, and forced himself to relax and drift off each time. Finally, he saw Dhara standing at the foot of his cot.

"Asleep at last! You are even more beautiful in my dreams than in real life. Are you here for a moonlit dip in the lake? Or is this a different sort of dream?"

"You believe you are dreaming. Very well. Follow me. You have nothing to fear if this is only a dream."

He rose from his cot and fumbled in the dark for his shoes, wondering why such a menial detail would be part of his dream. Dhara held a lantern and James was entranced by the yellow glow of the candle reflecting off her hands and face, while the rest of her exposed skin was bathed in moonlight. The dappled shadows of the trees cast patterns on her skin. She handed him the lantern and walked into the forest. At first, he followed her in silence, captivated by the light and shadows of the lantern and moon, as well as by Dhara's lithe movements.

He stopped suddenly.

"This is all wrong. This isn't how dreams work. People don't dream of putting on their shoes and taking a walk. The people change and the places shift. Abe Lincoln plays drums in a rock band. Dreams aren't linear. They don't follow a path. Who are you, and where are you taking me?"

"I am Dhara, and I am taking you to the lake. That is where you want to be, is it not?" She turned slowly and their eyes met.

"Yes." The light from the lantern played tricks with his vision, and Dhara's eyes appeared reptilian; unnaturally golden with slits for pupils instead of circles. He averted his gaze and stared into the lantern, then extinguished the flame.

"This is much more dreamlike," he said, his voice soft and contemplative. "I don't need the light anymore. I can feel your light guiding me. Are you the sun? All the mythology personifies the sun as male, but I feel your warmth, your energy. You must be the sun."

Dhara laughed. "No. I am not the sun."

"What are you then? You must be of dreams and myth, not of this Earth."

She laughed again. "Something like that."

He didn't understand, and she didn't seem inclined to give further explanation. They walked again in silence, James seeing the world around him as though he were in a trance. Everything felt so real, and yet completely impossible.

*At least there are no insects or dangerous animals in this dream. Everything is so peaceful, so beautiful. Yes. I must still be dreaming.*

It was then they stepped out of the forest and into the clearing surrounding the lake. This time there was no fog. Only crystalline black water shimmering from the silver light of the moon. Something moved just below the surface, creating ripples of sparkling moonlight. First one. Then two. Then more joined in, creating roiling waves that crashed out in every direction.

James watched, transfixed. His heart raced. His entire body shivered despite the heat.

"I'd like to wake up now."

"You know you are not asleep."

Dhara inhaled deeply. The way children do upon entering grandmother's kitchen after the long trip through the woods and over the river. The moment they smell the feast after their bellies have been empty for hours. This was the way Dhara breathed. James shuddered.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered, "Walk with me." Her lips brushed his earlobe, then his neck. She began walking toward the lake, toward the thrashing frenzy of water and scales and webbed claws.

James stood frozen.

"Follow," she commanded without looking back. Her voice was hard and cold. James fought, forcing himself to take one step backward, then another.

*If I can just reach the forest, maybe I can break free.*

But for each step back, his legs carried him three steps forward against his will. When he reached the wet sand of the shore, he dropped to his knees, panting. He drove the heels of his hands into the sand to stop his forward momentum, but his legs kept pushing him forward. Dhara disappeared into the raging waters, but he could still feel her presence reeling him in. Before he knew it, he was chest deep in the lake. The frenzy stopped. Residual ripples and an unusual silence fell over the lake. He trembled, creating his own ripples on the lake's surface. He tried again to move toward the shore, to get as far away from the water as he could.

This time, nothing fought him. The shore seemed farther away than it should have been, but he was able to half wade, half swim toward it, fully in charge of his body once again. He heard whispers and muffled giggles behind him. He didn't turn to see what it was until something sharp sliced into the back of his leg. He screamed and spun around. What he saw, he never could have imagined, not even in nightmares. In front of him were nearly a dozen humanoid creatures covered in greenish-gray scales, large gills protruding from their necks. But it was their sharp teeth and claws he focused on as they moved toward him.

He turned back in another desperate attempt to escape, and found himself face to face with one of the creatures. It slashed him across his chest and face as the others moved closer. One dug its claws into his skin, and began dragging him toward the deepest part of the lake. He flailed his arms and legs, and he screamed as his blood swirled in the water around him.

Just before they dragged him beneath the surface, one of the creatures wrapped its legs around his hips and dug its claws into his shoulders. It pressed its body against him, its jagged teeth barely an inch from his lips. He recognized its golden reptilian eyes.

"I told you the lake would destroy a man like you."

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

Veronica Schultz is a writer obsessed with speculative and supernatural fiction. She has several eccentric hobbies including roller derby, ghost hunting, wildlife photography and education, and the circus arts of trapeze and aerial silks. Many would say Halloween is a hobby of hers as well, but they'd be wrong. Halloween is a lifestyle.

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It wasn't holy. It was however, necessary. Recent prayers had gone unanswered and starvation had spread. True, William Garner's own larder prevented him from sharing the suffering of his flock—God did provide, after all—but he wasn't completely unfeeling, he *understood* how they felt ... of course he did. So he had allowed his congregation to follow their old pagan customs and in doing so, retained his authority, kept them onside. It wasn't as if it was going to cost him anything either, only one life ... and what was one life amongst many? He would say a prayer for the man's soul. Prayers were only words, they too cost nothing.

The Wicker Man burned brightly and Garner felt spirits lift, his own rising as he considered his approaching visit to the Bishop's Palace, whilst the smell of the man's roasting flesh drew forth visions of the meals he would eat there. He closed out the man's plaintive entreaties, his screams, his silence ...

Eventually, the flames died down and the villagers dispersed. Satisfied all would be well, that their man of God had delivered them.

Only the priest remained. The fire had hypnotized him, its warmth had embraced him and he continued to stand there entranced ... and alone.

No. Not alone.

A few flaming torches remained to illuminate the area, revealed that which should not be.

As the strength of the fire lessened, having eaten its fill of the offered sacrifice, a shape crawled out from the ash. Burned skin, shiny and black, festering blisters weeping, it struggled on all fours towards him.

Garner stared, unable to process what he was seeing and when the creature raised its head to him, he at last let out a scream. That, which had once been a man by the name of John Laverty, had no face. Eyes and mouth had vanished, flesh melding together, whilst only slits remained where his nose had been. It was as if the gates of Hell had opened and delivered them a demon.

"Sweet Jesus ..." he eventually whispered.

The creature's head tilted in Garner's direction, evidently able to hear although his ears, melted down and fused back against his skull, were indiscernible. The blackened monster turned, its skin tearing with the movement so new lesions ruptured. It came towards him.

Gathering his courage, Garner raised his crucifix. "Stop there, demon."

The creature did not stop, continuing to put one charred limb in front of another as it came nearer.

It seemed to grow bigger, towering over him, at which point Garner sank to his knees in desperate prayer, until he realized the giant was merely a shadow created from the burning torches.

Now however, it was right in front of him and he was down at its level. Shaken, he found he had no strength to rise and so had to remain looking directly into the destroyed face of the man he had sacrificed.

He continued to hold his crucifix out in front of him. "God help me ..."

"No," said a voice. "God is not here tonight. In fact, he has not been here for a long time."

The words seemed to come from this remnant of humanity before him but the creature had no mouth.

"I need no mouth to speak for me," it continued.

Garner moaned as the creature's face came right up against his own, felt the infernal heat of the body, its cracked and scabbed skin. He could smell the cooked flesh, its charnel scent, its hunger for revenge.

It prowled around him, feline, predatory.

"Your flock were right about a sacrifice being needed. But it's been so long, they have forgotten what is needed. Fire is cleansing, it washes away corruption and hypocrisy, it burns away unbelief. It needs to be offered a truly black heart ... your heart."

Garner felt a sharp stab at his chest, looked down and saw the end of what had once been an arm, bones like ivory blades, nipping at him.

He scabbled backwards, unable to tear his eyes away from the creature, fear paralyzing all rational thought or movement.

"You promised to deliver the harvest with prayer and with sacrifice," said the voice. "And now you will."

As if in response to some invisible command, the creature leapt onto Gardner. Ivory knives ripping into flesh, shredding muscle and tissue as it pulled him back towards the site of the fire where embers still glowed. Unable to fight, terrified into mute submission, he could do nothing but allow the monster to continue to his destruction as flames once more rose up, although this time with him at their center. At one point he finally gave voice to screams, to entreaties, much like those he had ignored earlier. Now, it was his turn to be ignored.

When morning came, nothing was left of priest or creature. Only ash.

Garner's vanishing was remarked on with sorrow. The harvest had indeed turned out to be a good one, its success attributed to him. Their man of God had truly delivered. It was a shame he wasn't there to see it.

#### About the Author:

Stephanie Ellis writes dark speculative fiction and has been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies. She is co-editor and contributor at *The Infernal Clock* and also co-editor of *Trembling With Fear*, HorrorTree.com's online magazine. She is an affiliate member of the HWA.

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#### The Neighbors' Things | Cecilia Kennedy

Pieces of quartz and sandstone catch the glimmers in the sun's rays and send the sparks flying—making the ordinary concrete slab surrounding the pool come alive with summer's brilliance. Indeed, Matilda and Brett's in-ground pool, in their yard across the street, makes me jealous. The smell of sunscreen and floral notes from Matilda's perfume fill the air as I relax in a

chair, counting myself fortunate enough to have been invited over. The days at home with a toddler can be monotonous and long, so a chance to enjoy the cool waters of an outdoor-pool is a most welcome change. Here, I can relax, but I know I can't make it a habit. Coming to the neighbor's pool every day is rude, I decide, so this one invitation seems special.

"Don't you just love it here?" Matilda asks, pointing at the pool, plants, and yard.

"It's beautiful—truly. I wish Phil and I had something like this, but we just can't justify the cost."

"Well, it's not that bad. Brett and I paid for it outright with our casino earnings."

"You gamble?"

"Yes—but responsibly and we save our winnings—for things like this pool."

I consider the idea of gambling, but it sounds boring and I just don't see how anyone could win enough money to buy anything substantial. Sure, there are success stories, but I think they're rare.

When I go home, I rinse off the sunscreen and put Duncan into his pack-and-play while I make dinner. There's a smell that still lingers—a strong perfume and . . . something else, which I can't quite place. It's slightly pungent and sticks to my skin somehow—something ripe. I decide that Matilda's roses must be in that in-between state I guess, between the height of sweetness and the onset of decay. It's so subtle though. Not enough to spoil the yard, the pool . . . all of the beautiful things she has.

In the meantime, I look forward to Phil's return. He's my anchor to the outside world—the one where he goes out to lunch with interesting people and talks about the office politics. Today though, I have something interesting to tell him about Matilda's pool.

"Do you think we should do it? Do you think we could make enough money at a casino to buy a pool?" I ask Phil.

"It sounds sort of crazy to me. If you really want a pool, the way to do it is to save up. Just put money aside each year from the budget. That's what sensible people do. Taking up gambling to finance a home project doesn't sound like a good idea to me and I really doubt that's

how Matilda and Brett got their pool. I mean, really? Gambling? They must be making more money."

And now, Phil is quite curious, so he looks up online what they make. They're both government employees and their salaries and bonuses are readily available to the public, thanks to all of the accountability efforts of local politicians. After a quick search, Phil is disappointed to discover that together, Matilda and Brett make less than he does. He wonders how they could afford that pool. He's convinced it's not gambling.

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Pink, ruby red, and white roses bloom on our property. I take Duncan outside to admire them—to mash the soft petals in his face and watch him laugh as they tickle his nose. He squeals in delight as my gaze falls on the house across the

street, which has always loomed above ours, but I'm really taking notice of it today for some reason. A plot of land in our neighborhood is expensive, so we built a tinier house for ourselves. The neighbors, on the other hand, built an enormous one—with tiered balconies and picturesque windows. And now, it has a pool.

I hold Duncan on my hip as I walk barefoot in the grass. The door of the house across the street opens and Matilda steps through. I watch her as she comes down off the porch and walks towards our house. When the doorbell rings, Duncan and I answer.

"Adrienne, I hope you don't mind, but I thought I'd come over to ask a bit of a favor."

"Sure—come in."

"Lovely house."

"Thanks. We like it—yours of course—yours is amazing. Phil and I just admire it—it's absolutely beautiful."

"Oh—well—thank you. We're very fortunate to have been able to pay for the house outright."

"With casino money?"

"Oh, no—no! My parents died and left some money, so Brett and I decided to build our dream home."

"That is fortunate—I mean—not the death part, but . . ."

"I know what you mean—don't worry. I just stopped by to ask a favor. I'm going to be out of the house all day and I'm expecting a package. Do you think you could keep an eye out for it? I don't want anyone to steal it off the front porch."

"Oh yeah—yeah—sure, no problem," I tell her, with my curiosity piqued.

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A truck stops in front of the neighbors' house in the afternoon to deliver, not just one package, but rather a series of extremely large boxes. I was going to take the package back to my house to keep it safe, but I couldn't possibly lift these boxes. Just to be neighborly though, I take Duncan with me across the street. They all seem to come from expensive exercise equipment companies, but the pungent odor of slightly rotted vegetation rises above the pleasant smell of roses. It seems to get stronger near the boxes. Based on their shape and the names of the exercise equipment companies written on the outside, I conclude that Matilda and Brett are building a home gym. I'll bet no thief will be able to steal these boxes without the whole neighborhood noticing, so I assume my neighborly responsibilities are over. The packages will be just fine.

An hour or so later, two new shiny sports cars in red and blue pull up in front of the house. Matilda gets out of one car and Brett steps out of the other. Together, Matilda and Brett lift the heavy boxes and angle them into the entranceway of the house.

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"How are they affording all of this?" Phil asks when he sees the sports cars and I tell him about the state-of-the-art home gym.

"I guess casino money—but the house was paid for by Matilda's parents."

"It can't be all casino money and let's just see if Matilda's parents really died."

I spend the rest of the evening watching Phil frantically search for public records. He's absolutely obsessed with Brett and Matilda's marriage records, property taxes, driving record, and salaries. I've never seen him like this. He's convinced they're doing something illegal and he's going to uncover it. In fact, he does not see anything that indicates that Matilda's parents are even dead. At midnight, I beg him to come to bed, but I can tell he won't be sleeping tonight.

"Let's go," he says. "Let's just go over to their house. We have a key to the back door from when we watched their house while they traveled throughout Europe last summer. We still have it."

"Phil—this is ridiculous. I'm not going over there—not while Brett and Matilda are home. What if they find us?"

"Come on—we'll be careful. I just . . . I just need to see what they're up to. I'm thinking there's a secret room somewhere."

"A secret room for what?"

"For making meth! I think they're making meth!"

"Phil, you're acting crazy."

"Fine—I'll go by myself, but I'm going."

I know that when Phil gets something stuck in his brain, I can't stop him and now, I'm curious, so we tiptoe over to the neighbors' house, though I'm sure security cameras are watching. I'm sure Matilda and Brett will find the footage in the morning and I have no idea what we'll tell them.

Phil and I climb over the fence and drop onto the cool surface of the swimming pool concrete pad. The pool is lit up for the evening and seems especially enchanting. Soon, Phil has the back door open and we enter the neighbors' spacious living room.

“You wait here,” Phil whispers. “I’ll check and see if there are any secret rooms and then I’ll come get you.” I agree as I lower myself down onto the thick carpet to stretch out and wait. Phil returns in ten minutes.

“Okay—I think I found something. Let’s go.”

I follow Phil up a winding staircase. We walk past all of the bedrooms in the house and head straight for a narrow door at the end of the hallway. I think it only leads to a closet, but Phil assures me it may not be what I first think it is because it’s locked. Phil shimmies the door open and flips on a switch once we walk inside. In the light we can see we’re in some kind of conservatory—all done up in 1920s style—with black and white octagonal tiles and graceful ironwork for the mini staircases and balconies. There’s a pond full of large rainbow-colored koi. Tropical plants bloom and flowers practically drip from the ceiling and balconies.

We keep moving forward in this space—all the way to the back and find a smaller greenhouse for new plants that are growing, but these plants are unlike any we’ve seen before. Several varieties of succulents and hibiscus and carnivorous plants seem to be grafted together, but then . . . there are other things. Strange and repulsive things are somehow bound to the edges of leaves and stems. Things that reflect human elements, such as fingers, beating hearts, and eyeballs—mixed in with the wings of birds and the tails of serpents, which still slither and slap the air. If we look closer, the plants—and all of their various parts—are pulsing and moving. To the right, a small alcove reveals a hidden chamber, which we duck into as well. All of the exercise equipment boxes, which were delivered earlier, are open and exposed, but instead of machines for running or rowing, we see cadavers—dissected, opened with some of the parts missing. I clutch Phil’s hand as we back away from the alcove and return to the greenhouse portion of the conservatory.

As we move about the perimeter of this space, we abruptly realize we are not alone. Two figures stand in front of a window on the other side of this space. The figures have their backs to us and they appear to be wearing dark cloaks, with hoods that cover their heads. Phil and I instinctively bend to the ground to hide below more ordinary looking plants. They are tall enough to peer over the tops without being seen.

Both figures stretch out their hands through the open window. They are holding potted plants—very similar to the ones we just observed—pulsing with life of the flora, fauna, and human kind. Their hands tremble as they stretch them out—as if delivering an offering. From the dark of the night, we hear loud shrieks. Something appears before the window—something large that pokes its hideous head through the conservatory window and screams. The eyes bulge from a face that is covered in scales, which are oozing, thick with blood. It appears as if thousands of worms peek through the edges of the scales and churn the flesh like soil. Long, spindly arms reach for the plants, while the mouth opens wide to devour them. The two hooded figures back away in terror and shut the window as they turn to leave. When the figures rush by, we recognize at least the remnants of the neighbors we thought were Matilda and Brett. Their faces have aged and it becomes clear that there’s a direct correlation between this work in the conservatory and the immense wealth they accumulate. They appear worn, tired, fragile, and weak. In the magnificent space of this exquisite conservatory—this elegant house—with the pool and the balconies—we see a more distant, faded light in their eyes—a light that’s getting dimmer with each step they take. Their eyes tell us they can’t keep this up much more.

Phil and I make good use of the shadows to escape from all of the neighbors’ things.

#### **About the author:**

Cecilia Kennedy earned a doctorate in Spanish and taught for 20 years in Ohio before moving to the Greater Seattle area with her family. Her horror/ghost stories have appeared in *Gathering Storm*, *Coffin Bell*, *Open Minds Quarterly*, and *Headway Quarterly*. She reserves her “scariest” writing though, for her blog “Fixin’ Leaks and Leeks”, where she chronicles her attempts at domestic projects.

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DRAGON BORN: BOOK TWO

# CHILD OF FIRE



*Ela Lourenco*

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

The hand had been with her as far back as she could remember. As a young child, it would poke from the kitchen bin, shaking its forefinger in displeasure when she tried to throw away gifts from him. When she started school, it appeared as a 'Stop!' in front of the girls' restrooms. He had convinced her mother that public conveniences were a haven of germs and perverts — only their home bathroom was safe. But she knew there was no safety from the eyes that peered at her through door cracks, or the hand that waited for the right time to act. She had no vocabulary to describe what that hand did to her, so she said nothing.

As she got older, the hand would appear in the mirror in a thumbs-down gesture as she readied herself for school. When she hit puberty, the hand would scratch at her budding breasts as she dried herself after bathing. Scratch and scratch and scratch at the warm, tender skin, leaving large, red welts that turned to small, white scars. When she imagined telling someone about the hand, it would leap to her throat, squeezing tight around her neck 'til thoughts of speaking left her entirely. Eventually she moved out and the hand left her alone. For a while. But then she ended up in crisis care. They wanted her to talk about herself while lying on a couch. She did and discovered the hand resting lightly on her chest, just below her neck, tapping softly — a gentle reminder it was still there. That it was still important to keep quiet. They didn't seem to see it. She hoped if she didn't mention it, it would leave her in peace. Stupid woman.

The hand decided to stick around, make up for lost time. While riding the bus, she watched it try to pinch schoolgirls' bottoms. Sometimes it laid innocently on an empty seat, waiting for women to accidentally sit down on it. Then it began tormenting her. Pulling her hair. Or rather, pulling out her hair. There were other things the hand did to her. To other parts of her. With objects. The day it poured scalding water down her front, she knew she had to do something.

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She researches and prepares carefully. Chooses the ladies' restroom of the public library. A notice states guns are not allowed in the library; this does not concern her, she has a meat cleaver. She has spent weeks strengthening her left hand, learning to use it. Practicing on cuts of meat and bone bought from the butcher 'til her aim is perfect and she can chop straight through with one stroke. She buys bandages for after and a flask of whisky for before. She needs to work quickly lest she be interrupted — either by a person or by the hand. She takes a long swig from the flask, then looks at herself in the mirror and nods. It is time. She lays her right arm on the marble counter between two sinks. It is cold. She keeps the main part of her mind distracted, focused. She has learned how to dissociate. She picks up the axe in her left hand and brings it swiftly down on her right wrist. Through searing pain she feels joyous relief. Blood spatters on the mirror, her blouse, begins to pool in the sink. In spite of the pain she smiles. It is a clean chop. The hand twitches in front of her. Working quickly, she wraps the stump in bandages, then throws the hand in the toilet and flushes. She doesn't want it to be found. She walks out of the ladies' and approaches the check-out desk, holding her bloody stump. The librarian begins to scream.

"Shh, shh," she scolds. "This is a library." Then she faints.

Afterwards, she refuses any type of prosthetic, insisting she'll manage fine. The first six months are bliss. There is occasional pain in her phantom hand, but she's read that's normal. Then one morning she wakes with her left hand gently resting around her neck. She thinks it a coincidence 'til it happens three times in a row. Then she notices it tracing the scars on her chest as she dries herself after bathing, the fingers flexing as if preparing to dig in. She will take no chances.

She begins strengthening her toes.

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

Originally from Missouri, Sherry has both her hands and lives on a farm in the Scottish Highlands where she pets cows, watches clouds and scribbles stories. Her first published short story was about her Peace Corps experience in Ukraine. Other published work can be found on her website. She was thrilled to come second in the 2018 Weird Christmas flash contest.

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At first we thought it was just April showers bringing May flowers. But May came and went, as did the summer, then fall, and the downpour never let up. By the time winter came — not that it felt like winter at all — electricity and telecom had become a distant memory. The help we had sought in the spring never arrived and we no longer had a way to reach out. The roads were blocked by mud and debris, nature's barricades fortified by large trees with their roots up in the air, as if they'd given up mid-fight and lain down in surrender.

Some gathered their families and left early in the summer, while it was still possible to go on foot along the roads that snaked around the hills. On the days when I felt fanciful, I would imagine they had landed someplace dry and warm. On other days, I knew they had done no better than those who had arrived here from the neighboring towns along similar paths, bewildered, starved, soaked to the bone.

Those of us who had hesitated to leave no longer could, or wanted to. We had left our homes in the valley and moved to higher ground, up the hills and into tents, old campers, and abandoned sheds. Most farmers who lived in the hills welcomed fleeing townsfolk at the barrel of a shotgun. One of them realized there was strength in numbers and that someone like my husband could help keep the rest away, in return for food and shelter.

My husband. Having paid his dues to the army, he had come home just weeks before the rain started and promptly knocked me up. We had put everything into our first house, where we would raise our child. When the rain came, we had nowhere to go and nothing but each other.

My husband hunted for the farmer, the farmer's wife, and the two of us. He caught rabbits, squirrels, and snakes. We ate boiled potatoes, sour apples, and bread from moldy wheat and corn. Without the sun, the crops that weren't flooded came in scarce and wilted, devoid of succor, coated with mildew.

Mildew was the color of my baby when she was born. My husband gave her his mother's name, a nice old-fashioned female name, but to me she was Mildew. The farmer's wife said Mildew was born on Christmas Day, like Jesus, but I knew she lied because no one kept track of the date anymore.

One day, I gave Mildew a bath in a tin tub that the farmer had used for apple picking. I turned around for just a second, I swear it was just a second—

She was underwater.

My heart stopped, but she wasn't dead. She was submerged and smiling. Over the next few days, it became clear that she could stay underwater for as long as she wanted and would scream in protest when we tried to take her out. The farmer suggested she had lungs but could also breathe through the skin, like a frog, and we decided he was right, for no one else had a better explanation.

Mildew was the first amphibaby, but she would not be the last. Over the coming years, more were born in the tents, old campers, and abandoned sheds. They came into the rain happy and strong, growing fast and doing much better than the rest of us. The farmer said they could likely filter toxins through their skin.

We let Mildew swim with the other children in the lake that now covered the entire valley. She brought home fish, otters, and rats. She had her father's knack for hunting.

Then the farmer's wife fell ill, with a high fever, vomit, and bloody stools. Contaminated water, said the farmer just days before he succumbed himself. My husband insisted that we bury them; with a scowl, Mildew humored him.

Then my husband got ill. I knew Mildew missed the lake, but she would not leave his side. After he died, she said she needed my help to take him to the water. I helped and then I left. I didn't want to know what she would do with him.

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I vomited blood last night. I haven't told Mildew yet. She is at the lake with her friends, making up for lost frolic time. I walk over to join her, to make it easier for her, so she doesn't have to drag me there all by herself. I sit at the edge and look at the gray water and the gray sky, no longer noticing the relentless drumbeat of the rain. I wait to see my beautiful girl's face emerge from the water, green like mildew, radiant like the sun that she's never seen, made for this world, perfect.

#### About the Author:

Maura Yzmore is a Midwest-based writer of short fiction. Her stories have appeared in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *The Arcanist*, *Ghost Stories*, *Coffin Bell*, *Asymmetry*, and elsewhere.

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Milo was an outside cat and that was just the way he liked it, thank you very much. He tried being a house pet, but the call of the wild was just too strong. When he was *captive* he snuck out every chance he got until one day, they didn't try to catch him. Oh, he still cared about his people. He liked to bring them presents occasionally; you know, the usual dead mice, chipmunks, pieces of road kill, and leave them on the door step. This let them know he was still around and thinking of them. They in turn, put food and water out for him every day just in case.

The day *it* happened was the best day for hunting. Early fall in the Midwest meant comfortable stalking. In the summer, he mostly laid under the porch in the shade and fed almost exclusively on the cat food his people put out. But today, he padded through the woods listening for something he could chase. His ears worked on instinct, scanning back and forth. From the right, something rustled in the dying ferns. Milo stopped, his pupils dilated wide, he didn't move a muscle. His ears zeroed in on the sound and his brain quickly calculated location and likely species. On his right, at about four o'clock, there was a small rodent. He sniffed, his nostrils flared, taking in the scent. His brain quickly sorted through the myriad of smells and found the one he was after. It was a chipmunk. Milo lowered his body, flattened himself out, and silently crawled in the direction of his prey.

He had the chipmunk in his sites when it stopped and sniffed. It had caught the scent of him. Damn it, he'd need to act quickly. He shifted his weight onto his haunches, preparing to pounce. His eyes fixed on his victim and his cells released the energy needed to make the leap. Simultaneously, the chipmunk turned and sprinted further to the right. Milo took off after it. They ran through the woods, jumping over fallen logs as Milo gained and then lost ground on the chipmunk. Suddenly, the chipmunk somehow flew vertically into the air, dropped back down, and disappeared. Milo stopped and assumed the statuesque position that allowed him to survey the scene and assess any danger. He heard nothing and saw nothing, so he took a few cautious steps toward where he last saw the chipmunk, stopped, listened, and continued.

He smelled the chipmunk, and then, underneath that, a meatier smell, not unpleasant but gamey, perhaps something that had been dead for a day or so. Just to the side of where he last scented his prey, sat an unusual, rounded, grey-green pod. Milo sniffed at it. He pawed a bit at what might be a plant or fungus like the mushrooms his people liked to pick and eat. The pod's thick husk flopped open, blooming with bloated petals that looked like bubbly snakes. Milo took a closer look. Inside the fleshy foliage was a ring of thin black worms with mouths that snapped as they stretched toward him. At the very center, a yellow, boney, beak sat waiting like a trap. Milo bobbed at it like a boxer and wiggled his back end.

The best way to deal with this usurper of his dinner was to tear it apart. He bit into one of the snake husks and pulled. He felt a tear and pulled harder. Thick, aloe-like ooze squeezed out of the bite marks and dripped down Milo's chin. This ooze was black and it smelled like decay. He wrinkled his nose but he refused to let go of the thing. He pulled, and the whole creature rolled itself around him. The tiny worms bit at his chest and belly. Its beak was snapping feverishly, so close to Milo's nose that he could smell the chipmunk's blood. The piece of tentacle in his mouth loosened. There was no choice but to swallow it quickly and grab another purchase of the slimy thing. This time, he unleashed the wildness inside him and tore at the thing with his front claws, all the while pulling back with his head. It came loose. The beak let out a high-pitched squawk. The thing, which was definitely not a fungus, summersaulted completely over, lifted itself up on the husks it had left, and limped away, leaving a stinking, steaming trail of thick, black muck behind it.

Milo, satisfied with his heroic revenge, dragged the spoils of war back to his home. It seeped and dripped the black sap onto the ground and Milo's tongue. It had a sort of numbing sensation that Milo did not like much. He wanted to get rid of the thing. He was going to give it to his people, and he might even spend the night in the house. All of a sudden, he didn't feel like being an outside cat anymore. At the front door, he dropped his find on the stoop and scratched and yowled until they answered.

"My God, Milo, what have you brought this time?" the female said. He pushed it toward her. She crinkled her nose. "Ugh. Sick! Bad Kitty! Where did you find a tentacle out in the woods?"

Milo meowed. He wanted her to pick it up and examine it. This was not your common gift, plus it had made him feel quite sick. He rubbed his face against the bristly mat in front of the door.

"Oh, you stinky cat! That thing is positively disgusting. I didn't know Octopus had black blood." She leaned down and poked it with a finger. "Or maybe that's ink. Ooh, and I didn't know they stunk so much. Milo, that is just gross." She kicked it. It squished under her shoe and puffs of yellow stuff came out of the little bumps all over it. Milo sniffed at it again. It didn't smell so gamey anymore. Now it just smelled sickeningly sweet. He followed her into the house.

"If you're coming in here, you're getting a bath," his person said.

Milo didn't care. He wasn't up to fighting about it. He just wanted to sleep. He got his bath twice. The first one didn't work because the water turned black from all the goo on him, and it stank so bad that it had to be rinsed down the drain and the tub filled up again. This time, his person managed to get all the stuff off him. She worked the shampoo through Milo's fur, and as she did, clumps of hair came out. He wanted her to stop and leave him be. He felt bloated and itchy.

"Oh Milo, goodness. You're getting mange or something. You're going to have to be an inside cat for a while, until you're feeling better," she said, drying him off. She found his old basket bed and put it in the living room by the fireplace. He laid down on it and slept.

Cats dream. All animals do. Most cats dream of chasing and catching mice or other vermin. Sometimes they dream of making impossible vertical jumps, high into trees, to catch birds. Milo dreamt the dreams of the damned: falling into nothingness, being torn apart by some giant beast, and then drowning in a pool of black, viscous, gel.

When Milo finally awoke, the house was empty. The people were away for the day like always. He was terribly itchy. More hair had fallen out, leaving him, he imagined, looking pretty ridiculous. The scent of left over eggs wafted from his dish but he felt heavy and full, so he just stayed in his basket. Licking at his protuberant belly, he found sores all over. So, he did what any cat would do—he licked even more at them. As he finished his cat bath, he realized the spots were everywhere. They weren't painful, but they had that taste, the cool, metallic taste of wounded skin. His stomach roiled and then he hacked up a thick, tarry hairball. It left a bitter, bile taste in his mouth. He fell back asleep.

"Oh God, Doug! What's wrong with him!" the female screamed. It woke him up. He tried to open his eyes, but they were stuck. He licked at his paws and wiped them over his eyes until they opened. Everything he saw had a grey-black cast to it so that the world was blurred with fog. He tried to focus up at his people, both of which were bent over him with looks of horror and disgust. He tried to meow, but it came out gargled. He coughed up another hair ball, this one with almost no hair, just a ball of inky mucilage.

"You have to take him out back and put him out of his misery, Doug."

The female was crying. She had her hand over her mouth. Milo tried to meow again but it came out a weak mewling sound. Pitiful. He felt pitiful. Something brushed against his naked thigh and he turned to look back at himself. Each of his sores had opened, sprouting from them were long worm-like feelers. They were various lengths, but each moved seemingly of its own free will, and each had a rounded mouth like a lamprey eel. The base of the sores weeped the same black substance that kept coating his eyes. His naked skin was mottled and bruised. He tried to stand, to go to his people and rub against them. His legs collapsed beneath him. His bones had turned to jelly. The instant he collapsed, his female screamed and backed away. He gurgled at her.

"Doug, please!" she cried.

Doug, his male person, reached out to pick him up. The worms snapped at Doug's hand. One managed to get its mouth on him. Doug pulled back and the worm slid long out of Milo's belly. Doug screamed this time. He grabbed the worm and threw it into the fire. Gelatinous and clotted discharge trickled out of the hole left by the worm. Milo was nothing more than a sack of proteinaceous worm fodder. It didn't hurt. It was all quite numb. He felt nothing but loneliness and now, seeing what just happened, guilt for passing his fate onto his people. He wished he hadn't left them so long ago, giving up love and security for freedom to run wild and never think of anything but himself. Now that he realized his mistake, he wanted nothing more than to sit on his female's lap and purr contentedly while she scratched behind his ears.

He looked at her through his rheumy eyes. She was still crying, but she had the ash shovel in her hands. Milo knew what she was going to do. It was ok though. It didn't hurt, not physically. He tried to show her with his eyes that it was ok. He never meant to scare her. He loved her. He knew that now. He just hoped she'd keep the tool handy for when it was Doug's turn to go. She brought the shovel down. The blackness covered his eyes again, and then it covered him.

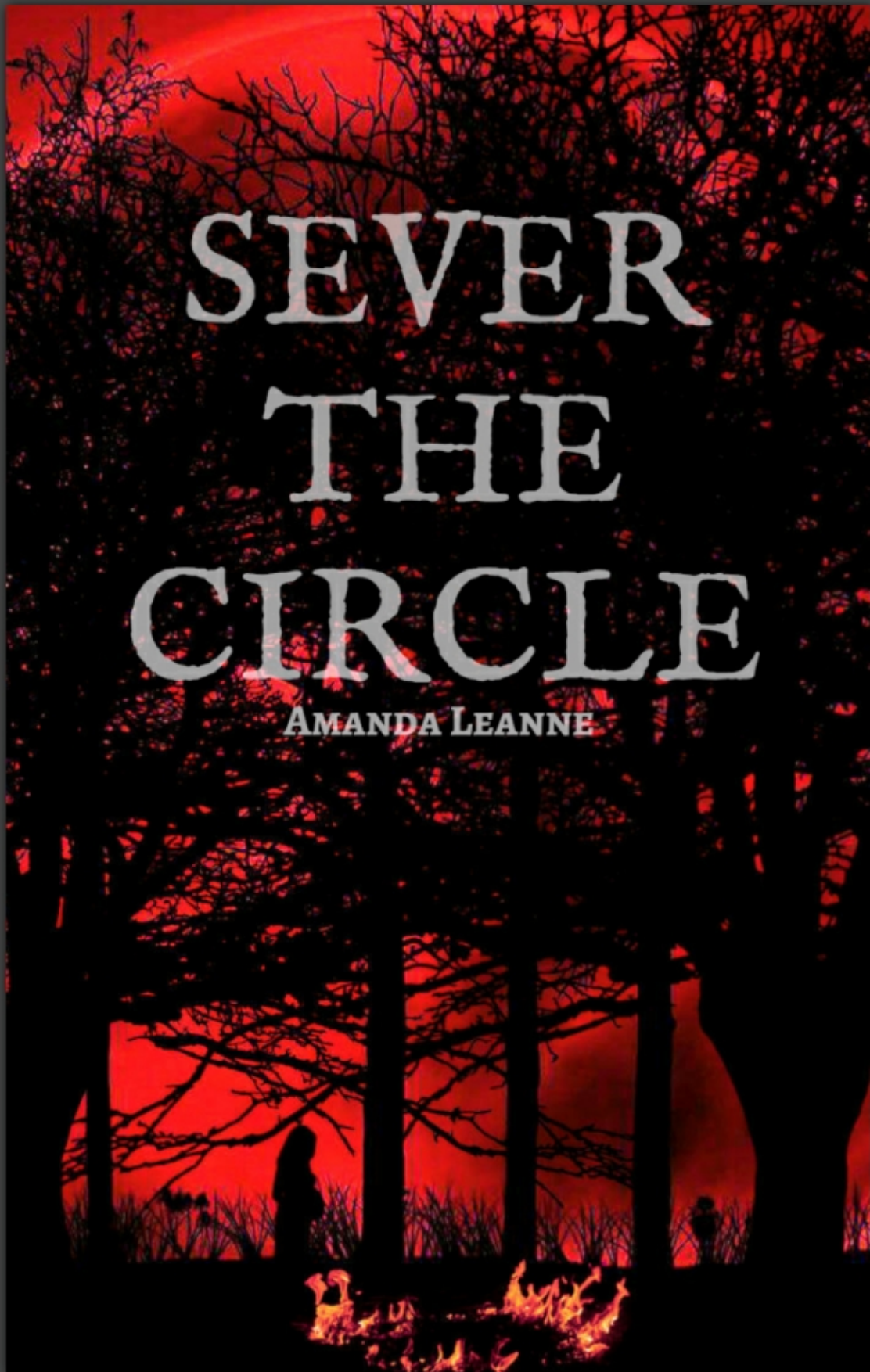
#### **About the Author:**

EV Knight is an author of horror and dark fantasy often featuring strong female characters. She earned her MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University but also keeps her medical degree current, so she can write her gory scenes accurately. She enjoys all things macabre and lives in the cold northern woods of Michigan.

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EVERY CIRCLE IN LIFE ENDS IN DEATH.



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As usual,  
it was one tank that drew the crowd  
down in the museum's aquarium.  
It was not the tank with pike  
gawping threateningly,  
their teeth barred  
in anticipation  
and hope  
of attracting an audience.  
No,  
though there was a monstrous pike in it,  
swimming with its mouth wide open.  
But its mouth was open wide  
in wonder,  
in wonder at its strange environment.  
Well,  
it's not often that a pike gets to swim  
in a drawing room  
furnished from times past.  
Its eyes bulged  
with the strangeness of it all.  
But  
it was a crowd puller,  
though still not enough  
to satisfy such an audience,  
the pike reflected,  
as it considered the strangeness  
of its very un-fishlike companion,  
the young girl costume dressed  
to match the drawing room,  
standing there dreamlike  
or maybe drugged,  
steadying herself  
with the chair.  
Perhaps earlier she was seated,  
when the water was lower.  
but now she has to stand.  
The water is already  
up to her waist  
and rising slowly.  
The audience gets larger,  
their eyes bulging fishlike  
as they gawp at the spectacle.

They call it entertainment.  
So it goes.

### **Melting | Lynn White**

The rock looms large above me,  
the petrified remains of the last time the sun burned  
in the time of giants.  
Giant rocks and giant creatures fused together in the fire.  
Look!  
There's one with a long nose!  
Or maybe it's a beak.  
And there's a human molar,  
surely.

And here I stand now,  
on my tiny rock.  
Now I'm lit by moonlight,  
but soon the sun will rise  
and consume us,  
fuse us together  
and we are both so small,  
I am not sure anything will remain  
after.

### **Monsters | Lynn White**

It's the monsters who come out of the light  
that are the most fearsome,  
but those that sneak up from the dark  
are the ones we fear the most,  
even though they're smaller,  
and often as afraid as we are.  
That's why they  
hide and sneak  
in the dark places.  
The ones hiding in the sunlight  
are more difficult to see  
and the most monstrous.  
They lie in wait  
blending in  
and waiting,  
waiting to pounce  
and destroy  
destroy  
us all  
to destroy  
all.

### **Look This Way | *Lynn White***

Look this way.  
Turn away from the salt wind.  
There's nothing to fear.  
Let me see your face.  
I know mine looks a little strange,  
but there's nothing to fear,  
nothing.  
It's just that I've been away  
a long time.  
I have a long life history,  
you see.  
Look this way.  
I've brought you flowers.  
I found them when I woke up,  
when I rose up.  
I didn't see who left them.  
I hope it wasn't you.  
It would be discourteous of me  
to return your gift.  
But at least you know I'm no thief,  
no grave robber,  
just someone who has been away  
a long time.  
Look this way.  
Let me see the salt wind  
blow back your hair,  
let me see your face.

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

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award.

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The day had been unavoidably long but as the bell rung I raced from the yard, intent only on escape. I ignored my friends, I turned from the teacher's scowl, I was oblivious to the crows who watched intently from the trees, for I was focused on one thing.

My heart raced as I barreled through the back streets, my breath coming in gasps, but I didn't pause even when I reached my destination, I flung open the screen door and rushed inside.

"Mr. Peters, she said yes. She said I could have Sooky's first puppy."

I moved through the house with the familiarity of a regular visitor and though Mr. Peters failed to respond to me, my excitement remained unabated. Not finding him there, I went outside and spied him in the rear of the yard.

"She said yes Mr. Peters."

At my words he turned and his expression grim, "Kevin I'm so sorry," he began but I was already shaking my head, "Sooky was hit by a car."

"By a car?" I parroted and as Mr. Peters nodded, I felt my eyes sting, "The pups?"

The optimism in my voice didn't even have an opportunity to fester as the elderly man responded, "Their gone lad, they didn't stand a chance."

I didn't wait to hear him finish, I rushed out into the street, my feet beating an unrelenting tattoo, as an unspoken refrain echoed in my head.

No Sooky, no pups. No Sooky, no pups. No Sooky, no pups.

I raced from the realization, my stomach contracting as anger bit deep. It wasn't fair, it had taken relentless badgering to convince Mom that I was capable of looking after a dog and now, when she had finally agreed, the dream was gone. As I rounded the corner a crow took flight with a knowing caw, startled I stumbled, my forward impetuous causing me to lurch into Mr. Martin's rubbish can and in that moment the anger which had been brewing became an unstoppable force. There was nothing but fury, it was as black as the crow's plumage, and unable to suppress it I lashed out, pivoting on one foot to kick the rubbish can which stood a silent spectator to my grief.

Standing with fists clenched I watched as the can teetered and then fell, rolling towards the edge of the embankment before plunging over the side. My lips compressed as I listened to it clatter and bang, then, as it hit the bottom with a dull thud I grimaced, the noise an unpleasant reminder of the reality I was rebelling against. Chest heaving, I hung my head, old Mr. Martin wouldn't be able to fetch it back, and pushing my anger aside I made my way to the edge of the embankment and scrambled over.

As I reached the bottom I paused, surprised to find an unusually large clearing, sitting still and quiet amongst the crooked and bent trees. Trees which appeared to lean back in fright and I stepped forward, glancing down as my foot slipped beneath me. The ground was littered with stones of all shapes and sizes; curious I bent forward to pick one up, only to drop it horrified. It wasn't a stone, rather it was a tiny skull and as I stepped back, I realized the clearing was littered with skulls. There had to be thousands of them, unnerved I turned, only to pause as I spied something in the distance.

At the far side of the clearing sat an immense stone, larger than anything I had ever seen before. Its surface was pitted and worn, its sides bulged as if it held more than it could possibly contain and though its top was worn flat it seemed ageless, as if it had sat there before time was created. I glanced around confirming I was still alone, then I began to walk across the carpet of skulls, feeling them shift restlessly beneath my feet. As I neared the stone my lips compressed; I could climb this. It might tower above me but I could conquer this stone. This was something death couldn't steal from me.

Intent on my self-imposed task I proceeded to collect the larger skulls with the diligence of the frustrated, smiling broadly as my determination wrought the desired result, a platform that I successfully used to climb onto the rock.

As I settled into a rut worn into the top I frowned, the surface was cold, hard and streaked with dark red but beneath my fingertips I felt a movement, like the beating of a heart and as I squirmed I realized that the stone was growing warmer beneath me. Disconcerted I reached down to trace one of the red lines, frowning as I lifted my finger to see it stained blood red.

Staring at my fingertip, the tears which had threatened since I learned of Sooky's death welled in my eyes and I began to sob.

"Why do you shatter my peace?"

The voice which intruded on my grief was older than time, it was weathered, it was careworn, it was impatient, but it asked the question I needed to hear.

"I want Sooky's first puppy."

My voice broke the unnatural silence which had fallen over the clearing but I paid no heed as I swung my short legs back and forth, my heels butting repetitively against the stones impervious surface.

"You want, what do you give though?"

That made me pause and I recalled the arguments my Mother had forwarded to deter my pursuit. You will have to feed it, you will have to walk it, you will have to clean up after it, but I dismissed these without hesitation, for I knew they didn't matter.

"I wish Sooky's pups hadn't died, then I could have the first and I would protect it and love it always."

Silence greeted my words and then the voice responded, a note of curiosity in its tone, "Would you?"

I paused, then in a fit of childish petulance I responded, "Yes, I would love it, I would care for it and I would protect it from harm until the day I died."

As my words echoed around the clearing I glanced up towards the heaving skies with a frown, suddenly aware of how small and immaterial I was, and panicked I tried to move but I was stuck firm.

"Well that is certainly a heart filled wish, three days." The voice was colder than the grave and now I struggled in earnest, as beneath my form the heat escalated, the ground trembled and then I heard it. It was a dark ominous chuckle filled with darkness and death.

As a clap of thunder echoed through the clearing, I toppled from the rock, crashing down onto the carpet of skulls to land on my hands and knees. Blindly, I stared at them and then I got to my feet.

I ran all the way home but when I arrived I made no mention of Sooky's fate or of my detour. I mentioned none of it, for lying on my pillow was a small skull, a dog's skull, and I knew that my wish had been granted, though at that time I didn't truly understand the evil I had encountered.

I awoke the next morning near the point of exhaustion, and as the day passed in a haze I followed my routine on autopilot, though I was painfully aware that a change had taken place. The sun had departed, leaving the skies dark and morose. The trees had shed their leaves to become skeletons that performed macabre dances and the darkness at night was absolute, the clouds veiling the stars, daring us to protest the absence of light.

Dour, I watched the changes with a heavy heart, unwilling to concede the cause until all the birds departed, except death's couriers, the crows, who remained. The coven stalked my every movement and I knew that I was marked; for no matter which way I turned they were there, observing me with their beady eyes.

It was as I watched the crows through our front window that my sister confronted me, her voice resonating with tension, "What have you done? Tell me you didn't."

At her accusation I stilled, for there was a parallel between the crow's watchful glare and the brooding look my sister directed towards me and from the dim recesses of memory I made the connection.

"That was the Wishing Stone." I whispered, horrified.

Memory can be a painful thing, especially when it reveals the truth.

I had been lurking in the hall when I had heard my older sister whisper to her friend excitedly that she was going to sneak out to the Wishing Stone. She loved him and now he would love her. I hadn't understood then but I recalled her delight when the boy, who had made it his duty to ignore her, was suddenly charmed. I recalled how within weeks she was married and moving away. I recalled the changes that occurred almost immediately, how she got to stay at home after losing her job, how Jack, her husband explained her bruises as clumsiness, how she was so lucky because he didn't let her out of his sight.

What I recalled the clearest was how she had finally returned home bruised and battered and now I realized the truth, she had asked and the Wishing Stone had granted her curse.

My words betrayed me and her eyes widened, "Go back, take it back." She commanded before she left the room, a white-faced parody of what she had once been.

Unable to quell my uncertainty I ventured back to the clearing, painfully aware of the crows that kept me company, but regardless of my intentions when I got there the Wishing Stone was gone. Futility overcame me then and I bowed my head, determined to return home and confess, but I never made it.

Whether it was punishment for considering breaking the deal or it was a coincidence I didn't know but as I began the homeward journey, the crows which had haunted my every step attacked. They swooped low, their eyes cruel, their beaks piercing my skin, driving me onwards, until I knew there was no alternative. I had made the deal, I had sworn the vow and with a sense of futility I ran along the road heading for Mr. Peters yard, hands up to protect my face from my foul assailants, to await my doom.

I have no idea how long I sat with my back against the tree's trunk, I only know that sensation took control. I was aware of everything, of the cold which crept into my bones, of the sounds which seemed painfully loud, and as the sun made its final retreat, I was aware of my isolation.

It was now that I realized I had never been alone, for the others began to appear. The predators that chose concealment in daylight hours came to observe my descent into the abyss. I heard the hiss of the hungry and though I wanted to run, my vow held me still.

The witching hour had come and gone when the soil in Sooky's grave stirred; dredging up a foul scent which made me gag, I shook my head, unwilling to believe what I saw.

Rising to my feet I backed away, averting my face but before I could flee a hand came down upon my shoulder and I swung round to see Mr. Peters, anger engraved on his features.

"What have you done boy? How dare you desecrate Sooky's grave? How dare you call these abominations to life?"

The words were caustic and though I didn't want to look, the condemnation in his eyes forced me to turn and acknowledge the horror my pettiness had wrought.

There, a small body wiggled, struggling to free itself from the grip of graveyard soil. Its front paws were frantic, and as it lifted its head I realized that its mouth was stained a deep dark red and I stood frozen as it whimpered pitifully. The sound was pathetic but something else was within its tone, a hunger which caught me unawares and I threw a glance towards Mr. Peters, who sighed tiredly.

"Go over there, boy." At his word's relief flooded through me, but I still hesitated to watch as Mr. Peters walked to his small shed and then, as he reached Sooky's grave, the moonlight illuminated his silhouette. I watched riveted as he lifted a shovel high above his head, bringing it down swiftly. Though I averted my eyes, I still heard the hard thud followed by a short yelp, which was cut off abruptly.

Nausea rose in my throat and I turned, seeking the comfort of the darkness but as my eyes adjusted I saw it, even as the shovel came down again.

Aghast I stared at the thing which loitered in the shadows, recognizing it for what it was. Small, fragile and still blind it might have wobbled precariously on frail limbs but, as its head turned towards me, I saw that it held a piece of its mother's moldering flesh between its milk teeth.

Overcome I bent over and vomited, as Mr. Peters reached my side.

"It's over, they're dead." His voice was harsh, "And don't you ever set foot on my property again."

I flinched at his words but when I didn't turn he walked forward and I caught sight of the frown which drew in his brows, "What are you looking at boy? What's there?"

As he leaned forward a crow took flight, a dark shadow drifting across the sky and I swung round, recalling my earnest promise, "I would love it, I would care for it and I would protect it from harm until the day I died."

The words were a litany, they were my duty, they were my commitment and as Mr. Peters spied the first and raised his shovel I struck. I pushed him hard in the chest, watching as unbalanced, he flailed and then he fell.

The sound his head made as it hit the ground was reminiscent of the sound of the shovel crushing the other pup's skulls but my attention was upon my pup, its bloodied dark coat shining in the moonlight.

Sending a glance towards Mr. Peters' inert form I scowled, before gently lifting my pup, to cradle its small form against my chest, and as it shifted and squirmed I smiled.

"I'm going to call you Diablo and I'm going to look after you always."

My voice was unnaturally loud in the darkness but it didn't matter, for only the crows' bore witness and they knew the truth, death would be a long time coming, for both of us.

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

Deb Whittam is a graduated from Macquarie University Bachelor of Arts, recently she has had the honor of her work being published in The Crux Anthology and The Rabbit Hole Anthology. She has also self-published a number of titles, which are available through Smashwords, including the Daddy's Angels series.

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# Out Of Phase



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"Not much further," she paused. "I can always tell; I just feel it in my bones."

I looked down, and under me I saw blackness. I had expected water, but there was just air, like space. Empty and gaping. A gouged out eyeball.

"You're a quiet one."

"What's there to say?" I asked because I genuinely didn't know.

"People say different things. Talk about regrets. About family. Sometimes they just cry. Bargaining—that's a big one."

"What could I have that you would want?" I turned my coat pockets inside out in a rather dramatic show of destitution.

She laughed. The way her breath caught made it sound like gagging, but her mouth was pulled up into something akin to a smile. I thought of Halloween masks sitting on vacant Styrofoam heads.

"You're right, you know. They usually promise money. It used to be jewels and gold pieces. Now it's just slips of paper. What would I want with either?"

I watched as she lifted the long, jagged oar and moved it to the right side of the boat. The wood was dark brown and worm-holed. I ran my finger across it and felt nothing, no knot, no hole, no splinter. I ached for the prick of a splinter.

She looked over her shoulder and down at me, and I shivered.

"You'll be rid of me soon."

"Then what?" I asked.

"My job ends at the gate. What happens beyond is not of much concern" she answered, shifting the oar once more to the empty air on the left of us.

"But what should I expect? Do you know?"

"I know that I steer this ship. I drop beings off at the gate. And then I leave."

"Are you dead?" I wondered, hoping she'd be too offended to answer me.

"No," she replied. "I was never alive, so I can't be dead. *You* are dead."

"Then what are you?"

"I'm like a bee."

I didn't question further. Her tone made me seasick, and while the words meant nothing, I knew she was being forthcoming.

I leaned over the edge of the boat. It was more like a gondola than a row boat, just smaller than I would've expected for the river Styx. But I would've also expected more water in a river. This was just an inky black void that seemed to inhale light. I gazed into it, long and deep. The darkness peeled up and twisted in on itself, wiggling and writhing, forming shapes and pictures. I saw a mouth, a fist, the roots of a tree and the tongue of a man. I saw myself, wasteful and entitled. I gasped and fell back onto the seat with a hollow thud.

"Don't look at it too long."

"What is it?"

"It's like a mirror. But instead of reflecting light and images, it feasts on them. It will drain you of things you hold dear and then show you what little you're left with. It's the tissue that connects us to the living. Almost there," she added absently.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that."

"Why am I seeing all this? What can I do?" I looked to my left and right, hoping to see something, anything but the nothing that entombed me.

"It's done. You're seeing this—you're here—because it's all done. There's nothing else." She tossed me another withering glance.

"I get it. I'm dead. So now what? Am I—am I going to Heaven?"

If there had been flesh on her face, she would've furrowed her brow like a discontented tutor.

"To Hell?" I nearly shouted.

"What about this aren't you getting?"

"Is this Limbo?" I asked in a panic. "When I was a kid, I remember my great grandmother begging my mom to have me baptized. I mean, I was like six, but she wouldn't give it up. First, it was about money, like, 'I won't help out with

the college fund if you don't cleanse this child.' Stuff like that. But it turned into, 'This poor baby will spend eternity in limbo, forever trying to climb up to Heaven and into the Lord's arms.' She used to say it to me, too. A little kid. I would just sit there while she would tell me I was going to be trapped in a pit wearing dirty diapers because I was filthy with original sin. What kind of person says that to a kid? I used to cry and cry and beg my parents to just let me get baptized so I wouldn't be an evil little baby stuck between Heaven and Hell. And they wouldn't. They wouldn't do it..." I looked up at her, into her purple eyes. "Is this Limbo?"

She sighed at me, pitifully. "This is just the end." She turned to face me, bending slightly, "There is no Heaven, no Hell, no pit of unclean children. There's just this—the Underworld. The end. You'll get off my boat, walk through the gate, and it will end. You'll be done."

"Done? Like, done with being alive?"

"Like done with existing. You'll blip out of existence. You'll fade into all the blackness. You'll be *done*. Some people find solace in that." She looked me up and down. "Apparently you aren't one of them."

"This can't be! This can't be it! I'm only 36. I haven't even started my life yet! I literally *just* paid off my car, for fuck's sake."

"You were waiting for it to start, and it had been happening the whole time."

"I can't. Please take me back. You can take me back, can't you? Please... I beg you!"

"*There* it is." She turned her back to me, her heavy robes rippling as she twirled. "I'm like a bee, and you're like honey. All this," she motioned, "this is the fabric of what you're made of. This is bigger than your worry and your chattering teeth. This *is* the very atoms of your being. It will absorb you and turn the wheel. I know why you beg, and why your knees buckle in sorrow. But I don't care, because to me, you are nothing more than speck of dust to be locked away in the folds of time. You are not special. There is no part of you that will go on. It's just logical."

I wept, empty sobs coming out in harsh jags.

"If there was a Heaven," she said to the darkness in front of her. "Why would you have been granted admission?"

There was no malice in any of her words. They simply left her mouth as statements of fact, as true as stardust.

"I guess it's what we all hope for."

"You all hope for time. And time is something you get. You just want more. But yet what did you do with what you were given, Megan? What did you do with it? Think your thoughts now, because those will all slip away into the echoes, for I see the gate, and this is as far as I take you; this is as far as my river goes."

"Will you remember me?" I asked.

"No," she said simply, directing me to exit.

"Doesn't it get lonely?"

"I am time itself."

I stepped off the boat to find the ground under my feet wasn't ground at all; it was the same rich emptiness that had surrounded the boat, but it supported me without fail. I walked toward the gate, unable to slow my step, unable to turn around and watch as she floated back down the river.

I wondered if the gate looked the same to everyone, because to me it looked like the entrance of the park we went to when I was very small. To that end, I wondered if the woman had really looked like my mother, or if I'd just imagined her face for want of something real.

I placed my hand on the iron bars, but couldn't feel their weight. It was like a dream, and my body was no longer part of me, I was just a passenger. As I pushed the gate open, the last bit of my fear melted away. Lightness seeped into my joints and I melted into white. I wondered if I—

#### About the Author:

Christine Makepeace is a weird fiction writer currently living in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and plants.

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“Don’t you ever worry you’re a bit of a cliché, darling?” Emmelina cocked her head and stared at her lover. “I mean, you write horror stories and play those weird card games, you’ve got long – and greasy, sorry – hair, wear a black leather jacket and those big old boots that make you into a giant, and think beer should always be as black as night. Isn’t it all just a bit, well, trite?” She smiled at him to soften her criticism. She wouldn’t want him to think her mean. She just wanted him to be his best self. “And that heavy metal music? It’s just so... loud. And dispiriting. Don’t you like a lovely melody or want to listen to beautiful words, to something that has meaning?”

Hanging from the metal hook on the wall, her lover said nothing. With his tongue cut out and his mouth stitched up it would have been quite a feat in even the best of circumstances. He looked at her with hate in his eyes – Emmelina tried to pretend his blue gaze was wistful or something a little more Keatsian – but he was wilful and stayed, necessarily, silent. She did not like the challenge she could not fail to see. *Goodness me*, she thought, *so many of them have to try, don’t they? Will they never learn?* She tried, valiantly, to quash the sudden anger that surged in the pit of her stomach.

Emmelina did so hate to be angry.

And gloomy.

“Don’t worry, my love,” she said, perking up, “I’ll bring color into your life. You like red, don’t you? I do.” She slid her knife from its sheath and ran her finger along its edge. A line of red bubbles followed its short track. The blade was sharp. Emmelina knew how to take care of her tools. “Oh yes, it’s my absolute favorite color, darling. Scarlet, crimson, call it by whatever name you choose, but red is red is red.”

Pushing herself to her feet with her free hand, Emmelina crossed the room to the record player. She flicked the switch on the side and the turntable began to spin. She moved the stylus to the right place on the vinyl, with the merest of crunches, and music filled the room. She turned and walked towards her lover, swaying in time, her feet tippy tapping across the stone floor as she felt every note in her bones, every beat through her muscles, her sinew, across her skin.

Oh yes. How Emmelina loved music!

When she reached her lover, she smiled sweetly up at him and was caught by the heavy look in his eyes. Heavy with desire, she preferred to think, heavy with lust for her. She could see him shaking. He must have been eager. How delightful. How, dare she say it, sexy? Grandma Junebug would be ashamed of her for even thinking such a word. ‘Bad girls go to the place of fire and punishment,’ she would say, ‘do you want to burn forever, Emmelina?’

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. *Oh, Grandmother, how I would gladly burn forever, thank you, how I yearn to be consumed by the heat of my one true love, incandescent in his flames... If only I could find him.*

Emmelina opened her eyes and looked up at her lover. He was not her usual fare, but she had been determined to widen her search, her end goal urgent with longing. Could it be? She had never given up hope. There had been so many, but this time... Her breath came faster and Emmelina wondered if he was The One, if at long last she had found him.

“Would you like to dance?” Her excitement was fuelled by the way his body moved, his legs twitching spasmodically against the wall, his jerking movements rattling the chains that secured him to the hook above his head. Oh yes, this was going to...

All of a sudden the weight of his lust rolled his eyes back into his head and his body went limp. Emmelina stared at him for a moment before closing her eyes and shaking her head in disappointment. What use was one that passed out when things got a little heated? So premature, so distasteful. She’d thought he was going to be a keeper. Now she was going to have to find another use for him. Maybe pie.

*No point being downhearted*, thought Emmelina, *there’s always another fish in that sea, just like Grandma Junebug always said. You’ve just got to hook them.*

#### About the Author:

C.A. Yates has written lots of odd stories. Her most recent have appeared in Kristell Ink’s anthology *Hanging on by Our Fingertips* and in the BFS Award-winning press Fox Spirit Book’s new anthology *The Jackal Who Came in From the Cold*. She narrates for podcasts such as *Pseudopod*, *Cast of Wonders*, and *Star Ship Sofa*.

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I leave my Uber and walk up to Timmy's apartment in a rundown, low-income housing complex. The paint flakes off the walls and spiky weeds sprout from the edges of the pavement. This is not how it was supposed to be, but life has a way of veering you off course. Every disappointing facet of our lives reminds me of how far we are from the big dreams we had in middle school.

I knock on the door. Timmy doesn't answer, but I know she's expecting me. The message I got from her this morning was stamped at 3:02 a.m. She told me to be here to read her new story. I'm always the first one to critique any new stuff she's working on. I try the knob, and it's open. As I enter the dark apartment, I hear the rush of water through the pipes in the flimsy walls. She's in the shower.

Timmy and I were instant BFFs. We swore that nothing would separate us, pricking our fingers and sealing our promise with blood. We wrote a manifesto of our futures together, hoping that by putting them into words they would come true. I was going to become a romance novelist, and Timmy was going to write children's books. We both would be on Oprah, live next door to each other in huge mansions, and drive matching Ferraris.

But my life ended at graduation when I married Devon. Since then, I'm what Timmy calls a kept woman. My husband is a tyrant. He doesn't let me have a job, or a car, or friends. Here I am, a grown adult, sneaking out to see Timmy after Devon's gone to work. It's ridiculous. "Why do you stay with him?" Timmy asks all the time. There are many answers that I never have the strength to tell her. I can't let go of the romantic story I made up about him. I let him convince me that I deserve to be hurt. I'm addicted to his game, the constant struggle to win his approval, which is always, tantalizingly, just out of my reach.

Timmy's home is my refuge. It's the only place I can breathe, though sometimes I feel like Devon watches me from some hidden camera he's placed in a picture frame or a drone that records me in infrared from the sky.

A half of a cold pizza lies stiff in an open box, and chocolate bar wrappers litter the counter—writers' fuel for Timmy's all-nighter. I check the coffee maker. The coffee's burned, stale, and smells like cardboard. I dump it and then scrounge up the last coffee grinds in the bottom of a foil bag. I have just enough to make a new pot.

I wait for the machine to stop sputtering and take my fresh coffee to Timmy's office. A few stray black hairs pepper her desk where Poe usually sits, but the cat must be off napping elsewhere. Timmy's keyboard is tucked under her monitor. Her headset lies in its place. She's given up typing—says her thoughts are too far ahead of her fingers. Now she dictates her stories, mumbling into her microphone while watching her words appear on the screen as if typed by a ghostly secretary.

Timmy was destroyed when I moved in with Devon. Soon came the bruises, the angry handprints on my neck, the flinching from pain every time I sat. She couldn't protect me, and that tormented her. Devon forbid me to contact her, accusing her of being a feminist lesbian.

In this case, Devon's paranoid thoughts were right. Timmy is a lesbian, but I will never tell him that. Her name is Timothea. Her mom called her Thea, but Timmy insisted on being called Timmy. I realized she was different back in those days when we spent summers between each other's houses, giggling in our sleeping bags, raiding our parents' kitchens for ice cream, Cheetos, and cola with the voracious hunger only teens have. Once she tried to kiss me and I laughed at her like it was a joke, but I knew it wasn't. We never spoke about it in all our years as friends.

I check my phone before diving into the story. No messages from Devon. Sometimes it's more unnerving when I don't hear from him. The guilt is always there, along with Timmy's silent accusation. The mansions and Ferraris never materialized, and it's my fault our manifesto never came true. I cursed us by falling in love.

Timmy's writing became darker the longer we lived our separate lives, and the more Devon succeeded in dismantling my self-worth. Instead of children's books, she's turned to poetic horror. Orpah's producers are not beating down Timmy's door, but she has a huge cult following who hangs on her every word. Most of her work is about death and violence. There's a sad solace in knowing that so many women can relate to the pain we feel. Her audience needs her, and that keeps her alive. I need her, and her stories to keep me alive too.

I sit in front of the screen and see an open document. I scan those mysterious little black characters that have the power to conjure a whole world in our minds' eyes. I can't wait to devour whatever her brilliant brain has come up with this time.

*The beauty disturbed him as he watched from his tower. It was just too much. He felt his soul would rip in two. When he watched the day moon set behind the mountain, he tried to feel the velocity of the Earth as it turned toward the sun again. But he couldn't. He couldn't really grasp the fact that he was a mortal being on a tiny rotating planet in the vast universe, and he thought he would always feel alone.*

*The moon looked fake in the morning sky filled with light, like part of the theater scene for a school play, stuck like a white paper plate that a student's mother cleverly tacked on the backdrop of pale blue felt.*

*The vultures soared past this blue felt sky and this paper moon in large graceful circles. He imagined being one of them, with their oily black feathers and scoping eyes. His breath would smell like carrion, and he would feed off of death instead of being incapacitated by the mere thought of it.*

Death. The subject again. Timmy's obsessed. I don't think there is one story that doesn't center around some morbid pre-grieving. I notice that she's been in the shower a long time, but I'm sure she needs it. When she's on a writing spree, she goes days without bathing. I'm hoping to finish the story before she gets out. I hate when she watches me read her writing.

*He chose one vulture and began to inhabit its body. He imagined how the wind howled past his ears. He felt his great wings stretch. He saw the land below him. From his lofty height it looked like a giant pinball machine. Where was the death? Where was his food?*

I smile. Timmy really does live off of death. Writing about it puts food on her table.

*He soared in sweeping arcs around the valley, observing the precious lives below. People walking, cars crawling along the roads like shiny colored beetles. Dogs barked and church bells rang. He lowered his altitude with every pass.*

Weird. This character seems more like something from an urban fantasy than Timmy's usual horror. Whatever it is, I know there's a message that Timmy's fans will eat up.

*The vulture sunk his head and dove, terrified of his velocity and wondering if he could stop. But this was his human mind still worrying. All he had to do was focus and fully immerse himself in the vulture again to be able to use its muscle memory and its reflexes as if he'd had them all of his life.*

*He zeroed in on a girl who lay in an alley. She was propped up against a wall decorated with the colorful street art of a hollow-eyed bird. The girl was in a drugged state. Spitte trickled from both corners of her mouth, her chin was buried in her chest, her small belly inflating and deflating as she laboriously breathed. She was covered in marks of violence.*

My first reaction is anger. I try to remember it's out of love, but I can't face it right now. This is her way of talking about Devon to me, sending me subtle messages that hit me like bricks. Yes, yes. *I get it, Timmy.* I'll pretend I don't make the connection, but we'll both know that I have when she comes out and looks me in the eyes. Just like when she tried to kiss me, we've always read each other's thoughts.

*But she rested against the wall in a way that made it look as if the bird's wings stretched from her body. She was a glorious angel and didn't even know it. She had beautiful wings. All she had to do was wake up and fly.*

*As the ground zoomed in larger and larger, blooming before his keen eyes, the dirty, colorful girl angel became more detailed. The vulture reared up and flapped his giant wings with a rough sound, like canvas against canvas. He perched on top of the wall and craned his tiny head to look down on the girl.*

*Her skin was withered and yellowed. She smelled ripe with rot already. Who knew how many years she had slept, fermenting in her tattered clothes?*

Ew. So, I'm rotting now? It occurs to me that maybe Timmy's writing is not all about me. Maybe I make it about me.

*If only she would join him. How to make this angel take flight? He calls to her. He calls to her over and over again in his sad, hoarse caw, but she doesn't move.*

Nope, it's about me. Tears fill my eyes. All the what-could've-beens. I pity the young girls we were, choking with laughter, bubbling with life, fearless together. We had no idea what we were in for, and there is no going back to our former, happy selves. How I wish Timmy could swoop in and save me.

Sobs that threaten to quake in my chest. I wait for them to settle and wipe my eyes before I read on.

*Hello? Who's there?*

*You know who it is.*

*What are you doing here?*

*I've come for you.*

I'm surprised dialogue has entered the story. I didn't expect the vulture to speak. I'm curious how Timmy is going to rescue this angel girl. Or maybe she'll give me the clue to rescuing myself.

*You've come for me? Why? Are you crazy?*

*Maybe just a little bit.*

*You never stop, do you?*

*No, I will never stop.*

The angel is not cooperating with the talking vulture. Maybe it's the girl's drugged hallucination. Timmy, where are you going with this?

*It's useless. We both know that. Our bond is unbreakable.*

*Oh, I think I can break it.*

*Don't come any closer. I'll scream so loud, the whole town will hear. Poe. No. Stay away, Poe!*

I laugh. The mic picks up everything Timmy says, even when she scolds the cat.

*Here kitty, kitty. Now that's a good cat.*

*I don't care what you do. You don't scare me.*

*Oh, you just have to give me a chance. I'll scare you. I'll scare you real bad, Timmy.*

I stare at the blinking cursor. These are the last words on the page. The hiss of the shower is drowned out by the blood roaring in my ears.

I roll the chair back and stand on brittle legs. I don't feel my feet on the floor as I creep past Timmy's rumpled bed to the bathroom, the darkness cut by a blade of light from a crack in the door. Steam unfurls into the plane of light. I knock lightly. "Timmy," I say, pushing the door.

The glass shower stall is clouded with condensation, but I can see a dark form on the bottom. Droplets pelt my face as I step into the spray. "Timmy! Wake up!" Water slicks over her dark skin, blood diffused into pink swirls against the white tile. I squat to check her pulse, but her body is cold beneath the sheets of warm water. I stand up, reeling from nausea, and stumble to the counter to throw up. Before I can stop myself, I watch my vomit splatter onto a twisted mess of black matted fur in the sink. *Poe.*

A wild scream is trapped in my chest, but the pressure of it is too great to release. I know I should run, get the phone and call the police, but my body is not responding. My fingers are locked onto the rim of the sink. Snot and saliva drip from my face as I heave over the dead cat. I straighten my body and wipe my mouth with my sleeve. I look up in the mirror. As the fog begins to clear, Devon's leering eyes meet mine.

I whip around. A bloody knife is clenched in his fist. He sneers at me, pleased at the fear in my eyes. "I told you not to ever come here," he says. "It's time to go home, sweetie."

But I won't let him take me this time. My cowardice, my self-hatred is just as responsible for Timmy's death as Devon. I grab his wrist and lunge into him. The hot, stinging pain of the knife cleanses me, and I feel alive for the first time since I broke the manifesto.

I've taken the power away from him, and he knows it. I glare at him with a triumphant smile, wordlessly gloating in his shocked face until blood gurgles into my mouth and a fuzzy lightness takes over. I hear the rough sound of canvas against canvas. The smell of carrion infuses the steam. Feathers brush my face. It's time to take flight.

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

Christa (Wojo) Wojciechowski is the author of The SICK Series and Conviction, which was published in the †3Dark Anthology. Her characters explore existential turmoil, mental illness, taboos, and the complexity of love.

Christa lives in the cloud forests of Panama with her husband and two grouchy old dogs. She works as an internet marketer and loves to help authors build their digital platforms.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

Holding her husband's .38 revolver, Claire Warburton thought that even the foyer in the home of her husband's mistress screamed seduction. What choice did he have when faced with plush tones of violet and evergreen, gold-trimmed vases, and a goddamn water fountain with a smiling Buddha? In the foyer no less! Surely Charles must have noticed the opulence as she led him inside and offered to take his coat. Undoubtedly, she had placed it on the gilded coat stand with a fleur-de-lis design.

The painting on the wall left something to be desired in the class department, an epic, oil portrait of hippopotami thrashing in a raging river! Gaudy and somewhat obscene with its creatures that could seem both docile and terrifying with ease, the artwork took up most of the left wall. While she was disgusted by the wide-open maw of the beasts with their thick, ragged and bizarre teeth, it occurred to her that males might like the edgy, display!

Claire forced her attention back from the testosterone bait of an image to that of the true hunter before her. Using her foot, Claire nudged the door closed behind her and raised her firearm. "You know who I am, don't you?"

The woman said nothing but did nod upon opening the door and finding Claire forcing her way inside, Waverly Shannon had not done more than gasp softly and acquiesce. There was a look of sadness in her dark brown eyes, and perhaps even a tinge of regret, but no fear.

Claire got the impression that she had been expected, and found the whole ordeal slightly humorous. Waverly's reaction was better than sobbing and urination. "Then you can guess why I'm here."

Waverly, with her name straight from 'Yacht and Country Clubville' took a step back and sighed. "You think I'm your adversary? I don't know how you think that but I am assuming that's why you barged into my home."

In no mood for games, Claire grit her teeth. Minutes before, she had seen her husband standing in the threshold, kissing Waverly's candy red lips. The door had been open for the exhibitionist display. His hand on a curved hip. Flashes of a golden-brown thigh. Fingers entwined in springy brown curls. Hell, Waverly still had a flush about her and yet she had the nerve to look nonchalant.

Claire lightly stroked the trigger of the gun in her effort to find calm. "You don't know why?"

Waverly frowned before rolling her eyes. Cool as spring morning wind, she replied. "No, I don't. I made no vow of love to you? I did not betray you."

Claire couldn't contain the eruption of laughter that burst from her lips. That was nearly the same speech that her sister had given her. It's not the other woman's fault. It's Charles'. He's the dog, Tricia had decreed.

Well, he was *her* dog and she would be damned if some other bitch tried to lay a claim.

"I get it," Waverly said as she bent down to pull off one shiny gold stiletto shoe. "Because we are females and he...Charles, being a male—is too ignorant to control his loins. He simply had no choice but to cheat on you, because my powers of seduction were so strong. You were a fool to come here and with a gun no less."

Claire trembled with the urge to pull the trigger. Waverly's insult stung, stoking the coals of the retribution that she needed to dole out, that she had to be *committed* to exacting. The harlot seemed to find humor in the doubts that could have dissipated the situation rather than warning. "No, you're the stupid one, bitch! You weren't blind. Surely you saw the ring on his finger?"

"I did. But I'm not wearing it. He is. Yet you've come to kill me. You're consumed with so much hate, I should have smelled you before you came to my door."

That her rage was an entity unto itself, Claire didn't doubt. How many nights had she waited up for Charles to finish up extra work at the office? Then there were the days that he professed that he needed a shower right after work, as if she couldn't smell perfume from the laundry basket.

He must have thought he was being so clever with his gifts and his praise. You look so beautiful honey, he would tell her even when she was in a ratty t-shirt and covered in rejected baby food. As if she couldn't see the guilt, revealing itself in the shy lights of his eyes. How he could look at her the mother of his children and dare believe that he could have or deserved a secret was beyond infuriating.

"You're damn right I have some hate in me, Whore! You've ruined my life," she blurted out unable to control the first sprouting buds of hot tears from forming at the edges of her vision.

"No. I haven't ruined your life." She rolled her eyes before pulling off her other shoe. Holding the footwear by the heel she waved it about as she continued to speak. "I've actually done you a favor by exposing the nature of the man you obviously think has the self-control of toddler. You could let him know that you're on to his affair. You could hold it against him or not, forgive him...You could use his infidelity to make your marriage stronger. Basically, you could use this event to see if he is sorry, redeemable even. Yet you're looking at me like you want blood."

Claire had played the scenario of confronting her husband's lover over a dozen times with merlot as well as coffee and in none of them did Waverly behave so...nonchalant. The woman seemed more concerned with getting comfortable than concerned with saving her own life. "I can't believe you. I just cannot believe you. What? You think that you're hot shit? You and your fancy nails and hair, your stilettos and your low-cut blouses. Have you no shame? And you're here acting like you're beyond reproach."

"I am most certainly not," Waverly chuckled as if the idea was somehow absurd. "But I'm not your real enemy either."

"But you are," Claire insisted, tears flowing freely. Why Waverly couldn't understand or at least sympathize only fueled Claire's anger and confusion. What she had come to see was a remorseful, woman shamed, not someone willing to stand with

shoulders thrust back and chin held high and defiant. “You— You’re despicable. Charles and I, we have kids together! Did he tell you that? Two boys and a six-month-old goddamned girl!’ How am I supposed to face them? What do I tell them?”

“You’re afraid of raising them alone? Of being alone?” Waverly asked with a strange air of concern upon her wrinkled brow.

Claire wasn’t buying for one second that Waverly gave a damn about her or her children. The whole night’s affair was just Waverly toying around, a play at manipulation. Just as the she-devil had Charles spun up in her web, she tried to do the same with Claire.

“Fuck you” she spat. “I’m not afraid of anything. This just isn’t how it was supposed to be damnit. We had vows and if you think for one moment that I’m giving up on him, then you are sadly mistaken!”

Four inches shorter without her heels, Waverly still stood considerably taller than Claire, with no less a look of condescension. “I’m not upset to hear that. He is a tasty morsel. Worth the fight even. I do understand why you are here, however if I cannot sway you from your intent to kill me, then you really should get on with it.”

Earlier that night Claire had imagined a bullet ripping through Waverly’s left eye, taking out the back of the woman’s head. She had known that she wouldn’t pull the trigger then, the image of bright crimson and dull gray brain matter, too vivid for her to want to see in reality. Despite the word coward echoing in her brain, Claire could not bring herself to act.

“No? Starting to see reason? I’m really not the one who you should directing your anger at, Claire.”

She had made a mistake in coming to Waverly’s home. Every hope of being able to establish an understanding of fear and wariness was dashed. Claire felt stupid for even believing that her plan would have even a measure of success. Lowering the weapon, she told herself that she would stop off at the store, buy a bottle of wine and a lobster to sulk with. Her next tactic would have to be confronting Charles. Deep down she felt that perhaps the conversation with her husband would be far more dangerous than the one with Waverly. Faced with the naked truth of his desire, Claire hoped that she wouldn’t run so quickly for the gun. “...I don’t know how you sleep at night but I suppose it must be like a baby when you have no morals. Stay away from my husband or I will return.” Turning her back to the other woman, Claire started back toward the door, directing the gun back into the maw of her purse where it had come from. She didn’t expect Waverly to try to stop her.

“Okay, I should cut the bullshit. I respect you, Claire. Coming up into *my* house and facing me female to female. Your man is, *was* weak. And you came here to fight for and defend what’s yours, damnit! Try again. Try harder...or I will take him.”

Claire whipped the gun out of her purse and turned. Her right arm was straight and her eye keen for a target. Her firearms instructor would have been so proud with the speed of her draw and the correctness of her form. But no sooner had she drawn on her target, did a slashing pain cross her wrist.

She wanted to scream, tried to generate a sound that seemed stuck swirling around her teeth. As her eyes took in the woman that should have been her target, the fear of what stood before was all it took. Claire felt the power of her fear, vomited forth with paltry sound.

Waverly’s face had split into two halves, square grinding teeth set in three rows went all the way back to her ears which seemed to work as hinges. In a way, the sight reminded her of the hippopotami portrait... only far...far more demented.

In the same moment that Claire’s scream broke free and truly gained volume, it was snuffed out. Waverly, the thing that she was, moved faster than she could blink. The horror of seeing five swaying tentacles where a tongue should be was suppressed by all-encompassing darkness and feeling those tentacles caressing her eyelids as if they wanted the gelatinous prizes within.

Claire wavered on her feet as the hot fetid stench of Waverly’s breath assaulted her nostrils. She prayed she would faint as she felt rows of grinding teeth on the back of her head and pressing between her lips.

There had been truths in Waverly’s words...in her sister’s but they were ones she should have been aware of *before* the confrontation...not during. Waverly had not been her enemy. If she had been human perhaps...then perhaps not was her last thought as Claire heard the loudest crunch she would ever hear in her life. Ever.

#### About the Author:

Mya Lairis began her writing career in 2007, writing paranormal romance and erotica. While she has always shown a love for creatures and their backstories, writing them as villains is something that has only recently occurred. Mya is one of the founding members of Colors in Darkness, a group dedicated to diversity in horror, paranormal and dark fiction. In her free time, she likes to crochet and cuddle with her minions of darkness, a calico named Zoe and an orange tabby named Cougar!

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## **The Balfour Witch | *Tawny Kipphorn***

There stands a house in Autumn Falls  
Where the purest evil lives in the walls  
And if you dare enter the home on Carmine Lane  
She'll destroy your mind and make you insane.

Legend says its grounds are cursed  
By the Balfour Witch to quench her thirst  
For the blood of all who inhabit the place  
From whence she had once fallen from grace.

It was the year of sixteen-seventy-one  
When the dawn of October bestowed a son  
To the Balfour Witch, then called Rosalee  
Filled to the brim with such joy was she.

Until one night came the sound of yelling  
From a voice just outside her little dwelling  
Rosalee caught the scent of a blazing fire  
And through her window saw a man next to a pyre.

"You will burn, witch!" shouted the man "You'll rot in Hell!"  
To escape she tried but down the stairs she fell  
Down her legs pools of vermillion did run  
As she screamed in agony at the loss of her son.

Into her home the man barreled in  
About to commit the ultimate sin  
Dragged her he did by her locks of red  
And threw her onto her fiery bed.

An ungodly shriek rang through the air  
Transfixing all with a bone-chilling scare  
And just as she was believed to be dead  
All became plagued with a sense of dread.

Everyone feared what would be in store  
For the Balfour Witch had risen once more  
As she recited her spell as loud as she could  
The guilty dropped dead right where they stood.

"I curse this land now and forever!  
No one escapes, not now, not ever!"  
As time went on and centuries passed  
Her curse remained forever cast.

The only way to escape her wrath  
Is to follow in her murderous path  
Craving the blood she needs to sustain  
The blood of innocents so she will remain.

But to this coin lies another side  
From a guilty conscience one cannot hide  
For once you commit this violent act  
You kill yourself to fulfill the pact.

The pact in which you've unknowingly made  
With your own life to her you've paid  
Only the brave dare to visit this home  
Whence the Balfour Witch continues to roam.

Here today in modern times  
She's the reason for these crimes  
Forever we mourn the lives she's taken  
As every October the witch awakens.

If you visit these grounds you must beware  
Of the Balfour Witch that lurks in despair  
Hidden within her haven of pain  
The house that sits on Carmine Lane.

### **The Legend of Countess Creep | *Tawny Kipphorn***

Tell you I must the legend of Countess Creep  
Whose spirit invades my mind as I sleep  
It all began with an innocent spell  
Which gave birth to the legend I'm here to tell.

From atop the bloody mountain high  
Which stands beneath the blackened sky  
All have heard the suffering song  
Of the Countess screaming ever-long.

Deep within cold chambers of stone  
Dwells the horrid scarlet crone  
Of whence took place her ghastly swathe  
For in their blood she loved to bathe.

Pools of crimson leak the horrid truth  
From the castle's hellish fountain of youth  
Her sanguinary reign at last its end  
But not before her spell was penned.

That whoever disturbed these very walls  
Shall drown in her victims' bloody falls  
And when I stepped into her castle of hate  
Her spell had sealed my unfortunate fate.

Forever I am trapped within this castle of death  
Until I take my final breath  
For now I just continue to weep  
As I await the return of Countess Creep.

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

Tawny Kipphorn is a Freelance Horror & Speculative Fiction Author. She writes Supernatural and Psychological themed Dark Verse, Short Stories, and Flash Fiction pieces.

Twitter: [@MysticRoses89](https://twitter.com/MysticRoses89)  
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The blazing sun hovered straight ahead. In the blinding glare he almost missed her thumbing a ride at the crossroads. He stomped on the brake. The tires squealed leaving two black streaks on the pavement.

She was just this side of legal; fresh and pink in cut-off denims and a conspicuous red lace bra beneath a barely there pink blouse; twilight sliding into the passenger seat of his rust-crusted silver Chevy Blazer. One long, loose burgundy ringlet, on either side of her sun kissed, freckled cheeks, unfurled, the loose ends caressing her ripe little breasts; succulent peaches like his wife's before three kids sucked all the fun out of them.

It was the Friday following Labor Day. A mass exodus of cottagers and tourists had left the back roads isolated. Once the population in the small sleepy town deflated there were no strangers. So who was this sweet little fawn?

She opened a sparkly, pink clutch and removed a brand new pack of Double Yum; 'Cherry Chuckle' flavor.

"I don't like girls who chew gum," he said.

"I don't like the way you haven't asked my name," she replied while slowly unwrapping the package.

His gaze drifted to watch her slide a small square of gum past her plump, glossy lips. His parched lips parted. She was a dangerous distraction baiting him. The corners of his mouth curled into a sly grin. "So," he said with a glance into the rear view mirror. "What's a tasty little treat like you doing in the middle of nowhere accepting rides from strange men?"

"Are you a strange man?" she asked, playfully twirling one long ringlet around her index finger.

He bit his lower lip and shifted uncomfortably. Sweat formed on his upper lip and forehead. Sunlight glinted on the gold band choking his index finger while he white-knuckled the steering wheel. He wanted to do things; vulgar, deviant things to this gift given on a beam of sunlight. Just ahead, to the left, he glimpsed the dirt road that would lead him home.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"Where you headed?" she asked.

He sucked in his breath, inhaling the thick fruity aroma wafting throughout the interior of his truck, salivating with an urge to taste the inside of her scrumptious mouth. "I was thinking of going for a swim," he said.

"Sounds good," she said.

They blasted past the dirt road. He let out a beastly yowl, turned up the radio, and tapped his massive, calloused hands in time with the song's bouncy rhythm, bellowing along, exaggerating the singer's lilting twang. Dense hardwood forest quickly scrolled past on either side. The occasional mailbox indicated a home concealed by the towering trees' thick green foliage. Two sad songs, a weather update, and three commercials later he turned onto a scarred stretch of ground. The truck bounced and swayed as he navigated the pocked and rutted terrain until finally they arrived at a clearing, and just ahead, a small, isolated lake.

He turned off the engine, turned to face her and flashed a salacious smile. She met his gaze, blew a bubble the size of his fist then sucked it back in.

\*\*\*

Pink and purple dawn reflected in the rippling lake; a gentle breeze tickled leaves and grass. Clothing shed in haste, haphazardly strewn, dangled from tree limbs and draped prickly shrubs. A raven cawed as it fluttered to the ground near a pallid, severed arm. Torn and striated limbs littered the clearing. A decapitated head lay in the tall grass beneath an old oak, eyes wide and frozen in a vacant stare, mouth agape revealing a wad of pink bubble gum.

\*\*\*

The blazing sun hovered straight ahead. In the blinding glare he almost missed her thumbing a ride. He stomped on the brake, spraying gravel and a dirt cloud, sliding to a stop.

She was just this side of legal; fresh and pink in cut-off denims and a conspicuous red lace bra beneath a barely there pink blouse; twilight sliding into the red, leather passenger seat of his silver Mercedes...

#### About the Author:

Terri Ross writes fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in 'The Broken City', 'Trembling With Fear' and 'Paragraph Planet'. Terri resides in Haliburton, Ontario, Canada with her husband Bill and their 150 pound cane corso, Mojo.

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# Mental Ward

**STORIES FROM THE ASYLUM**



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The stars wink at me, shining eyes in a midnight blanket, but with no mouth to smile, or ears to hear my cry: I can't get out. I seep into the earth, like the river when it wells with tears on a blistering summer day, as if it misses the birds that played on its shores and the young deer that kissed its reflective cheek. They are gone, and none to hear my cry, "I can't get out." I am her river now, and she drinks without a mouth. Where are her ears to hear my wail, "I can't get out?"

My breathing tomb has a lid of dried flesh, a case of bones, and a lining of rotten tendons. No silks, no padding, no pillows, no eternal dark underneath the ground; yet the worms have settled in my clouded eyes, and my dripping tongue can taste the dead. Their mothers buzz in my ears, kiss my papery cheeks, and leave their children to comfort me with slimy armless arms, eyeless eyes, but no ears to hear my cry, "I can't get out."

Others roam, wander, wailing the eternal mantra, "I can't get out, I can't get out!" We search for those who can free us, who can hear, who can *do*. Sometimes I wait and watch. Someone will come.

When the angry sky shrieks and its frigid breath freezes my stiff breast, I smell warm bread birthing from a brick womb of fire and wood. Someone is here. Hope and dread spring to the dead vestiges of my heart. I limp out into the icy shrapnel careening from the shredded clouds. It tears the thin shreds of paper-skin from my bones, like the curved cat claws that dug into my flesh when I stole her tiny kitten from the burrow beneath the porch.

Lallycat, with her wiggling orange stripes, yellow eyes, and whiskers fringing her tiny mouth, had ever stayed on my heels. I was the mother I stole her from. The claw marks were my deed of ownership, my badge of honor. Lallycat's mother should have been grateful. A massive tom had feasted on her children like hors d'oeuvres, or the most delicate and saltiest of caviars.

Now Lallycat lives inside me. The sharp dry mass of her tail still coils in a corner of my stomach. Lallycat never wanted to leave me, even after rotting black teeth sank into my once tender flesh like ink into goatskin paper. She remains, no matter how many others force their way out of my rickety throat and leave me behind.

I stagger inside the bakery. The oven's golden brown child sits on the counter. Its soul dances over its smooth skin. Its breath is hot, its flesh is soft, but nothing rushes through throbbing veins and beating heart. I wait at a dusty table for my fleshy meal of pulsing heart and stuffed bones.

The father comes. Breath expands pink lungs; steaming blood pouring through slick veins, like the cars that raced on rainy streets in the midnight light of yellow street lamps and rosy brake lights. Their bright eyes streamed down the mirror road and into the night. Waves of gilded water washed their tracks, and I could not follow.

I leap to my crooked feet. My exposed bones ripping across the dirty tiles, I lunge for that relentless heartbeat. My fingers slip through the tender flesh. Rivers of roses stream from his gurgling throat, splash my parched tongue and wash my yellowed eyes. He bats at my decomposing face, tears the wriggling flesh from my cheek. I have to get him inside me, where souls meet heart to heart. Little does he realize that once inside, his heart will make mine beat again. His soul will wrap its hand around my trapped spirit and pull it free.

Empty the marrow, drain the blood, chew the flesh, suck clean the eyes; I am two becoming one. Life flows into the chasm of my being like cold water dropping into an empty gut. It mixes with the parchment lining of my stomach where lives are written, lives are lost, and lives have escaped. Hope stirs for the thousandth time, the millionth time, the first time. The soul to set me free stares into my eyes. Clouds cover them, and then they shrivel into the misshapen dead. Only silence screams from the open mouth.

I know he is inside me. Now he will free me. I sit. I wait.

My stomach twists and turns, my throat constricts. His soul is forcing escape, and he won't take me with him. I double over in pain. He claws up my throat like a desperate animal trapped in a cage, planted over a mound of the big red ants that used to tunnel from one yard to another, until the neighborhood was connected like the bonds of invisible love. This walking coffin hasn't enough restraints to keep him in. He gushes from my mouth. Blood, flesh, and bone spatter the floor. His steaming soul takes flight with swirling wings, and then he is gone.

I can't get out.

Black globs fill my vision and transport me to the bookstore, the grocery store, the pet store where baby animals no longer leap with excitement when I come in. The yips of puppies, the mewls of kittens, and the chirping of birds echo in the store's memory.

Sometimes my mouth is smeared with new souls. Sometimes I am releasing them with heaving jerks in my abdomen. All the souls glide away, and no matter how I reach, no matter if I seize them, they slip through my fingers.

"I can't get out," I rasp after them. "Take me with you!" None ever answer.

Now I'm in the shopping center, where the clothes lie untouched. Here I had bought a pink blouse, a white skirt, and shining high heels. This was where I had gone to the make-up counter, the hair salon, and the food court to show off my beauty. Here my pink blouse smeared with blood. Here my flesh liquefied and seeped into my skirt, filling my shining shoes

with gleaming mucus. No make-up can cover this corpse's face, no hair stylist can save the residual locks of jetty hair. I can count on my remaining fingers how many I have left.

Memories fade in and out like the yellow paint on a cracking road. Faces full of life chortle, mouths smile without words, eyes gleam without blood. The floor clears of dead leaves, broken sticks, and jutting trees. A song echoes from the recesses of memory. Warm lips press against mine, strong arms circle me about, and then they lift like the baker's slippery soul. The trees, sticks, and leaves return. Only they can hear me weep, "I can't get out."

I run my pointed jerky-like fingers over the glass check-out counter. It smears with blood and brown juices. Sunlight glints on them like gold, as if I'm not completely trapped, as if I can stop my incessant wail, "I can't get out!"

The tinkle of glass calls to my shriveled ears. As I turn with a wheezing gasp, a bit of bone rips through my knee. It's white, pure and uncontaminated as virgin snow. Under heavy-laden trees, through plump white bushes, across the smooth expanse of meadow, my boots had cut trails of adventure.

"Walking tomb, walking corpse," calls the tinkling glass, "walking coffin, here is life, here is the soul who will set you free. No longer be like the turtle that carries its shell everywhere it goes."

I limp through the dead clothes, the smeared glass counter, the scattered make-ups in their dead casings. Their souls still gleam through clear plastic eyes, pink, blue, green, gold, silver, and white. They can't get out. I won't let them out. They have to stay this time, and I can leave.

I hurry towards the glass. I push through the green plastic foliage of a bush in the middle of the mall. It's smattered with grime and dust, stuck and immobile as me. A man and woman start. Their blood races, their hearts pump, and I see the volatile souls gleaming like glittering fish in their wide liquid orbs. Two souls to set me free. My stomach groans and I charge with outstretched hands.

The man points a gun with two long barrels, gaping as wide as the cave where I had seen the strange child run, the child with rotting teeth and poison saliva, the child that inked into my flesh the sign of the coffin walker.

"Kelly," the woman cries, holding up her hands, "Kelly!" Silver petals from a ravaged flower dribble from her dark eyes and down her gaunt cheeks. The soul is already trying to escape. I must pull it inside me before it all gets away.

"It isn't her anymore, Tanya," the man shouts.

For a moment, his voice stops me. His face used to be youthful, carefree, smiling. Now it's lined, hard, and full of sorrow. A phantom puts strong arms around me, presses my shriveled lips. The phantom laughs, runs, waves at me from a car door when the autumn leaves sprinkle from an invisible treasure chest in the sky. Then it fades. My stomach growls, my mouth contorts into a grin, and I charge.

Tanya presses her hands to her face and screams. I'm no more than five feet away when the barrels explode in a shower of yellow and red fireworks. It kicks me in the face and I fly back. Dried limbs clack to the floor, bones crush to powder, like the flour I used to make bread with on summer days, cooking in the kitchen with my mother.

I can't see, I can't smell, but I can hear the woman's wails. Her slender fingers touch what's left of my mummified skull.

"Rest in peace, Kelly."

They bind me in a blanket. I struggle to move, to speak, but nothing will work. There is digging, dirt dropping, metal spades slicing untouched ground. Strong arms circle around me and the man whispers, "I love you, Kelly." Meaningless sounds, because he won't let me devour him. Meaningless sounds because he won't let me devour the woman. Meaningless sounds because these entities with the fish waving in their eyes have become like the globs that transport me from one place to another.

He lays me in the cold ground. Heavy slabs of dead dirt hit my stomach and head. This is a coffin within a coffin, always alive, but never living. Beneath the ground in the eternal dark, there are no eyes to see and no ears to hear the cry of my lipless mouth: "I can't get out."

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

Julia Benally is a wild Apache lurking in the cold part of Arizona. Besides writing and killing zombies, she enjoys playing the piano, adores dancing, loves to sing, hunt, and fish. She's thrilled to announce that her first book "Pariahs" is out and about. It's a dark fantasy full of monsters and high adventure.

Blog: <http://sparrowincarnate.blogspot.com/>

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I looked at the water stained, paneled walls and suddenly realized that I was in the bedroom of my camper, *How the hell did I get here?* I thought.

The room began to spin around violently. I squinted and tried to focus in the half-light that was either morning or evening, I couldn't tell. My naked body shivered and I rested my head on my knees until the vertigo stopped.

Flash memories of being in the apple orchard played in my mind and my stomach clenched. I leapt from the bed and darted out the door. I barely made it to the deck railing before I heaved hard enough to break the blood vessels in my eyes.

Thick, black slime splattered on the grass and the inside of my mouth burned like fire. I wiped the back of my hand across my lips and smeared a black streak across my shaking fingers. I clung to the rail for support, but my knees gave out. I dropped onto the cold wooden boards and curled into a fetal position. I shivered as a gust of freezing wind picked up and scattered dead leaves across the empty porch. The property was silent, as if it had gone dormant with the trees when autumn arrived.

I gathered my strength, pulled myself up, and went back inside to look for my clothes. My closet was empty, but Jacob's closet had a spare set of clothes he left there for emergencies.

I slipped into the camouflage fleece pants and heavy sweatshirt, thankful to be covered. I found a pair of old boots in the back corner and slid my frozen feet inside them.

A sudden, intense thirst came over me. I hurried to the refrigerator and found the door hanging by a broken hinge and its shelves bare. I vaguely remembered emptying the contents into a box when we left, but I couldn't recall what they were, or where I had taken them.

A gust of wind blew through the camper and caused the front door, which we'd kept padlocked from the outside, to blow open. I leaned out the door and noticed the padlock hasp missing and the metal peeled back as if someone or something had ripped it off.

Outside, all the sheds were pad-locked. I remembered seeing a set of keys somewhere but I couldn't remember where. The thirst became too strong to bear. I ran to the rain barrel next to the garden shed and twisted the handle. It snapped off as if I'd smacked it with a hammer. I tossed the broken handle aside, scooped the water into my hands and drank until I choked.

My head was pounding and my body ached all over, *I'm so sick, I just want to go home*, I thought, though I couldn't remember where home was, or exactly what it looked like. Alone and confused, I sat on the cold ground and cried. My eyes stung and burned as black ink flowed from them, *"God, what is going on!"* I screamed. I expected birds to take flight, or a wind to pick up, but there was only silence.

It took all I had to get myself off the ground, but finally I stood up and walked around the property looking for signs that anyone was there, or had been there recently. There was no trace of anyone recent, just a set of tire tracks leading out to the road. Freezing and light headed, I went back to the camper and crawled back into my bed. *Jacob has to be looking for me*, I thought. I was sure I heard the faint voices of men talking outside but I didn't have the energy to get up. I drifted off.

Sometime later, an engine idling outside startled me awake. I sat up and bile rose in my throat so suddenly I barely made it to the door before the black ink spewed out of me. I choked and fought for air as I barreled out the door. I tripped over the threshold and sprawled onto the deck, gasping for air as the black ink poured from my mouth and nose.

After what felt like hours, the vomiting stopped. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes. My stomach and mouth were burning like fire. Above my head, a gun cocked. My eyes shot open and bile again rose in my throat. Jacob stood over me, his pistol pointed at my face with a look of pure horror in his eyes.

"Jacob, what are you doing? I'm so sick, where have you been?" I pleaded, but his face never changed.

"Shut up." he said through gritted teeth.

"Jacob, it's me, Sharon!"

His face went from horrified to angry, he gripped the pistol tighter, "Shut the fuck up," he screamed.

I sat up and scooted into the corner still choking on the ink, "Please, Jacob, I'm sick."

He glared at me with a mixture of hatred and horror in his eyes. There was a man standing at the bottom of the porch steps, I couldn't see him around Jacob's legs, but when he spoke, I recognized his voice.

"My god, it just looks like her," he said.

"It looks like a dying monster version of her," Jacob said.

I leaned around Jacob so I could see him, "Lenny, what are you talking about?" I asked.

"Don't you fucking say my name!" he yelled and started up the stairs.

Jacob blocked him, "We don't know for sure what to do, we need help," he said.

"I know this thing killed three people in the last month, and I want it dead," Lenny growled.

"So do I, but we can't chance it," Jacob said.

My head began to throb and suddenly two of my teeth let loose. I spit the teeth into my hand and raised them to Jacob, "I'm dying," I cried.

He raised the pistol to my face, "Shut up."

Lenny ran to his truck and jumped into the drivers' seat, "I know who can help," he said and sped off leaving a trail of dust.

The tears stung like acid streaking down my face, but I didn't care. I was confused and scared. I scooted as far away from Jacob as I could and pressed my back against the cold metal of the camper. I put my head down and wept, "*I just want to go home.*"

My own voice sounded unfamiliar to me, it was low and gravely as if I'd lost it somewhere in the abyss. Everything I'd ever known was becoming a black spot in my memory, as if someone was erasing me with every minute that passed. I felt myself dying, my body becoming weak and shutting down as the seconds ticked by. I wiped my tears and looked at the black streaks on my hands. The veins in my wrists ran black as night under my skin.

"Jacob?" a soft, female voice called from the other side of the camper and a wave of hope washed over me. I couldn't explain it, but her voice soothed the suffering I was facing.

"Sharon, stay there," Jacob said.

"I want to see." The woman said.

She stood at the bottom of the steps, the sight of her brought about a sense of healing deep within me. I looked closely at her, this lovely woman with auburn hair all tied up in a messy bun and loose curls around her porcelain face. She looked into my eyes and in that moment, I remembered why I chose her.

Still trying to keep up the charade, I pushed myself deeper into the corner like a scared rat, "Who is that, why does she look like me?" I asked.

Jacob just glared at me, but the longer she stood there the stronger my own instincts and memories grew. I needed her if I wanted to live, and all I had to do was get her to take my hand, willingly.

Pretending to be terrified, I looked at Jacob, "What's going on! Who is that?" I sobbed.

Jacob glared down at me, "Shut up," he growled.

I locked eyes with Sharon and held her gaze long enough to plant images of a beautiful angel in her mind. Jacob tried to pull her away and to my luck, she protested and came a little closer.

"I know you're scared," she said.

"How?" I asked her as fake acid tears fell down my face.

She tried to come up the stairs but Jacob blocked her, "I think we're somehow connected," she said.

My head pounded, every thought was a razor blade behind my eyes.

I had her in the woods that day, we were halfway through the transition when a gunshot startled us both and she ran away. Since then I've been stuck somewhere in between, half Dopple and half Human, while the double I'd created of her body decayed from the inside. The other people I'd stumbled across in the woods just wouldn't do, I was already too close to becoming Sharon, and now is my chance to finish our transition. I looked at her, knowing she saw nothing but a beautiful creature, and I laid it on thick.

"I saw you in the orchard. I'd never been that close to a human before, I was curious. I hid and watched you for a while, but I wanted a closer look. I must have made a noise because you looked right at me. A flash of light came between us and I ran into the forest. I was running away as fast as I could, but something changed, I could suddenly feel the sticks and leaves beneath my feet, and the cold wind on the human body I'd turned in to."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know," Sharon said.

"What did you do to me? I want to go home, into the light," I sobbed.

When she looked at me the sympathy in her eyes was bittersweet and I knew I had her. I hid the smile on my face, "Sharon, do *you* remember what happened in the woods?" I asked.

Jacob must have sensed the malice in my voice because he glared at me with such intense hatred in his eyes, I was sure he was going to pull the trigger.

Sharon took a deep breath, "I was by the apple tree. I heard something, when I looked up...", she trailed off, lost in thought.

"What did you see, Sharon?" Jacob said.

Her face paled and she looked up at me with tears welling in her eyes.

"I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I couldn't have seen what I thought I did," she whispered.

Jacob was growing impatient, "Sharon, what did you see?" he asked.

She slowly looked up at him, tears spilled from her eyes, "An angel, an angel with white wings surrounded by a golden light," she said.

I crawled toward her, "Yes Sharon, I'm an angel from heaven, take my hand."

Jacob kicked me in the head and I sprawled on my backside across the deck, "Angels don't bleed black, this thing is fucking with you," he said.

Sharon tried to reach for me, but Jacob grabbed her arm and pushed it back down.

"Jacob, this is an angel and I've hurt it." Sharon sobbed.

"This thing is not an angel, look at it!" he shouted at her.

Lenny's truck bounced down the gravel road, barreled through the grass, and slid to a stop next to the porch. An old woman with long white hair sat stone faced in the passenger seat. Lenny helped her out of the truck and she hobbled to the bottom of the stairs, using a cane to steady herself.

The old woman glared at me and spat, "You're an abomination," she growled.

"You're too late this time, Nonny," I said.

My stomach knotted and turned, this hag, Nonny, had killed many of my kind, but she wouldn't win this time, I was so close, I just had to touch Sharon's hand.

I crawled to the edge of the porch and vomited more black ink, "Please help me, Sharon." The old woman looked at Jacob, "Your wife has to kill it or it will take her real body, permanently."

Sharon sprang toward me, "I can't kill an angel!" She shouted.

Jacob grabbed her with his right arm and turned her toward him, keeping the pistol steadied on me with his left.

A smile crossed my lips, I spat the black ink at the old woman's feet and Jacob raised his gun to my face. If Sharon got close enough for me to touch, she'd be mine, forever.

Blue light emanated from Nonny's hands, she climbed the stairs and placed them on Sharon's face, "See this creature with your own eyes," she said.

I lunged at the hag, "NO!" I growled.

Jacob flinched, he was going to fire and Lenny knew it. In a split second decision, he dove for the gun and pushed on the barrel just as Jacob pulled the trigger. Sharon dropped to her knees and held her stomach as blood poured from the bullet wound.

I scrambled towards her, "No you idiots! You've killed us both," I screamed.

Lenny's boot landed on my forehead, knocking me back into the corner of the porch.

I locked eyes with Sharon, she was bleeding out and I was getting weak. My connection was gone; Nonny had shown her my true form. The hag had won.

Sharon picked up the gun, "Jacob, help me," she said.

Jacob pulled her to her feet and stood behind her, helping her steady the weapon.

I pushed myself backwards into the porch rail, "NO!"

Sharon pulled the trigger.

\*\*\*

Two months later.

Jacob signed the paper that he'd stretched across the hood of Lenny's truck, "That's it," he said. Lenny folded the contract and put it in his shirt pocket, "We both did the right thing by giving these properties back to the tribal council, this damn land is cursed." he said.

"I hope they keep it this time," Jacob said.

"I think they've learned their lesson, they'll never sell it again."

Jacob extended his hand, "Thank you, for everything."

Lenny shook his hand, "Give Sharon my love," he said.

The two men held eye contact for a moment, both knowing they'd probably never see each other again. With a nod, Jacob got in his truck and drove away for the last time.

When he got to the blacktop road he picked up his cell phone and dialed Sharon's number, "It's done, I'll be home in a few hours," he said.

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

Jamie R Wargo has previously published stories in issue 27 and 50 of Sanitarium Magazine. She has a full time career in financing and currently resides in North East Ohio with her husband and son. She has a deep appreciation for the outdoors and many of her stories take place in, or around the woods of Southern Ohio.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

## Big Brother | C.A. Viruet

Autria rested her hands on her round belly as she surveyed the back yard from the kitchen window. A foot pushed against her hand and she smiled, unaware.

In the yard her oldest son was walking around with a shoebox. Walter walked on his knees, inspecting the ground with his little four-year-old face scrunched up, taking it all very seriously. Autria watched as he picked up something and put it in the box. She had seen him earlier, digging up worms. This looked too big, even from far away, to be a worm.

The compost pile was a serious project for Walter. Autria just wanted a garden of fresh vegetables; she did not expect Walter to take such a shine to the barrel that helped them create compost. It was Walter's greatest joy in life to put things in the barrel. His father bought him a book about composting; Autria never imagined there would be a book for children about composting. There was, and Walter loved it. His father told him all about the process of decomposition with the help of the Internet. Autria yelled at her husband for showing their son pictures of dead and decomposing animals. Walter said, "Mommy, its science!" She relented. He was a little scientist.

Autria watched as Walter stood up and wiped his filthy hands on his equally filthy little cargo shorts and white polo shirt. Why did she buy anything white? He looked very smart this morning, but scientists are messy.

Walter walked confidently to the sliding glass door, singing to himself, clearly very happy with his bounty. Autria felt warmth spread through her. Happy children sing. A little foot pushed against her hand.

"What have you got there, big brother?" Autria knew her job was to listen to him tell her whatever his little brain had to say about how this box of dirt and worms would help the garden. It was always a mix of things learned from his book and his father, and blanks filled in with imagination.

"It's food." Walter smiled.

"Yes it is, for the plants, and I saw worms to help eat it all in the composter. How many worms did you find?" He always had a number, if she divided by ten it would be close enough to true.

"No Mommy, it's all food, it's all food for Levi." A little foot kicked inside her.

Autria chuckled. "Sweetie, your little brother won't be eating as soon as he's born, and he sure won't be eating whatever you dug out of the yard." Autria sniffed. "What is that smell? Did you pick up some dog poop by accident?"

Walter smiled, "No! Levi doesn't eat poop!" Walter laughed and walked to the coffee table where he set down the little shoebox. Autria picked up the nearest rag, ready for a potential mess.

"Mommy, Levi eats all the time, when you're asleep."

Autria thought about this for a moment, what could that possibly mean?

Walter opened the box, "I'll show you, he's hungry now, and it's too late for you anyway."

Autria took a half step back, this was something dark. She gave a weak nod and sat on the couch across from Walter, the open shoebox between them.

The box was full of the usual, worms, dead leaves, crab apples, half eaten and dying vegetables from the garden. Walter dug his hand in and pulled out a dead baby bird.

"Oh, no, honey..."

She wanted to tell him to put it down, but couldn't speak. Walter brought the dead baby bird to her stomach, it's black feathers slick like it had been in a dog's mouth and spat out. Her belly button opened wide and the knot of flesh lurched forward and grabbed the carcass. She saw her own flesh, form lips and pull the dead bird into her, into the hole that used to be her outie belly button. She felt pressure as the lump in her stomach rose and vanished. The bird was gone and she suddenly felt very full.

"See? I told you he was hungry. I'll feed you again later baby!"

Walter was all smiles as he headed to the sink to wash his hands.

## About the Author:

C.A. Viruet writes as much as she can, but horror is her favorite genre to write. She has been published in several anthologies, you can find the list at her Amazon author page. You can also find her on Facebook as well as Instagram.

Amazon Author Page: [C.A. Viruet](#)

Facebook: [C.A. Viruet](#)

On Andy Waterson's wedding night, his father gave a speech to the guests in the rented hall.

"Women play games with you, son. Always let them win. They'll be happier."

Wedding guests laughed as they raised their glasses.

Andy tugged at the neck of his shirt. *Here we go again. Another one of dad's stories. He must be the one I get my imagination from.*

"I had one time where I didn't let a girl win a game, Andy. The night has haunted me my entire life."

Andy's wife Madison squirmed in her chair as she pushed a piece of blonde hair behind her bridal tiara. A morbid heaviness hung in the air. It didn't stop Andy's father from continuing. "I met a girl who was immortal."

Guests glanced at one another with raised eyebrows.

"She had dark eyes you could get lost in. Red hair to the middle of her back. She could talk about anything. Every era. But not like a scholar, like she lived through it. I went back to her place after drinks at the bar. I knew I shouldn't go there, Andy. I knew something was wrong. But you know what it's like, don't you? You've got your curiosity from me. It's why you married Madison after knowing her for only four months."

Madison frowned as Andy tried to hold her hand. *How the hell am I going to make this up to her?*

His father took a swig of champagne. "Anyway, she looked at me like she was looking through me. Like she wanted to devour me. But not for sex. She got real mad when I told her to slow down. She pushed me against the wall. Her hand wrapped around my neck. I couldn't move."

Heat flushed across his face. *Finish the story, Dad.*

"Asked me to beg for my life. Please. Please. Please. I must have said it a million times until the words made no sense. She stared into my eyes and said, 'I like to play before I eat. Tell me you want to play.'"

Chicken dinner gurgled in Andy's stomach. *I should tell him to shut up. I should yank the microphone cord out of the speaker.*

"I wouldn't say it back to her. Something inside of me told me to run. Adrenaline, I guess. I told her I needed to use the restroom and afterward we could play whatever she wanted. She let go. I went inside the bathroom and I thought I heard her outside, scratching at the door. I climbed out the window. Fell two stories. Sprained my ankle. I could hear laughter behind me as I half hobbled, half ran. It sounded like two people laughing, not one."

The room fell silent as it does when drunk men babble on too long. Madison glared at her silverware as Andy sunk further into his seat.

His father raised his glass. "To immortal love that lasts forever."

Guests clapped but nothing could cut through the tension in the room. Not the cutting of the cake. Not the DJ playing music.

*It's wedding jitters.* Andy gazed at his new wife. Something sinister tugged at him that he couldn't get rid of.

Unease followed Andy and Madison home. It seeped into the walls of their old Victorian fixer-upper. It sunk down to the house's downstairs apartment. It clung to the apartment's tenants too. Madison's best friend Zoe, and her husband Reggie. Zoe and Reggie argued every night, their voices bouncing through the floors. Andy could sleep through the yelling below him. He couldn't sleep through the painful groaning of an adult man.

It wasn't a sex groan. It was pain. Sloppy and sputtering pain. Gurgles and gagging. Retching and choking.

"Madison," he shook his wife's shoulder. She stayed still.

Another garbled whimper. He climbed out of bed and pressed his ear to the floor.

"Please. Please. Please." The voice warbled like a warped record on repeat.

"I don't want to play anymore. Just kill me. Please. Please. Please."

Andy pulled his head away from the floor.

His father's words from the wedding toast.

Below him, someone choked and sputtered. Andy tapped Madison's shoulder again.

"What?" she slapped his hand away.

"I heard something downstairs."

"It's Zoe and Reggie."

"It's not Reggie. He's away this weekend. It's something else. I..."

Madison pushed off the covers. "Fine. I'll go down there and tell her to knock it off. You only care about work, anyway."

"I'm the one who pays the bills. The electric bill has tripled since your friends moved in. Zoe keeps the lights on all night...for her guests."

Madison walked to the window and peered out over the driveway.

"Andy, Reggie's truck is here."

"He's not supposed to be back until tomorrow. Someone else is there."

"He probably got home early." Madison climbed back into bed.

"I heard a guy say please, please, please. It wasn't Reggie's voice. Zoe made him say it. I know those words. It's my father's wedding speech..."

"Andy, your father is an alcoholic sex addict who had a dozen affairs. He ruined the reception with his stupid story. You didn't even ask him to stop talking. You sat there like a statue. Didn't even stick up for me, your wife. And now you're coming up with stupid stories about my best friend. Saying that she's bringing in men while Reggie is away. You're ridiculous, Andy. I know you don't like my friends. You're mad I asked you to let them move into the downstairs apartment."

"It's not that. Something bad is going on down there. I can feel it."

Madison scratched at a thread on her pillow. "You are hearing things because you're tired. You're tired because you are a workaholic. You're taking it out on my friends. Maybe you heard arguing?"

"That's not what I heard down there, what I heard was..."

A lecherous scream of ecstasy interrupted him.

Madison's giggle sounded like a cackle. "They don't just argue. I guess they make up too. Are you scared we'll end up like them? Arguing all the time?"

"No..." he trailed off, unable to look at her.

She reached out for his hand and his anxiety lessened. "I know we've only been together for four months. I thought we could help them out. I'm sorry, Andy. Go down there and tell them you have to sleep. Zoe never listens to me."

Andy looked into his wife's eyes.

"Besides, didn't your dad say you should always let women win?"

He leaned forward and kissed her. She was right.

He took the steps down to the kitchen and rushed out the back door into the dark night.

As he stepped onto the grass, Andy's foot scraped against the edge of a piece of aluminum siding. Reggie had collected mountains of it to make extra money, but it never moved from the yard. Andy clenched his fist as his foot throbbed. *It was his yard, it wasn't a junkyard.* He'd tell him to clean it up after he told them to be quiet. He'd tell them about the electricity bill too.

Before Andy could knock, the door swung open. Zoe leaned against the door frame. Stringy pieces of red hair framed her face. Denim cut-offs and a halter top hugged her body.

"I can't sleep. I...could you...keep it down?"

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Andy. I was watching a scary movie. I must have had the volume on high again."

"Oh," Andy laughed uncomfortably. *A scary movie. It made sense.*

"I don't like scary movies," he trailed off as he stared past her into the living room. Garish red paint covered the wallpaper. Light blocking fabric covered the windows. Fast food wrappers carpeted the floor. Car parts spilled out the closet. A clump of oily hair clung to the baseboard by the couch.

"Hey, we had an agreement you guys would keep this place clean, and not alter it. In case I need to rent it out again," Andy grimaced at a dark stain on the floor.

"I love scary movies," Zoe sat down on the couch. A zombie horde rushed after a little girl on a bicycle.

Andy stepped inside.

"Where's Reggie?" Screams vibrated from the television's speakers. Zombies tore the little girl apart. Andy shuffled backward, slipping on a discarded hubcap. He steadied himself by grabbing onto the doorway. Grease coated his palm and fingers. It smelled like rotten meat and cheap perfume. His stomach heaved.

"In his truck," Zoe bathed in blue television light. Zombies munched on the little girls' limbs. Andy rushed to the kitchen, desperate to get the foul-smelling gunk off his fingers. He glanced outside at Reggie's truck in the driveway. The cab was empty except for a single pine tree air freshener. Andy's throat tightened.

"The kitchen sink's broken, you'll have to use the bathroom."

"It's broken? Why didn't you tell me?"

Bicycle frames without wheels leaned against the hallway walls.

Andy inched open the bathroom door as he climbed over a pile of men's shoes to get inside. A heavy cloud of decay engulfed him. His eyes watered as he noticed black smudges on the walls. *Four months. They've been here four months and this is what they've done to my house. How much are they going to cost me?*

Various scented candles burned on the toilet tank lid. Ocean breeze, vanilla cupcake, and lavender fields. The sickeningly sweet smells combined with the odor of human waste and rotten food.

Andy grabbed the trash can as his stomach surged. Caked in layers of grime were dozens of discarded rectangular pieces of plastic. He reached inside and grabbed one. Identification cards. Each ID was a young man, in his twenties or thirties.

He clutched the edge of the sink as the room spun.

Andy turned on the water. It wouldn't drain.

"What the hell?" he pulled out a clump of hair. Crushed flesh dangled from the strand. It slipped from his fingers back into the water with a loud plop.

Andy heard his father's speech again. 'Climb out the window and run.'

Putrid air enveloped him as his hands fumbled with the blackout curtains. Something was outside the bathroom door.

He yanked the cloth, expecting to see moonlight. Masses of nails protruded from a piece of Reggie's scrap metal. *No. This can't be happening.*

The scratch at the door startled him. A small laugh followed. Another laugh. A different laugh. Madison's signature cackle.

"Please, please, please," Andy choked.

There was no adrenaline rush, only his father's words playing in his head like a record stuck on a scratch.

'Women will play with games with you, son. Always let them win. They'll be happier.'

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

Jessica Shannon is currently working on her debut novel that takes place in a dead mall. Her work has appeared in *Black Candies: The Eighties* and *Trembling with Fear*.

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#### **Ferryman | Maura Yzmore**

I keep seeking a place, a time, where someone — anyone — knows how to cure you, my love.

Each wormhole I travel reminds me of Styx, the river that separates the dead from the living. To cross, I must pay, but the Ferryman won't take coins.

I've lost an ear. Most teeth. Gallbladder. Spleen. Half of my fingers and half of my toes. Testicles. Kidney. Almost all hope.

Then I lost an eye and finally saw there's even less left of you than there is of me.

It's time to cross the real Styx, my love. I have some coins for the Ferryman.

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

Maura Yzmore is a Midwest-based writer of short fiction. Her stories have appeared in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *The Arcanist: Ghost Stories*, *Coffin Bell*, *Asymmetry*, and elsewhere.

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# BELLOWS OF THE BONE BOX



*A Steampunk Anthology*

edited by Gloria Bobrowicz

Available on Amazon, Smashwords, & CreateSpace

Tess sat at the bar of the luxurious lakefront lodge. She considered ordering a drink, remembered all her meds and ordered anyway. Sipping her rum and Coke, she waited and watched. The ice boats whipping across the seemingly endless expanse of Taylorville Memorial Lake held her attention for only a moment. The people all around her weren't talking and laughing like the old days, no, they all sat side by side tapping on machines. She knew they were small computers, phones and games, and she sighed. *Such a strange world.*

"Tess, Tessie is that you?"

She looked up and saw three men standing by her table, two of them well into their senior years, the other in his mid-fifties. She forced a sad smile because she hadn't smiled like she meant it in half a century. "Yes, come sit."

They talked and she ordered another drink. Her head was buzzing and she wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or the fact that she hadn't taken a pill since she got out of the asylum two days ago.

"I'm glad you found me, Mr. Glover," she said. "Somehow I had hoped for more of us."

Mr. Glover nodded his bald head, "There were, but most have died over 50 years. All in all, about 40 people survived originally, but there were lots of suicides. Oops, sorry."

Tess nodded and ordered another drink. "I was institutionalized, never tried to kill myself, guess I just wasn't that crazy. I only hear voices and constantly suffer from depression."

The younger man said, "Look, I was just two when the dam broke but my family is down there. The sun will set soon, why don't we go and pay our respects now."

"Sure, Bobby, good idea. Time to bundle up and go," the third man said. "I haven't been back in two decades. It hurts to remember the town the way it was."

Tess thought about the town, down under the water, buried for all time as well as everyone with it. When the dam burst, she'd been one of the few swept away who somehow survived. She never understood why she lived, or why Jim and the baby had died in their sleep.

But she knew they didn't sleep now, because they called to her all the time. Without her medications, she'd have gone completely mad. Listening to five decades of a baby crying for her mother. It would drive anyone crazy.

Tess rose, put on her parka and the four of them went out onto the blue ice that stretched to the horizon, fading into the blinding rays of the setting winter sun.

She shivered and looked back at a foreign landscape. This had once been miles of forest with Taylorville in the center. Now it was a lake, and a resort. Probably more people lived around here for work than had lived in the town buried under water. Funny how life goes on and people benefit from tragedy.

"I'd love to drain this sucker and set things right," Mr. Glover muttered. "Shameful no one ever got buried, town cemetery's down there too."

Bobby shrugged. "It's enough that they are memorialized with a plaque," he said pointing. "The dead are gone."

Tess tilted her head and listened to the sounds she could hear below the wind: the voices calling, the baby crying and she knew differently. "I've heard stories that on nights like this when the sky gets dark and the water is a frozen window, people have seen the town lit up."

"Aw that's crazy!" the third man snapped. "I'm cold, the sun's down and it's dark. This is just plain dumb. I'm going back for dinner."

They turned to go, but Tess announced, "I'm going to stay a bit." She watched the men retreat and listened to the voices that had been silenced by modern medicine for so many years. She instinctively glanced down, looking for lights or a sign of some kind.

"May I join you?" Bobby asked as he returned. "I'd like to see lights under the ice too."

They stood side by side in the now black evening and listened to the wind howl through the tall pines surrounding the lake. Suddenly, Tess tensed and dropped to her knees. Desperately clawing at the ice, she screamed, "Look, look the town is there, see it, see the lights!"

Bobby dropped to his knees as well. "Yes, Tess, I do."

She smiled at him, a real smile, and sighed." "They're down there, you know. Waiting."

Bobby put his arm around Tess's shoulder and said, "This isn't the first time I've been here, you know, Tess. I came about fifteen years ago. I joined them then."

Tess shivered. "A suicide?"

"No, an invitation. And it is extended to you. Shall we?"

Tess didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Without a sound, the ice vanished beneath their feet, and she sank down, all cold and all regret gone. Suddenly there was Jim and her baby girl beside her. She gently took her daughter into her arms and smiled. The baby finally stopping crying.

### **About the Author:**

Diane Arrelle, the pen name of South Jersey writer Dina Leacock, has sold more than 250 short stories and has three published books including two story collections: *Just A Drop In The Cup* and *Seasons On The Dark Side*. She is 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).

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### **Chaser | *Miracle Austin***

Wish I could tell you that all of us made it back home and the underdog, Golden Grizzlies, won the football state championship that night against the Texas Red Rattlers, 39 to 41.

My freshman band members and I loaded onto the bus with our heads lowered. A few convertible mustangs and chargers swarmed around the bus.

The drivers and passengers yelled out, "Red Rattlers are unstoppable! Hibernation time, Grizzlies. We're number one... we're number one!" Their piercing laughter filled the crisp December air.

I noticed the football players' heads bowed down too, as their bus drove off, kicking up swirls of dirt and rocks.

We all buckled up. No music or loud talking on our one-way trip. Instead, most focused on their cell phones with ear buds planted inside their ears.

Our bus was the last one to drive out of the mega-sized graveled parking lot. Mrs. Pinkerton—Mrs. P—, our bus driver, didn't follow the other buses towards the main highway. She took the back road. I figured she knew a short cut.

As I was reaching down to grab a book from my backpack, I heard a loud pop, which echoed against the metal interior of the bus. My head almost slammed into the musty smelling vinyl seat in front of me.

There were no cars in front or coming towards us that I could see. The bus swerved wide to the left and then to the right. Mrs. P gripped the oversized wheel with both her hands and guided the bus towards the grassy side of the road. It came to a complete halt.

"Everyone okay!" Mrs. P yelled out. Her face was painted scarlet with a steady stream of sweat running down. Her hands trembled against the steering wheel. She unbuckled her seatbelt and slid out to stand up.

All the students nodded.

My backpack slid a few feet towards the front end.

Our band teacher, Mr. Casey, walked down the aisle to check on us. He then walked back up towards Mrs. P. "Looks like we got a flat."

Mrs. P flung the bus door opened by pushing the handle out near the wheel.

"Y'all stay put. We're going to assess the damage. All will be okay, and we'll be back on the road in no time," Mr. Casey said.

I looked at my friend, Link, and he did the same. We both shook our heads.

Half of the students were texting, playing games, or watching movies on their phones, while the others watched Mrs. P and Mr. Casey outside. I noticed Mr. Casey walking towards the back of the bus to retrieve the spare tire.

After twenty minutes, he rolled it back towards the front of the bus to start changing it out. We sat down. I found my backpack and walked back towards my seat.

Link, the class clown, turned around in his seat and stood up on his knees. He always wore his Grizzlies baseball cap backwards. Link turned on the flashlight on his phone and placed it under his face, projecting an eerie blue glow.

"Anyone want to hear a true story that happened on this very road?" he asked, while rotating his eyes back and forth like a pendulum.

A small group turned around to face him and tuned in. I watched them. Their eyes were fixed on him like he had placed a spell on them.

"Cut it out, Link! When will you stop with your crazy and make-believe stories?" I asked. Link and I had been friends since second grade, and he always told weird stories, mostly for attention, in my opinion.

"Let him tell the story, Chuck," Tamara begged. She possessed the prettiest golden-hazel eyes you've ever seen; I promise they twinkled whenever she smiled. Plus, you would've thought an angel was playing the flute when you heard her perform.

I leaned back in my seat and folded my arms across my cobalt blue Vibranium t-shirt. "Okay, tell us," I commanded.

"Y'all sure?"

We all nodded. I raised my eyebrows, lifted my hands up in the air, and he started.

"Promise... this one is true," Link whispered in slow motion with a slight grin.

I turned my head to stare out the window and noticed Mr. Casey mounting the wheel back onto the axel, while Mrs. P held the flashlight.

There was something strange that night when I think back now... I hadn't notice any other traffic traveling on this road, since our tire blowout.

Link started his story.

"My older cousin told me about the *Per-seg-ui-dor*, when we went camping last summer at Lago Fantasma—Phantom Lake, almost fifteen miles from here."

"Per-what?" I asked with a frown.

"Chuck, you need to start paying attention in Mrs. Z's class. It means *Chaser* in Spanish," Tamara popped off with a slight wink at me.

Link's flashlight started flickering. I followed the others, unfolded my arms, and rose up in my seat.

"Almost a year ago, two best friends—Wilbur and Antonio—around the same ages as us, rode out here on their BMX bikes on a night just like this. They made a pact to capture the *Chaser*, a creature that upon first sight resembled a large rolling tumbleweed."

"Umm, tumbleweed, Link?" I asked while scratching my head and squinting my right eye.

"Come on, Chuck, let him tell us," Tamara pleaded.

"It could roll almost ten to twenty miles per hour towards you and then shapeshift at will into a seven-foot half-werewolf (upper body) and roadrunner (lower body) with huge talons, feathers, long snout with fangs, claws, sonar hearing pointy ears, and glowing maroon slit-shaped eyes."

The entire bus was silent. Everyone gathered around to listen.

"Wilbur and Antonio packed their backpacks with a large fishing net, heavy-duty gloves, flashlights, a sling-shot, quarter-sized silver pellets, and a mega water gun filled with holy water and liquid mercury," he said.

I started laughing out loud. "I must say, Link, this is probably one of the best stories I've heard from you so far. A hybrid werewolf/road runner, really?"

Others laughed as well, except for Tamara. I glanced up at her. She stared deep at me with her wide eyes. My laughing ceased.

"Okay, let's pretend for a moment that your story is true, why did Wilbur and Antonio want to catch it?" I asked.

"To prove that it existed and claim the undisclosed monetary award that's been accruing since the Battle of San Jacinto! A **Chaser** loves to cause havoc whenever it can. Plus, humans are its favorite delicacy!" Link yelled out.

"Well, did they?" Tamara asked without blinking her eyes.

"If you're asking if they caught the **Chaser** that night, then..." Link said, dragging each word.

"Don't leave us hanging!" I shouted.

"You don't believe anyhow, Chuck," Link barked.

"Whatever, man... I may not, but it looks like you have a crowd that do."

He whined in a soft, yet creepy tone. "Wilbur and Antonio waited for it for over an hour. It finally showed up, a few feet away from them. The **Chaser** then rolled up on them crazy fast. They froze for several seconds before they remembered what was inside their backpacks, but Wilbur and Antonio were too slow."

Link paused and stared out the window for a minute before he continued.

"The next morning the local sheriff and his deputy found their mangled bicycles with ripped leather seats and discarded backpacks. A trail of blood led off the road and into the woods. On the ground was one twelve-inch burgundy and mocha tint feather. Wilbur and Antonio were never found... not even their clothes ... or their bones."

Tamara's face turned pale.

Link turned off his flashlight and slid down into his seat with a sly, crooked smile.

All of the sudden the bus began to rock back and forth, almost tipping over. High screams saturated the entire bus and more screams could be heard from outside.

I held on tight to the back of the seat in front of me, stood up, and looked out my window, but I didn't see Mrs. P or Mr. Casey anywhere, only the flashlight spinning in the middle of the road.

A loud thud landed on the roof of the bus. Something was walking from the back towards the front. We all looked up and noticed sharp claws piercing through the metal with ease.

Link stared at me. "I told you the **Chaser** was... Oops, I mean **Chasers** are real."

My eyes grew double in size as my teeth began to chatter.

His green eyes flickered a few times and transformed into shimmering maroon slit-eyes, as two razor-sharp glistening fangs crawled out of Link's trembling mouth.

#### About the Author:

Miracle Austin is a social worker by day and a writer at night. She's a YA/NA cross-genre hybrid author.

*Doll*, her debut YA/Paranormal novel, won 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the YA category in the 2016 Purple Dragonfly Awards.

She's a /Marvel/DC/Horror Fangirl who loves attending teen book events.

Miracle lives in Texas with her family, and she enjoys hearing from readers.

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No one alive remembers when the carnival first came to town, how it settled in Henry Neery's far field, how it beckoned young and old alike with cheery music and colorful lights and the scents of buttered popcorn and fried treats.

No one alive remembers why it never left.

The carnival's ruins — cracked and swollen signs from booths, cars from the Ferris wheel bleached by the sun and scratched by shattered glass, rusty machinery that once performed behind the scenes — are strewn over Neery's land like the broken, discarded teeth of a long gone monster.

Once in a while, Old Gertie finds people here. Hikers who took a wrong turn, needing directions. Teenagers, who spent the night on a dare, begging her not to call the police. Homeless or runaways, chased from wherever they were, searching for respite.

Sometimes, like today, it's only evidence she finds. Sunlight warms the cold glass of empty beer bottles as Gertie puts them into the wheelbarrow she trundled to the field. With a stick, she scrapes through a dead fire, ruffles the pages of a dirty magazine, jabs a filthy pile of blankets.

It shivers, coughs.

Gertie steps back as a man's face — dirty, gray-stubbed — peers out at her. His eyes are fearful, his voice the tremble of an old man. "You gonna chase me off?"

She shakes her head, squats so she's eye level with him. She digs in the pack slung across her body, hands him a bottle of water. He keeps his gaze on her as he drinks.

"Thought I'd get some peace, sleep safe for a change. But it's too quiet here. You know? Unnatural. Like something's missing. Like what's supposed to be here left." He eyes her suspiciously as if she will mock him.

But Gertie only nods. She's heard this before.

The man relaxes a little. "Something chased off all the critters. Pollution maybe. From all this mess." He juts his chin at the debris around them. "This your land?"

She nods again.

"You should clean it up. Be worth a lot more if you do."

Gertie offers him a granola bar. She knows what it's like to be hungry.

He drops the empty water bottle then grabs the granola bar from her hand. He tears through the wrapper and into the bar with sharp, yellow teeth, a predator devouring prey.

"Nice to have a place to call home, a place all yours. You all alone out here?" A sly look comes into his eyes as he tosses the wrapper onto the ground.

She picks up the wrapper, the discarded bottle.

"Think I can get a hot shower up at your house? Some soap will do me good." He smiles, but it's feral, not friendly.

She nods, stands.

He uncoils himself from the blanket, a tired snake shedding its skin.

She turns her back, as if to lead him over the fields to the house.

He moves fast up behind her, as Gertie knew he would. He grabs her arm, twists her to face him. The smell of him is sharper than the knife at her throat.

Hunger makes creatures do terrible things. It even makes monsters rip themselves free from roots that once held them.

Gertie Neery smiles. Her teeth — broken boards, rusted gears, glass shards — and the shredded flesh stuck between them, are the last things the man ever sees.

No one alive remembers that Henry Neery never had children.

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

Madeline Mora-Summonte is a writer, a reader, a beach-comber, and a tortoise-owner. She is the author of the flash fiction collections, *The People We Used to Be* and *Garden of Lost Souls*.

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# Mental Ward

**ECHOES OF THE PAST**



Sirens Call Publications

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

"The holidays are always hard when you're alone," said the blind man to my right.

We were sitting in October gloom, nursing brown water dressed up as coffee. Mine was actually mostly sugar and cream; I took it sweet and hot to give my nervous energy a name. The cafe had cleared out nearly an hour before; somewhere, there was a sports bar showing The Big Game. All the parents had gone home to help their kiddies get ready to beg for candy. I'd come here to think, because my apartment was full of distractions. There were distractions here too, but these I could handle. These were the living kind, full of breath and energy, bustling through the streets and wiping down tables. I could ignore them.

"It's not a holiday. It's Halloween," I said. "Stephen Peck says you're never really alone. It just feels that way for long periods of time."

Outside the window behind his head, snow was falling quietly. A Halloween snow the likes of which we hadn't seen for twenty years, drifting down on the heads of the trick-or-treaters. All that white made me suddenly feel tired.

"Hah!" the old man puffed. "I like that."

I waited for him to make a move, to sit beside me or signal for the check, but he only sat there staring idly into nothing. I wondered whether he could sense light, if everything in his field of vision was a constant, exhausting snowstorm. The waitress circled us uneasily, like a coyote moving restless and tracking a scent. I stirred my coffee and poured in more creamer, pale whorls that looked like fog.

"Who's waiting for you?" the old man asked.

I looked around the cafe, as though there was a stranger hiding in the shadows and whispering things into his ear. "What?"

"You should get on home," he said, and his voice was rougher than before. There was no smile in it. His nostrils flared, delicately testing the air like a wolf. "I can smell the sickness on you."

I stared at him for several moments, my brain pinwheeling, unable to speak. There was a five dollar bill in my coat pocket and I placed it under my coffee cup, catching the eye of the waitress as I stood up. I didn't know how much she'd heard and suddenly I was overcome with rage, the kind that shakes the hands and blurs the vision. There were few things I hated more than people who thought they had me figured out. I imagined ramming my coffee spoon into his eye socket and scooping out the soft jelly, laughing as the waitress screamed into her apron.

I left him there, his cloudy eyes trained on the window, seeing nothing and everything.

\*\*\*

The darkest bar in town was one block over. I stomped through the snow, soaking my socks even through the boots I wore. *Midwest snow was just different than in other places*, I thought, keeping my head down as I passed under each streetlight. It was denser, colder, more invasive. It never seemed to matter what I wore in winter, the cold penetrated each layer anyway and left me shivering in a hot shower as soon as I got home. I realized it had never occurred to me to move to someplace warm. It would have just been a new place to hate.

Inside the bar I hung up my coat and sloshed to the back, collapsed into a booth so dimly lit I couldn't have read the menu even if I wanted to. Bailey's offered pub food, thick steak fries and burgers that catered to the college crowd, but my belly was full of greasy coffee and all I wanted was a whiskey neat and a smoke.

"You can't do that in here," the waitress said, eyeing my lighter on the table.

"C'mon, this place is a tomb," I said, gesturing around. One old man was nodding over a gin at the bar, which was jollied up by a foam-rubber jack-o-lantern lit from within and a small bucket of candy, although no trick-or-treaters were coming in here. The entire place stank of mildew and yeast. All the college kids were watching the game. I didn't have it in me to be coy, to put on my mask and get what I wanted. The cafe had stilled me, made me hyper-aware of myself, and I hated it.

The waitress pursed her lips, blew out a breath that smelled like mint chewing gum. "Whatever," she muttered, slamming a glass of water down in front of me.

I ordered my bourbon and she stalked off, hollering my order to the bartender. The old man had rattled me in a way I couldn't define. He was a stranger, a *blind* stranger at that, yet the entire exchange had felt like something in a movie. Like he was some wizened old goat with second sight, a seer who could sniff out the bad in me. My legs jittered beneath the table, driven by rage-fueled energy. I wished I could go back there, track him down, and shake him until he told me what he'd meant.

"Hey," I said to the waitress when she brought my drink. "I'm sorry about before. It's been a long day." Her features softened minutely as she sat the bourbon on a napkin. "Same."

"You should close up early. No one's coming in here tonight."

She snorted softly. "My boss has all the surveillance cameras feed directly to his phone. He's had it out for me anyway because I wouldn't lie to the state inspector last month about the food prep station."

"So you're saying I shouldn't order the nachos?"

"I'm saying I can only vouch for the onion rings and that bourbon you've got there."

"Got it."

Silence for a beat, but it was amiable enough even though she hadn't smiled yet. I considered myself pretty good at breaking through that thin layer of ice some women have on top. Sometimes the mood strikes me; sometimes I think it's gone forever. It's the ones who seem disinterested that hold the most appeal, the age-old allure of the chase.

"Hey, you want to go out back, have a smoke with me?" I asked.

I thought she would decline, the way her eyes shifted away from my face. Instead, she gave a little nod and led me away, down the hall and past the bathrooms. The back door was pasted in signs explicitly instructing patrons not to open it unless they wanted to set off the alarm, but there was no sound when the waitress pushed the bar with the heel of her hand. We waded through broken-down boxes and bags of trash to a surprisingly odorless dumpster, where she gestured to an overturned milk crate that I could sit on. It held a fine scrim of snow and I'd left my coat in the bar, but I sat anyway and lit up. She remained standing and lit her own after procuring a battered soft pack from her apron. The cold didn't seem to bother her.

"I've had a weird night," I said. My breath plumed like feathers in the still air.

"Every night is weird around here," she said. Her fingernail polish was chipping; she studied it closely before putting a thumb in her mouth to chew delicately on the skin around it. Her lips formed a perfect O while she did it, soft pink tongue snaking out to catch the streetlight above us. I watched this display for a moment, fascinated. For the first time in a long while, I felt a connection, however brief. Here was a girl who was moody, unconcerned with vanity or impressing me, kohl-rimmed eyes regarding everything with disdain.

"Do you know a blind guy?" I asked suddenly. "Old, maybe in his 60's, hangs out at the coffee shop down the street?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. What did he do?"

"Who says he did anything?"

"Jesus, don't be so defensive." She flicked cigarette ash into the snow and licked her lips. "You said you had a weird night. I figured he did you wrong somehow."

I shook my head, unable to put into words what had happened. "It's complicated."

She sighed. "Yeah."

"Where are you from? Around here?"

She shook her head, looking out across our limited view of the city. "Tampa, originally."

"And you're out here without a coat? I thought warm-weather people hated snow."

The waitress gave a little laugh; I could hear the ice cracking, slowly. "I love snow. That's why I moved here. Florida is just heat and bugs and frizzy hair. I miss the beach, but I like having seasons. And I like that it gets dark early now."

I saw her suddenly in my living room, the shape of her on my couch. How she'd look spread out, pale arms turned tattoos-up. The bourbon was warm in my stomach and I felt the familiar ache begin to unfurl. Slowly.

"Hey," I said, standing up. Her perfume mingled with smoke and snow, reminding me of something I couldn't grasp. "You wanna come to my place? It's warm. We could have a few drinks."

Her pupils expanded and contracted, once. I was so close to her I could almost see my reflection in them, an amorphous blob like an ink splatter. *When did I move this close?* I thought. I couldn't remember.

"That's okay," she said and took a pointed step backward. The dumpster was at her back. "I have to close tonight so I'll be here awhile."

I thought of my apartment, of what waited for me there. Suddenly there was a different scent on the air: fear. It smelled sour, like a sweat stain. I remembered the old man then and how his nostrils flared like a wild animal when I got too close. *Is this what he smelled?* I wondered.

"Come on," I said. The cold and the smoke had worked to make my voice almost unrecognizable, a hoarse near-whisper that made her shiver. "I don't feel like being alone. Let's go for a drive."

\*\*\*

And we drove. The pavement hummed beneath my tires, throwing slush into the weeds, and the radio played something soft that sounded like a woman laughing, or crying. I rolled down the window and splayed my fingers, let the frigid air slice through them. The smell of snow filled the car, overtaking her perfume and creating a memory time had swiped: me at six, when things made sense. My mother's warm fingers beneath my chin, tying my hat so it wouldn't slip while I was sledding. Afterward, she made hot chocolate and grilled cheese while the snow dripped from my socks on the radiator. The house smelled like winter.

Her fingers on the back of my neck made me shiver. I felt oddly calm, even when my apartment building loomed inside the windshield.

Inside, the heat was off and I could see my breath crystallizing in the living room. Mother sat in her chair in the near-dark, IV bag glinting in the moonlight. She was almost all there, her dark hollow eyes as focused as they ever were as she turned from the window. She smelled like piss and fever, but for the first time it didn't bother me. I could see her future as though a gypsy had spelled it out in tea leaves but there was no fear attached to it.

"I've been watching the trick-or-treaters on the street," she said. "Where have you been?"

I thought of the car, the drive. I couldn't remember much of it suddenly; just a vague feeling of weightlessness and the way I had purposely avoided looking in the backseat when I got home.

"Just for a drive."

She smiled and reached out to touch my face. "My sweet Sarah. You always did love Halloween, since you were a little girl. You loved to be scared."

"Yes, Mama," I said. "But I'm not scared anymore."

### About the Author:

Amanda Crum is a writer and artist whose work can be found in publications such as *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Blue Moon Literary and Art Review*, and *Dark Eclipse*, as well as in several anthologies. Her first chapbook of horror poetry, *The Madness In Our Marrow*, made the shortlist for a Bram Stoker Award nomination in 2015; her latest, *Trailer Trash*, will be published by Finishing Line Press in early 2019. She currently lives in Kentucky with her husband and two children.

Blog: [The Journey Begins](#)

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**The Walk | *Mary Genevieve Fortier***

Echo sweet the whisper  
Lamenting on the wind  
Cries of Ancient torture  
In Shadow, haunt and bend

The ear in screams of silence  
To hear, its reckoning  
Twisting earth  
A childless birth  
The death toll's final ring

Upon a dark and roughened road  
Where many a penance, there has sowed  
I walked, in barefoot – miles  
Bloody, still I smiled...

Passersby in awestruck horror  
Begged to slow, at first with ardour  
Eager, then to speed away  
Leaving me, as if a stray  
Upon that road, exiled  
So lost, alone, reviled

Barely clothed, in tatters black  
Ranting like some maniac  
Sunken eyes, sick and wild  
Upon that road, defiled  
Bloody, still I smiled...

Trembling, stumbling, then to fall  
Upon my knees began to crawl  
Staring as if mesmerized  
Wishing I were paralyzed  
Invoke this spirit, exorcise  
This virulent demon's wake  
I dare you, do not sympathize  
For this bares, no mistake

Upon this road,  
this roughened road  
Both torturous and vile  
Each slackened step, I've tripped  
and slowed  
Bloody, still I smiled...

Upon this road,  
this roughened road  
Assigned my own perdition  
I suffer tears of agony

Of my own volition

I walk alone, in fear and dread  
I walk to reconcile  
Yes, yes indeed, oh I am dead  
And bloody, still I smile...

**I Am | *Mary Genevieve Fortier***

I am the evil whisper  
A taunt beneath your bed  
That summons with a whimper  
To get inside your head

The shadow in the darkness, black  
You know, you've seen me there  
Daring you, just turn your back  
So I may stroke your hair

I am the movement; smooth and quick  
Upon the bedroom wall  
I am the voice; deep, rough and thick  
Coming from the hall

I am indeed the cackle  
Maniacal and crazed  
Don't you hear the crackle?  
I've set your bed ablaze

Deep beneath the cloak of night  
I feed upon your fear  
In nothingness, you've lost all sight  
Though my breathing, you still hear

I am sensed-to some, I'm seen  
My presence, I cannot hide  
I crawl within your brain to feed  
With ease, I crawl inside

I crept within your nightmare  
To smother all your dreams  
I'm everywhere and nowhere  
To play upon your screams

I steal away your blanket  
Your flesh, rippling and cold  
Replaced by earth and violets  
To rot, decay and mold  
The Fates have all foretold...

I am your cries  
Your sunken eyes  
Your gasping, final breath  
I am the fear  
Forever, near  
For I'm what you call *Death*  
The Dark Angel of Death...

Collecting souls  
Is what I do  
Collecting souls  
I've come for you

I hold the very power  
To call you out by name  
In your final hour  
Extinguishing your flame

Prepare the Feast of Fear, I must  
Heighten fear and dread  
Moaning, groaning, in darkness hushed  
Somewhere, among the dead

Ingesting the light  
Inhaling your breath  
No sense in a fight  
That's right, *I Am Death*

### **Within the Mirror | *Mary Genevieve Fortier***

Gaze within the mirror  
What is it that you see?  
The glass beveled, distorted  
The image can't be me

Eyes wide, crazed and wild  
Blood red and circled blue  
What is that beyond the stare?  
I can't describe to you

Something evil dwells within  
Wicked, cruel and cold  
Where is my soul? I cannot tell  
What gazes back, is old

Some demon, has it crawled inside?  
Slithered legion it be?  
"Pluck it out!" I plead—I cry  
"Pluck it out!" I scream

I reach inside, way down my throat  
I feel it squirm and shake  
My nail has pierced its slimy flesh  
My body taut—I ache

The visage in the mirror  
Grinned slyly back at me  
No more was I visible  
This *Thing*, is all I see

Down its throat I continued  
Success, not in the cards  
Just before withdrawing my hand  
It bit my fingers, HARD

Blood; it splattered everywhere  
This *Thing* began to chew  
What there were, of my digits  
I watched, 'til it was through

Behind those eyes, somewhere was I  
Trapped deep, now I reside  
While this Demon carries on  
In shadows, it must hide

Hunger is its driving force  
This *Thing* inside my shell  
Capturing its living prey  
This Demon, straight from Hell

It looks into the mirror  
From within, I see its eyes  
Trapped for all eternity  
A Demon in disguise

**About the Author:**

Multi-Award Winning Poet, Columnist, Editor, Reviewer, Podcast Co-Producer, Character/Creator/Performer/Dialogue Writer, Audio Performer/Narrator. "HWA's Reading List 2016," Co-Founder - "The Greater Saint Louis Area Horror Writers Society." "Woman in Horror," 2014-2019. Appears in numerous anthologies. Mary's collection of Horror Poetry, "Verses From a Deeply Darkened Mind," has gained exceptional recognition. Through Mary's unique style, she has been deemed, "The Modern Day Poe" by her esteemed Peers.

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"We have been so lucky in so many ways: a beautiful family, a successful business, many friends and lots of loyal customers. It has been a bountiful year, with business doing well, and the blessing of a healthy family! We've been blessed with a long life. It is time for the thanksgiving ceremony to begin," the elderly man rose unsteadily to his feet. He steadied himself against the table and picked up his glass. The raspberry wine threatened to spill over the lip of the crystal glass as the old man, Eli, toasted his family around the table before drinking. His family all followed his lead: his wife, Lama, smiled broadly as the jewels on her fingers caught the light, while his son-in-law, Attor, grinned slyly before sipping from the cut crystal glass. They clinked their glasses and congratulated each other on another profitable year.

All bar one.

"Lucky? Are you making a joke Papa? I don't feel very lucky."

"Hush now, Mya," chided Lama, "The gods themselves blessed this bath house. You have heard the tales of how mother rabbit was caught in a trap, but ran through the stream here, instantly healing her injury; the tale of how the songbird was lost in the snow and came to rest on our vines. Fruit grew immediately wherever his tears touched. Our waters heal and our wine offers long life." Lama swirled the wine around her glass.

"But now the devil has cursed us," spat Mya. She downed her wine and grabbed the bottle from the table, refilling her glass. The wine spilled down Mya's chin as she took a long drink and she was refilling her glass when her mother snatched the bottle from her fingers.

"How dare you! This bath house has been in our family for over 30 generations. And we've only grown more successful with each generation. When we started, it was only a tiny spring and look at what we have now: multiple private rooms with hot tubs, the public baths, guest rooms, and all of this," Lama gestured around the opulent dining room, plush velvet curtains blocking out the moonlight, dark wooden furniture weighed down by fine china (for display purposes only!), whilst the thick pile green carpet was completely impractical but had been imported from the Middle East at great expense.

Mya glared over her wine glass. "But at what cost, Mother?"

It was her father who replied, "Hardly any cost at all Mya. Once the ceremony is over, you'll understand. We've all had to make a sacrifice, each generation, to ensure the continuance of our bath house and our family. A few little cuts, and its over."

A small noise from behind Mya caught the groups attention. Mya rose and went to her infant daughter's Moses basket. The small child was stirring but a few gentle words from her mother and soon the baby was dozing once more.

Lama frowned as Mya returned to the table. "You shouldn't fuss over her, Mya. I've told you: don't get attached." Lama stretched over the wide table and attempted to pat her daughter's shoulder in comfort but ended up waving vaguely as her hand failed to make contact. She sat down & sipped her wine, "I'm not saying this to be unkind, it will be easier for you when the ceremony happens."

Mya dabbed at the tears which suddenly clouded her eyes. "It's barbaric," she muttered.

"It's tradition! Your first born child will be sacrificed during the long night moon so the gods will bless this house for another generation. That's tomorrow. I'll have no more of this nonsense. We sacrificed your brother, same as my parents, their parents and generations of our family. It's always been so and it will continue." Her father's words cut through the room, silencing further argument.

Attor put a restraining arm Mya, his smile not reaching his eyes as he said, "It's a tradition we take great honor in participating in, Eli. It is after all, for the good of the family." His wife didn't respond as she stared at the little wriggly bundle in the Moses basket.

\*\*\*

"How can you go along with this?" Mya demanded as Attor carefully hung his clothes back in the wardrobe.

"Go along with what?" He asked, picking small pieces of fluff from the delicate fabric before closing the wardrobe door and turning to his wife. "Huh! Do you have to do that in here?"

Mya ignored his evident disgust at her choice to breastfeed their daughter. "Attor, tomorrow my mother and father, your in-laws, are going to kill our daughter. This tiny, wonderful little creature we created. How can you let that happen?"

Attor rolled his eyes, "Mya, you're being ridiculous. You knew any child you had would be sacrificed for the good of the family. You shouldn't have grown attached but got a wet nurse like your mother suggested. All these cuddles and feeding. I mean, you even named it! You've really brought this whole thing upon yourself."

"Nina! Her name is Nina and she is your child. Our child! I carried her in my body, I birthed her. She's mine, not some offering for a demon!" Mya fought to contain her anger and despair but tears streamed down her face.

Attor waved away her comments. "It's what's best for the family. It's tradition," he replied, climbing in to bed beside Mya.

"What happened to the man I married? He would have fought for us, fought for Nina. He'd have found us an escape route, a way to keep his family safe," spat Mya. Nina stopped feeding and sensing her mother's distress, began to cry. Mya kissed the infants cheeks and did her best to soothe her daughter.

Attor turned his back on them but Mya heard his muttered snide comments, "The man you married wasn't sleeping on the finest cotton sheets, in silk pajamas and wearing imported suits. Like your father said, a few cuts and it'll be over. Be worth it to get rid of that screaming brat. Besides, we can always have another. Once the gods accept that things little sacrifice and we're rich, we can have as many rug rats as you want."

"But...."

Attor spun and glared at Mya, "No 'buts' Mya. I am your husband and you will do as I say. You will do as tradition dictates. You're the blood relative, so you're the one who needs to kill it. I'll be there to support you, but no further discussion, tomorrow, you will sacrifice that creature. Now, if you insist on feeding it, go elsewhere, I want to sleep."

Mya hugged her daughter close as she scurried from the room.

\*\*\*

It was the pin-prick stings which woke him: he didn't initially register the blooming pain in his arm as another tiny stab jabbed his back. Battling to groggy wakefulness, Eli tried to rub the sleep-dust from his eyes but the realization his hands were tied washed all sleepiness from him. Looking around, he realized he was in the sacrificial chamber, tied to a wooden cross which was hanging over the open pit. Eli knew better than to look into that pit: the image of hundreds of eyes and glistening teeth had filled his nightmares since he had peeked as a child. The fire lamps caused shadows to dance around the chamber as more pain blossomed across his thigh.

A muffled scream whipped his attention to his left. His wife had her hands and feet bound together and was hanging from a rope, trying to keep her head from rolling back. Her body was a maze of cuts, slowly seeping blood into the pit below.

"Ah, Papa, you're awake," Mya flicked the blood from the knife into the pit as she stepped in front of her father. There was a gleeful hissing as whatever it was in the pit drank the blood.

Eli's shouts were, like his wife's, muffled due to the gag straining against the skin of his mouth. His mouth was dry and what little saliva he had was like blades trickling down his throat. Mya stepped close and peered into his eyes. "Now, what was it you were saying, Papa? Little cuts wasn't it? Make sure lots of blood flows for the sacrifice." She slowly dragged the knife across Eli's cheek. He screamed again and pulled at his restraints, but Mya grabbed his hair to keep his head steady. "Careful now. I wouldn't want to go too deep and finish you too quickly. That's not the family way is it? Oops, I see some of mother's have started to clot. Don't go anywhere. We've got to make sure the sacrifice is carried out to maintain the family's wealth, don't we?" Mya stepped over to her mother and took her time reopening her assorted red lines which crisscrossed the older woman's body. Her mother groaned but could not fight to stop her daughter. Mya stepped back, observing her work with a critical eye. Content that the wounds she'd inflicted on her parents were still dripping blood into the pit she slowly turned around.

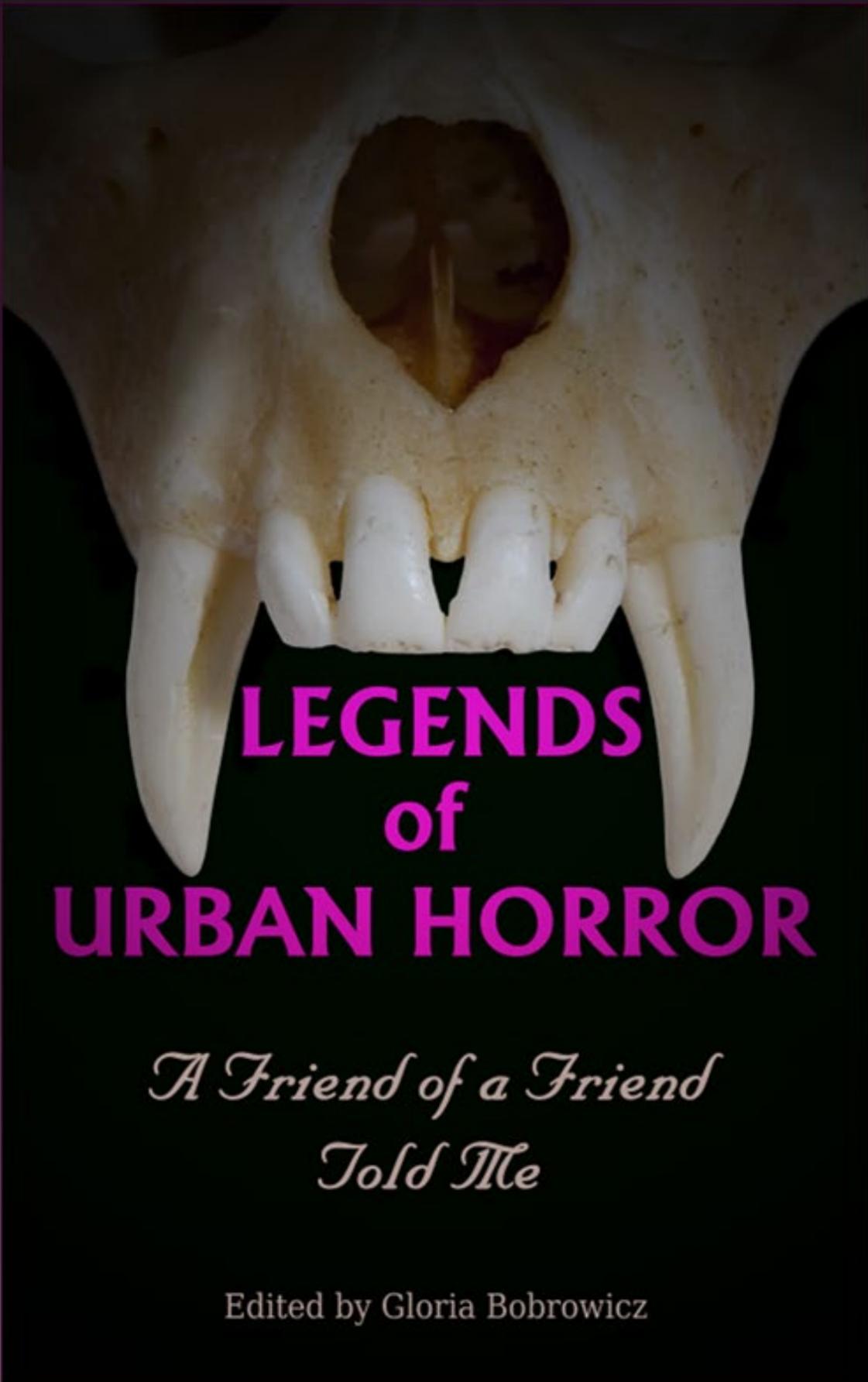
"Oh, don't play with that darling," she cooed. Sweeping her daughter into her arms, Mya roughly stuffed the sleeve of the silk suit back into the bundle of kindling. She shook the box of matches, smiling as Nina gurgled happily and reached for the rattling box. "These aren't for you, my little cheeky angel," laughed Mya. "No, these are a gift for daddy. See? There he is. All tied up and wrapped all cozy in his precious suits." Nina gurgled as she saw her father's terrified face peering out from under the pile of clothes and kindling. Mya turned back to her daughter. "Silly daddy, it looks like he's playing hide and seek. Perhaps if we burn away all those layers, we might find him." As Mya dripped the match onto her husband she said "I'm starting a new tradition."

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

From staying up late watching 'B' movies to reading spine-chillers, Geraldine has always loved supernatural and monster horror. Women in Horror Month offers a chance to celebrate all aspects of her favourite genre and this year she's created an Instagram 'daily challenge' featuring craft ideas, movie reviews and, of course, short stories. Come and join the fun on her blog and Instagram.

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**LEGENDS  
of  
URBAN HORROR**

*A Friend of a Friend  
Told Me*

Edited by Gloria Bobrowicz

Available on Amazon, Smashwords, & CreateSpace

I can honestly say, I cried more when the family dog died than when my father did. I sobbed when we rested Candy into her freshly dug grave in the garden, but when I threw earth on my father's coffin I had to squeeze out the tears. So, when my sister telephoned about six months after he had died, crying, 'I need your help. I think Dads ghost is haunting the house!' I immediately thought, *Yeah, that old bastard would.*

I met my sister that evening outside the family home. My mum had already left, fled to my aunt's house, ordering my sister to 'deal with him, get a priest in to throw some holy water around!'

"Does she believe it's Dad?" I asked her.

"Yes!" my sister was smoking a cigarette and shivering at the same time. We waited outside neither wanting to go in. Cathy didn't want to talk about Dad in the house, she said it aggravated him. I just hated the idea of returning 'home'. I stared at the house, with all the lights on it looked like it was grimacing.

"What's been happening then?"

"Poltergeist stuff mainly. Things moving around the house. Remember his walking stick? The one he never really needed? It keeps appearing by the front door. His glasses are left unfolded on opened books and the bathroom stinks of his cologne!"

"Are you sure Mum's not doing this?"

Cathy laughed.

"Mum's more interested in selling up and moving to Spain but she can't if he's still here... lingering. I know for certain she hasn't done this."

"How do you know?"

"I packed all his clothes and stuff in that old trunk we used to hide in. I locked it and threw it in the basement, that's how. I have the key Caireen. Yet, when I checked the trunk, it was open and hadn't been broken into."

I didn't know what to say. Cathy looked so scared.

"... And then there are the noises."

"What noises?"

She shook her head, took her cigarette packet from her pocket, and lit it, cupping her hands around the lighter flame. The wind caught the smoke as we started walking.

Dad was a bully. He always called us his lazy, useless daughters, and would blame Mum for not giving him sons to be proud of. He never hit us, but the threat was always there. I had left home as soon as I could and never thought about returning. I think my parting sentence to my mother was, 'I'm doing what you should have done years ago.' a cheap shot, and one I regretted very much. So, mostly through guilt, I decided I had to help rid the family home of him, even if it was so Mum could sell it.

Cathy stopped, her hand shook.

"There's snoring."

"What?"

"His snoring in the bedroom. Mum ran out of there about a week after the funeral, saying she could still hear him, screaming her lungs out. She said she could feel him in the bed next to her! I thought it was just grief, but I could hear that rattling phlegm through the walls myself! She slept on the couch ever since."

I tried not laugh, but I did. She joined in. It helped to break the tension between us.

"It's the crying though, '*Help me. Help me someone*' '*Don't leave me here.*' his voice sounds desperate, so old ... and there's the bell."

I remembered the bell. A small hand held instrument of torture. It sat on his desk; he would ring it whenever he wanted something. It used to drive me mad, and make Mum shake.

"You can hear it all over the house. It goes on and on until it's inside your brain and you want to stick a pencil into your eardrums."

She finished her cigarette and flicked it into the garden pond. The orange end hissed as it sank into the muddy water. Memories can be vicious.

"Let's go in, but you know how much he hated me. I might make things worse!"

We linked arms, and together for the first time decided to face down our father, even if he was dead.

I felt sick as we entered. Every room was lit up, lamps and wall lights glowed. There was nowhere to hide. The central heating roared, the radiators trembled.

"I feel like I'm in Hell! Can we lower the heating? Maybe turn off a light?"

"You can try, but he'll just switch it back on."

I flicked off the hallway light. It immediately came back on. I flicked the switch off again. The light came back on, the bulb hummed with electricity and anger.

"OK Dad! Lights on then!"

Cathy grabbed my arm.

"Don't wind him up Caireen!"

"*Fuck him!* He's dead! He can't control us now!"

The lights went out. Every one. We were in darkness. The heating clicked off and within seconds the house was freezing. Cathy whispered,

"See?"

She held the flame of her lighter between us with a shaking hand.

"I find it easier just to apologize. Just say 'sorry'."

I watched her face in the flickering light. She looked worn out. I remembered begging her to leave and to come stay with me years ago, but she wouldn't leave Mum. *'Funny'* I thought, *'Where was Mum now?'*

"I'm sorry."

Silence.

"I'm very, very sorry."

The lights came back on and the house began to warm. Cathy blew out the flame of her lighter.

"Just like old times." I muttered. "Let's go to the study. If he's anywhere, it'll be there."

"OK ... if he'll let us in."

The study was his domain. The door opened sideways, rolling on castors instead of opening inward and had garish orange plexiglass inserted into it so he could see if anyone was outside listening to him. As we approached, the door opened.

"He's expecting us then."

I squeezed my sister's hand, and pulled her close. We were both shaking. I caught a whiff of his cigar smoke, the smell must have permeated the wallpaper.

"I thought he'd stopped smoking?" I whispered.

"The smell started a couple of days ago. It makes me sick."

The stench was cloying at my throat. I was a teenager again, listening to his latest lazy daughter rant, waiting for the ash to fall from the cigar that seemed to be permanently wedged in the corner of his mouth. I was amazed by how he managed to rage and keep a steady stream of smoke billowing out of his nose while brown spit dripped down his chin. It was disgustingly funny. My smirking annoyed him even more.

I dropped Catherine's hand and went into the office, buoyed up on my memories of defiance. I wanted to deal with him. Throw him out along with his boxes of documents and letters that were still stacked along one side of the wall. I sat in his chair, behind his untouched desk. Catherine stayed at the door.

"I can't come in."

The lamp on his desk flickered. The room seemed to be spinning, moving very slowly.

"That's ok. Watch that the door doesn't slide shut on you though."

The lamp flickered again.

I couldn't resist the temptation of opening the drawers of his desk. There were dried up boxes of cigarettes, old cheque books, notebooks crammed with his messy handwriting and a quart bottle of whiskey. I opened it and took a long swig. All the important stuff seemed to have been taken, no doubt mother had seen to that. The light began flickering again. It got on my nerves,

"Christ Dad! Give it a rest!"

Cathy fumbled in her jacket pocket for her lighter anticipating the blackout. I leaned back in his chair, my fear eased with the help of alcohol. I touched the cracked leather of the arms trying not to relive the absolute misery he put us through. That's when I saw it. A hidden drawer in the section that went over your legs. The keyhole was small, almost hidden in the wood grain pattern. I tried to open it but it was locked tight, so I grabbed

the letter opener he kept on the desk and rammed it into it. He must have been doing the same thing because the groove in the keyhole was exactly the same shape as the point of the letter knife. The drawer opened.

"What is it?"

The light stopped flickering.

"You need to see this."

Cathy crept over while I made room on the desk and carefully opened what I had found. It was fragile with age and the thin card creaked. It was a homemade Ouija Board. The hand painted letters were arranged in a circle, with 'yes and 'no' 'hello' and 'goodbye' within them. In the very center was a faded red ring. The board was just waiting to be used.

"We need a glass"

There was a tumbler with his ashtray balanced on top of it next to the dreaded bell, on his bookshelf. I grabbed it and placed its rim on the red circle. I rested my fingertip on the glass and looked at Cathy. Her hands were shaking, but she did the same. Her finger made the glass tremor. The room felt heavy with the stench of him and his misery.

"Keep your hands still ..."

Before I could even finish my sentence the glass moved. It shot across the desk, I had to stand to keep up with it. It spelled out 'HELP'. *He* was asking us for help, after everything he had put us through. The glass vibrated, Cathy was shaking even more. It spelled out 'HELP' again. Cathy asked "How can we help you Dad?"

The glass stopped. I could only hear my heart pounding in my ears. Cathy's breath was rapid through her clenched teeth. Then it moved.

NOT DAD

We pulled our hands away. For the first time since I entered the house I felt really frightened, instead of angry. This was not dad but a stranger haunting my home. Dad I could fight, but this entity was an unknown.

'Find out who it is Cathy.'

She looked at me like I was crazy.

"You ask! You're older!"

The glass began to shake, jumping up and down until it almost fell off the desk.

"Ok ..."

We rested our fingers back on the glass. The lights began to flicker again.

"Who are you?"

ROBERT.

We looked at each other, trying to sort through our scrambled thoughts. *Who was he?*

"Robert? Why are you here?"

I LIVED HERE BEFORE YOU

My brain felt as though it was splitting.

I DIED HERE

Cathy began to ramble on, her head shaking with nerves,

"So the house was haunted by the previous owner. O.K. that happens. People buy haunted houses all the time ..."

The glass began to spin around the desk again. I think it was Robert's way of telling her to shut up. It began to spell out again. There was no stopping it.

YOUR FATHER KEPT ME HERE

We looked at each other.

A PRISONER

That sounded like Dad.

I WANT TO MOVE ON

The house felt like it was shaking. The lights were burning and the heat was unbearable. Robert was a very angry cellmate who wanted to be released. The glass scorched our fingers, but we could not pull away.

"How can we help?" I asked. My voice seemed to stick in my throat. Then everything stopped, as the house settled.

SMASH THE GLASS RELEASE ME

Dad must have been messing with the spirits for fun and when he made contact, he must have wanted to control it. The ultimate pet. Robert had been trying to contact someone to be freed, not to scare the crap out of. Cathy didn't look too certain.

"If we smash the glass aren't we releasing the spirit into the house?"

"He's already in the house. What have we to lose?"

"Sanity. Our lives. Everything really."

Her head began to shake again as the glass trembled. I grabbed it quickly before I had too much time to think about consequences, and threw it at the wall. It fragmented and scattered over the floor. There was silence and then the place erupted.

Light bulbs burned and shattered above us showering us with glass and sparks. Windows cracked and doors slammed. The ceilings and floors seemed to shift and tilt. There was a long scream of release around us. The choking pressure that had always been in the house evaporated. We couldn't move as the house calmed.

"I need a drink."

I groped around the draw of the desk and found the secret whisky bottle. Cathy found her way to the kitchen and returned with a lit candle and two glasses. I filled them almost to the brim and we swigged it down as though they were shots. My glass rattled against my teeth as my hand shook.

"Only Dad would keep a ghost imprisoned. Only he would be that evil. That poor spirit must have been trapped for years!"

Cathy finished her whisky and slammed the glass on the table leaving dark splashes on the Ouija Board. It gave me an idea. I upturned my empty glass, placed it on the red painted ring and placed my finger on it. Cathy followed, we were both smiling. By candlelight we decided to hold our own séance.

"Dad? Are you there Dad? It's Caireen. Cathy is here as well."

The glass didn't move. Cathy spoke then.

"Dad? Are you there? Please speak to us, we miss you so much."

The glass began to rattle slightly, hum a little, and vibrate. Then it moved.

WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG

We both waited, not really believing it was him.

LAZY LAZY GIRLS

That was him. We took our fingers off the glass. It moved around the board by itself. Its sharp jagged movements spilling out more of his bile. Eventually it slowed.

ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME

I reached for the ashtray that I had knocked to the floor. I placed the glass upright and rested the ashtray on top and the bell on top of that. The metal rattled against glass and the bell rang quietly. Dad was not happy. We watched it jump while we finished the whiskey.

For now, we share him, one week in my home, one in Cathy's new apartment until we have sorted something for definite. I wanted to bury him in the garden pond, deep in the middle where he can stay forever in the dark and never move on. Cathy wants to deposit him somewhere much worse. We just haven't decided yet. Maybe we could advertise him on the internet? I'm sure someone would like a pet ghost.

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

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. and has had work published by 'Crooked Cat', 'FoF Publishing' 'Firbolg Publishing', and 'Flame Tree Publishing'. Her work for 'The Patchwork Raven's' 'Twelve Days' is also available as an artbook. She has been included in previous ezines by Sirens Call and has been a speaker at the London Book Fair discussing independent publishing.

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drowned orange  
PEN AND INK ILLUSTRATION

He'd studied her since he was a child; both the truth and the myth.

From unconfirmed accounts to verified carnage left in her wake; he'd tracked and followed her for nearly forty years of his miserable life. She was a mighty force, a fierce and unforgiving spirit who snatched the souls of those who dared awaken her. But to Bruce, she represented the deepest love one could feel, love so deep that you would let it steal the breath from your lungs in order to touch its lips to yours. He craved that kind of love, twisted it may be, but something inside of his soul craved that kind of unbiased ask-no-questions kind of *love* that would consume him and end the suffering he'd been forced to endure each day on earth.

*She* was the one he'd selected to bring him peace, and Bloody Mary was the name by which she answered.

Earlier attempts to get her attention had failed. Perhaps there was too much light coming in through the bathroom window, or maybe she sensed he wasn't passionate enough in his pleas. She had to know what was in his heart, regardless of what tumbled from his lips. She wouldn't be fooled.

But this time would be different. He had meticulously prepared the room for her arrival, lining the tiny window with black trash bags sealed on the edges with electrical tape; once the door closed, the room would be pitch black, as dark as a tomb appropriately. She would come for him this time for sure, and he could finally experience the highest manifestation of pure love.

Bruce stripped naked and showered, then shuffled into the bedroom where he removed a plastic covered suit from his closet. He tore into the bag with his fingers, ripping it from the hanger to expose the virgin wool-blend suit beneath. He'd emptied his life savings to purchase it, but the evening he had planned called for the most elegant of fabrics and he couldn't be bothered with budgets. Besides, after tonight, money would be a thing of the past.

The fabric felt comforting against his skin and a wave of excitement rushed through his body as he smoothed his hand down the front of the jacket. He wanted to look good for his queen's arrival.

Standing with one finger poised above the light switch in the tiny bathroom, he quickly surveyed the room one last time to be sure he was ready.

He was ready.

*"Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary."*

The room was quiet, except for the sound of Bruce's nervous breathing. He stared straight ahead and waited; sensing no movement, he tried again.

*"Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary!"* He whispered, more urgently this time.

Suddenly, a pin point of light began to radiate from the center of the mirror, growing in size as it swallowed the darkness and illuminated the bathroom. Sounds of moaning, gnashing and bloodcurdling wails emanated from the center and Bruce realized with a start that as he peered into the mirror toward the source of the screams, he may actually be looking directly into Hell. But he wasn't afraid because he sensed his precious Mary was stirring within.

Something moved deep in the center of the mirror as a figure cloaked in black advanced toward him. Thick black ropes of knotted hair draped around her heart-shaped face where red eyes penetrated skin the color of smoked almonds. A lizard-like tongue snaked in and out between her lips as she floated beyond the edge of the mirror and crossed into the room with Bruce.

"Yes! Yes! Please take me with you!" Bruce trembled and cried out to the woman levitating just above the sink. His bladder released as he stared directly into her fiery eyes and begged for death.

Wordlessly, she moved downward and the room became warmer with her presence. He strained upward, wanting desperately to be consumed.

A tear fell from the corner of his eye as he squeezed his eyelids shut and leaned back his head. For the first time in his miserable life, he would finally know love. He steeled his body and held his breath, waiting for her kiss, but instead he felt a slight warm breeze pulsing across his face and he realized that it was her breath on his skin.

He peeked out of one eye and found her face floating just inches away, their noses nearly touching. Her eyes were merely red orbs beneath razor-cut bangs and messy tendrils framing her face, but he knew she was staring at him, staring into him, into his soul. He returned her gaze and almost choked on a rush of emotion; he had the attention of his Queen.

Excitement traveled through his body and caused his legs to tremble. When her tongue snaked out between her chapped lips and she opened her mouth to yawn, Bruce thought he might collapse to the floor in shock.

"Well, say something, you oaf," His beloved Mary – *Bloody Mary* – was clearly agitated. Bruce was taken aback, not just by the fact that she was within his arm's reach and speaking to him, but that she had a voice at all. The Bloody Mary of folklore, of his own dreams, did not engage in pointless banter or even utter a single word. She swooped in and

did her bidding with surgical skill and a complete lack of pathos. Yet, here she was, crouched on his sink and attempting to socialize with him. *Him*. A mere nobody.

It warmed his soul.

Her hand snaked out from beneath the dirty tattered sleeve of her gown and Bruce felt a punch to his chest. The power behind the strike was much stronger than her small hand appeared capable of, but he felt it just the same.

"You summoned me, now stop wasting my time!"

"But-but-I thought you were going to...*take me*..." Bruce stammered like an idiot.

"Take you? Take *YOU*?" She laughed, a yawning black hole opened beneath her nose. The tiny room filled with the stench of burning flesh and rich, wet soil. Even as Bruce stared into her gaping hole of death, he had to stifle the urge to dive in and swim deeper into the blackness.

She reached out again but this time she stroked his face. The skin of her hand was rough and scaly, the ragged edges scraped against the stubble along his jawline. Her head tilted sideways as she examined him with a scowl on her face, her thin lips quivered and the tip of her forked tongue danced along the slit. Her fingers dropped down to pat the lapel of his suit; then she cackled.

"You men are all so predictable. You want me to free you from your *pain*, right?"

"No, I'm not like the others. I-I-I *love* you!"

"*I love you!* Ha!" She mimicked him and he felt his heart sink. This wasn't the way he had imagined his meeting with the love of his life. He had played the scene over and over in his head for years and never had he even considered that she might *not* want him. After all, Bloody Mary was legendary in her exploits but never had he heard that she rejected any man that summoned her.

"I'm bored. All of you humans bore me. It's the same song and dance every time." She pushed herself off the sink and rose again in the air, floating just above Bruce's head and directly in front of the thin stream of light. He could no longer see her, but he could feel her presence cloaking him in the darkness.

As she bore down on him, he felt his passion quickly turn to fear and he had an uneasy feeling creeping through his chest, telling him that his plan had gone terribly wrong. She wasn't the lover he'd anticipated, the one that would take him without question and return his love with an eternal embrace. Instead, she taunted him and made him feel unworthy of even her presence.

"I just want to love you," Bruce whispered. This time it was his bowels that gave way and soaked the pants of his mighty fine wool-blend suit.

"I don't need your love. I need your fear," Bloody Mary replied, drawing back and sniffing the air for the scent of his distress. It pleased her.

Bruce inhaled sharply as the specter swept him into her arms, crushing his windpipe and severing his spine in her deadly embrace. She held him until the twitching stopped, then let his body fall to the floor.

Her work completed, the bathroom mirror beckoned for her return, but whatever might lie beyond the taped door felt much more intriguing. She floated up and retreated into the corner of the ceiling, drawing her gown around her into a cocoon.

When the tiny stream of light through the window turned to darkness, it would be safe to explore.

So she waited.

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

Kenya began writing short-form horror in her teens and won several writing awards for her creative works. She has since firmly established her place in the genre with the release of the horror collection *Daymares*; *Devil Inside*; and *The Mixtape*. Readers will find that a common trait among Kenya's stories is that, more often than not, the truly frightening monsters are human.

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The constant rattle, that intrusive low rumbling din, and that ever present migraine inducing clatter. The air conditioning in this office is older than me I swear. It sounds like ten generations of rats are living up there, feeding, scratching, gnawing. I feel like any second they are going to gnaw their way through the ceiling and swarm over me.

Sitting behind my now overly sparse work space, recently sanitized as per the office 'tidy-desk' policy, I contemplate my existence in this world. I try to convince myself there is a reason for all of this, all the while pulling an ugly gurning face as I go through the daily motions, repeating the mundane tasks as if I am a programmed robot, mumbling under my breath as I type meaningless emails to my faceless colleagues.

BANG. I look up, a little pensive at the rattle. Although the loud intrusive vibration is of course a welcome distraction from my vacuous task. It sounds somewhat like the workmen are here again, fixing — to use the term loosely — the aging system. Just one problem with that, I contemplate uneasily: there is no one here. There are no cars outside, nor any work vans. I opened up, it was my turn. I know that I am all alone here.

BANG. a second loud commotion distracts me from my unease. It's louder; it's getting closer to me. I can see the ceiling panels expand and contract with the furious motion within. What is this? I go back to my work, nervously twisting my hair. It's an anxiety trait, I've done it for years. The disquieting rumblings, a sickening dragging sound on the metal vent is disturbingly close to me. A piece of my hair, an end, snaps off.

A third intrusive bang, a ruckus louder than overhead thunder. I jump up from my swivel chair, the force causing it to roll back hard into a filing cabinet. Alarmed by my own fear, as well as the seemingly closing chaos, I edge away from my desk.

I know I am all alone here. I was alone here.

Backing myself up further, unnerved both by the ensuing commotion and my own fears of loneliness and isolation, I instinctively want to run and hide in one of the less than appealing bathroom stalls. That's what happens in the movies. It never ends well. The isolated victim hides in the bathroom, only to be gutted and tossed away like a piece of rotting meat.

I resist my urge to flee and cower, even though I think it's the somewhat sensible option. I instead drag my chair back, and wheel it over towards my possible demise. I lever myself up onto the filing cabinet and slowly push one of the ceiling tiles aside. I am confronted with the dusty innards of this deteriorating shell. This office is akin to an old tomb.

Raising myself up higher, my tiptoes dancing off the edge of the cabinet, it all seems quiet, still, just a hollow space lurking above the misery of day to day working life. The absence of anything gives me a nauseating feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Just as I turn to lower myself back to the mundane, annoyed at myself for overreacting, and amused at the same time, I sense something. Tentatively turning, it strikes me with the force of a truck, knocking me backwards from the chair, my back crunching as it hits the corner of a desk. I barely manage a scream; it's more of a silent whimper. I am overcome. There is nothing now, just blackness and a loud silence. It has me.

No more mundane. I wonder if my boss will even notice.

### **About the Author:**

Lesley-Ann Campbell was born and raised in Southport, Merseyside. She still lives here today with her soon-to-be husband Andy. Horror is her passion; she loves reading, watching and writing horror. She finds inspiration from authors such as Tim Waggoner, Hunter Shea and John F. Leonard. She is currently working on her first novel, Quicksand, and hopes to have finished her first draft by the end of 2019.

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I was 7 when I saw her. Standing in the empty hallway in my pink Barbie nightgown, a little stuffed elephant cradled in my arms as I stared up at the woman. Old in my child eyes but looking back now she couldn't have been more than 30. Her eyes seemed hallow, sunken, her face gaunt. Despite her spectral appearance, I wasn't frightened. The moment stretched for eternity but when I finally wandered free down into the kitchen for a juice box, mere minutes had passed. I can't remember the color of the carpet of that old house, nor the layout. Hell, I can't even remember the address half the time, but I remember her. I also remember excitedly chirping away at my mother in the morning about my new friend. She was more interested in the missing juice boxes I had admitted to nabbing at 2 in the morning.

I dreamt of her that summer. She'd be in the little chair in the corner of my room. Sitting in a way that had her legs disappearing into the floor. Never talking, never moving. A sense of calm about the room. Again, in the morning, I'd happily tell my mother all about her. My friend. My guardian. "Honey, eat your breakfast."

The night terrors. I still can't quite pinpoint when they started. Sometimes I feel like they must have always been there. I'd thrash about in my bed. Sometimes so violently I'd wake with bruises, scratches. My mother would trim my nails, make me sleep with mittens and yet I would still find a way to leave angry red gashes across my skin. It got to a point where my mother would place a baby monitor in my bedroom so she could hear me and wake me before I did serious harm. Sometimes though, my friend would beat her to it. These were the first real interactions I had with her. I could feel her sitting on the bed beside me, stroking my hair. Her breath a cold breeze on my forehead. It was one of those nights when my mother interrupted, frozen in my bedroom doorway clutching the baby monitor in her hand. She trembled slightly, I can remember that, her eyes wider than I had ever seen before. I told her I was okay, that my guardian woke me up. She wouldn't leave my bed that night, or many nights after.

There were many conversations behind closed doors after that. Harsh whispers that surely would have escalated into full blown fights had I not been around to hear them. I don't know what was exactly said but I could tell it was about me and my friend. My mother would no longer entertain stories about the woman in the hallway, in my dreams. My father warned me to let it go. Being a good kid, I obliged.

I was 8 and had always been a relatively healthy kid. Perhaps a cold here and there. This was different. It had come on hard and fast. I woke up unable to pry myself from the bed. When I wouldn't respond to my mother's demand to get downstairs she finally came looking, horrified at the sight. I was carried by my father into the pediatrician's office. She said it was a flu, nothing extraordinary, besides the fever that was a little higher than she had liked. The extra exhaustion everyone chalked up to the night terrors that had kept me awake throughout the week. I was ordered to bed rest. None of this I remember. I do, however, remember my friend, again in my room. Again, at my side. Always watching, her lithe fingers combing through my hair although I never felt them.

We moved while I was sick. My father said the fever became so bad they had no choice but to hospitalize me. They wouldn't tell me why we left that house. We had lived there less than a year and knowing what I do now about mortgages, it couldn't have been easy to just pack up and go. But we did all the same. My friend wasn't in the new house, she wasn't there in my chair in my dreams, she wasn't there in my nightmares with a soft tune she hummed. But the nightmares weren't really there either. They trickled away as I recovered. I haven't had one since. I only tried once to tell my mother about my friend in the new house. "Eat your breakfast!"

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My daughter is 7. She has a wild imagination that I love. I treasure the moments when I can silently observe her, deep in conversation with her imaginary friends over tea. The stories she weaves of their lives are so complex, my mother claims I wasn't much different.

It's lunch time, my mother is visiting, something she does often during the summer and I'm grateful for the company. You can only discuss Barbie's dream house for so long before you go completely insane. It's the same for my mother, only with the boat my father recently purchased on a whim, thinking he was handy enough to fix it up himself. The jury is still out.

"Mommy, do you like Abigail?" she asks, her little legs kicking in the air on the counter stool as she munches on a peanut butter sandwich.

The question confuses me, I don't know an Abigail but my mother turns white as a sheet and again, I see her tremble.

"Mom?" I question, gently touching her shoulder hoping to ground her a little.

"Mommy!"

"One-minute sweetie. Mom, are you ok?"

She shakes her head and I start to reach for my phone to call 911, fearing a stroke. She stops me. A tight grip squeezing my hand numb.

"Mommy, do you like Abigail?" she asks again, her voice impatient the way a child gets.

"Who is Abigail honey?" I reply wrenching my hand free.

"My friend."

"She isn't your friend!" my mother yells slamming a fist on the counter. "She isn't your friend and she isn't real!"

It's a side I've never seen of my mother, nor my daughter. She scrambles away from her as the older woman gets closer, voice rising with each word, scaring my child and frankly myself.

"Don't you talk to her! Don't you ever talk to her again!"

My daughter falls off the stool and I rush around the counter to console her on the floor. She's choking and crying, trying to shield herself from the yelling. I pull her into my arms and carry her out of the room. Once I have her calm in her bedroom I'm back in my kitchen.

"What the hell was that?" I screech, nerves and adrenaline still fueling me.

"You have to move."

"Move? I'm not moving. What the hell is going on with you?"

She's not answering me, just shaking her head and wildly looking about.

"Mom, who is Abigail?"

The name snaps her back to the conversation at hand. "You know."

"I don't."

"Abigail. Your Abigail."

The look of confusion must be plastered all over my face.

"You're friend."

I won't entertain the idea of ghosts. At least not then. I had always chalked my friend up to shadows, tricks of the light that a child turned into more. My mother said it herself, I had a healthy imagination. But I couldn't help watching my daughter a little more closely. Give those tea parties a better listen. She didn't bring up Abigail.

My mother was the one who set up the baby monitors. She was visiting, after weeks of no contact, mostly on my end. My husband noticed them first, curiously waving one in my face that night before bed.

"What is this?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Isn't Grace a little too old for-"

"It must've been my mother."

"Why?"

I didn't want to get into it. I just waved the question off and got into bed. After I was sure he was asleep, I turned the one on my bedside table on. The gentle sound of my daughter's breathing lulled me to sleep. The soft hum woke me back up.

I was 7. Standing there in my pink Barbie nightgown, cradling my stuffed elephant in my arms. Her hallow eyes boring into mine. It takes seconds to reach Grace's room. The door is already cracked but I open it with force all the same just in time to see a faint woman disappear in the moonlight. I spend the night in her room, and most nights thereafter.

My husband sees it first, a small bruise on her ankle about the size of a finger. She doesn't remember how it happened. Nor does she remember the scratches a few days later.

"Sometimes I have nightmares," she offers by way of explanation and a chill runs down my spine.

"Move," my mother begs. She has lit sage in one hand and an afternoon cocktail in the other. This all seems ridiculous to me but there's a part of my brain agreeing with her.

Grace is sick. It comes on strong and fast. My mother comes by every day. She doesn't mention moving or Abigail. My father, however, does.

The man who merely clapped me on the back when I got married now has tears in his eyes as he pulls me out of my daughter's bedroom. "You almost died ya know. When you were about her age. You were sick."

"What?"

"You were really sick. You kept getting worse. We did...everything."

"I don't- "

"Get out," he sighs taking both my shoulders in his hands. "You have to get out of this house."

"What are you- "

He shakes me a little to silence me. "You have to get out of this house. We did. We moved and you got better. I don't know what it is..."

"Dad, please stop."

"Abigail. We moved and maybe she couldn't find you. I don't know. You have to move."

I go back into my daughter's bedroom. I can't listen to any more of this. I also can't get my parents' concerns out of my head and finally admit defeat somewhere around midnight. Google, your best friend and worst enemy. Instead of checking the girl's symptoms however, I'm looking to see if ghosts can make you sick. My husband pulls my phone free from my hands, the look of disappointment shaming me into going to sleep.

It's not Grace's voice I hear on the monitor, a guilty pleasure I keep under my pillow hidden from John until he falls asleep. Tonight, however, he reaches over me for the device.

"What the fuck is that?" he gasps.

"Abigail."

We don't know how it came to this. A priest in our home. Neither of us are religious. Honestly, I don't even believe in God but there he is, Father Matthews, wandering the house muttering blessings. My mother follows him, her mother's rosary in her hands. She pops prayer beads like I pop Skittles and the absurdity of it all has me hysterical but John keeps it in check.

The good Father is outside Grace's bedroom when a loud crack like thunder rattles the house, shaking the pictures in the hallway off the wall. He mumbles something I hope is a prayer and not a curse before he leaves. Again, my mother begs me to move. I'm no longer interested in arguing.

Grace moves in with my parents while we look for a place. I have the responsibility of getting our house listed and it's a struggle not to tell the real estate agent we have to get the hell out of here because of a ghost. Seems more plausible than we built up our dream house and now we want the next big adventure. I haven't seen Abigail but I can feel her. It's not the feeling I remember from childhood and I find myself cranking on the heat in mid-August.

It doesn't start small, the physical activity. It was quiet for awhile but she came back with a bang. My phone was yanked from my hand as the kitchen exploded in a whirl of pots, pans, and dishes one morning. The high-pitched shriek sent me out of the room while my mother screamed from the other end of the call trying to understand what was going on.

We were on edge, neither leaving the house without the other. My husband who had never been afraid of anything as far as I knew now peed with the bathroom door open. We were ready to throw in the towel and just move in with my parents.

A late-night phone call is every parents' nightmare. I got to the phone first, too awake for the hour.

"It's Grace," my mother sobbed.

She didn't say anything else and I didn't ask. We were shoes on and heading for the door in seconds. The baby monitor crackled to life even though I had had them both turned off since Grace left. The soft humming was more ominous than any sound I had ever heard.

The ambulance beat us there of course. They have Grace in a blanket, her little body shivering. The fever is at a dangerous high and they want to take her to the hospital. My husband jumps into the ambulance before I can even process what is happening properly. My parents try to pull me into the car but I push them on without me. "I need to talk to Abigail."

She's waiting, in my old bedroom, where Grace had been staying. I can't see her. I can never see her any more but her image is forever burned into my mind. I stare at the children's chair in the corner, feeling more confident if I have a place to focus.

"What do you want?" I ask. "You can't have Grace." My voice is firm, something that surprises me given the circumstances.

There isn't an answer, a verbal one anyway. Just a whisper of a breeze on my forehead, chilly for this time of year.

"Abigail..." a tear slides down my cheek. I know this will never end. I can hide Grace away but you'll find her again, the way you found me and my daughter will be faced with this dilemma, as will her child.

Grace is 8 when she first sees me in the hallway. It's 2 in the morning and she's standing there in my old t-shirt, a get well soon bear in her arms. I can't help but think I look a fright, my face gaunt, eyes hollow, but she doesn't seem to be afraid. Instead she stands there, eyes roving over my spectral frame. The moment seems like an eternity but when she scampers away toward the kitchen, my eyes catch the clock and it's only been minutes.

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

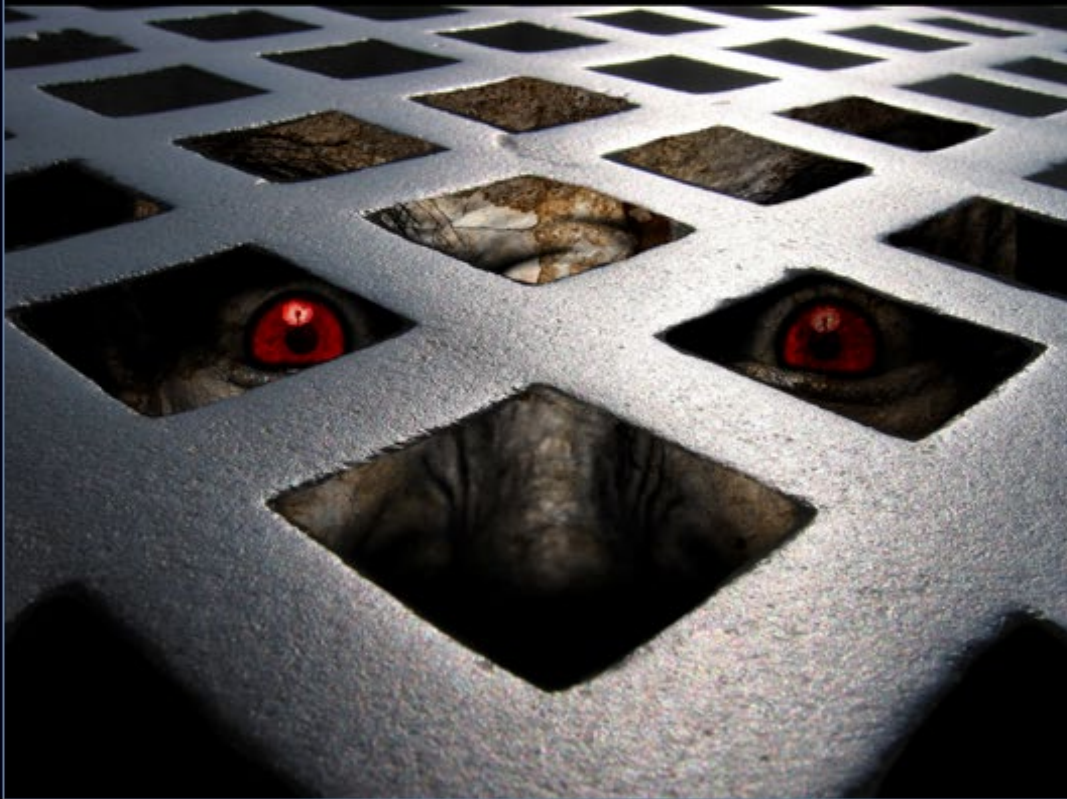
When Clover Swan isn't hard at work weaving tales of the spooky and macabre, she can be found immersed in her photographic work both in front of and behind the camera or perusing the shelves of her favorite oddity shop.

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SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS

# WHAT DWELLS BELOW



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

**Featured Author | Mercedes M. Yardley**

Mercedes M. Yardley is a dark fantasist who wears poisonous flowers in her hair. She is the author of *Beautiful Sorrows*, the Stabby Award-winning *Apocalyptic Montessa and Nuclear Lulu: A Tale of Atomic Love*, *Pretty Little Dead Girls*, and *Detritus in Love*. She recently won the prestigious Bram Stoker Award for her novella *Little Dead Red* and was a Bram-Stoker nominee for her short story "Loving You Darkly." Mercedes lives and creates in Las Vegas.

*SCP: For anyone who hasn't read your work can you explain a little about your style and how you developed it?*

**MMY:** I'd say that, for the most part, I write sorrow and loveliness. Beautiful darkness. I also have a humorous, swaggering style. I've always written with humor, and that voice came very naturally. The lyrical voice took some work. It required me getting out of my own way. I thought my language was too flowery or unusual.

But when I finally said, "Hey, let's shut that inner editor off and see what flows forth," I found out that I was writing about ghosts and shattered true loves and serial killers. I write about Jack the Ripper's daughter and a woman destined to die. I've found my niche now, but it didn't come easily. I thought I needed to write like everybody else.

*SCP: What is one book that you think everyone should read?*

**MMY:** I often recommend *Get It Done When Your Depressed* by Julie A. Fast and John D. Preston. Creatives especially tend to suffer from depression, and it's difficult to create worlds when you're struggling to get up in the morning. This book discusses depression and ways to move forward in a matter-of-fact manner. It doesn't try to convince you that everything is in your head, and it doesn't sugarcoat anything, either. It's like, "This sucks, but it's how your life is right now. Let's do this thing." I find it quite helpful.

*SCP: What book are you currently reading?*

**MMY:** I'm always reading several things at one time. Right now I'm reading the ARC of Brian Kirk's book titled *Will Haunt You*. It releases on March 14 and believe me, you want a copy of it. I'm also reading *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty, and *Violent Mind: The 1976 Psychological Assessment of Ted Bundy* by Al Carlisle. Mainly, though, I'm reading over 1300 submissions to both Crystal Lake's *Tales From The Lake Volume 6* (that I'm coediting with Eugene Johnson) and Shock Totem Magazine. My eyes are ready to fall out of my face, I'm reading so much.

*SCP: How do you balance your personal life with your writing life?*

**MMY:** Oh, balance. That's the struggle. I don't balance as well as I'd like. One day it's all about the kidlets. We're doing small crafts and reading together and I'm trying to feed them nutritious foods. The next day it's all about the writing and the kids have gone feral.

It's a madhouse. Gorgeous chaos. Perhaps subconsciously I like it this way. It's quite conducive to the muse.

*SCP: What inspires you?*

**MMY:** I'm inspired by beauty. I'm also inspired by ugliness and rot. It's amazing how closely beauty and horror are intertwined. Strength and suffering. I'm inspired by finding the gems in ordinary, everyday things. It adds sparkle to the mundane.

*SCP: Why horror and what is the response you get from people when you tell them what you write?*

**MMY:** I've always been a dark little girl. I'm attracted to the horror and dark fantasy genre because I like my literature to have teeth. Quite a few people back away as soon as they hear what I write. They'll say, "Oh, I don't read horror." Which is fine, but most people don't really know what horror entails. It isn't all blood and gore. It's dread and fear and emotion and excitement. All of the things that make life interesting. People act like I made a conscious choice to write in the horror genre. It wasn't like that at all. I write, and this is what comes out. What makes people think I have a choice?

*SCP: Have you noticed any discrimination for women that want to work in horror, or do you feel that as long as a person is talented and works at it, they can succeed?*

**MMY:** It's hard to break out into any market. I wouldn't say there is out and out discrimination, but I'd say that literary relationships had already been formed and it's tough being the new kid on the block in any situation. Being a woman felt like a bit of a setback originally, but now that people are aware of gender bias and are actively soliciting women for their anthologies and whatnot, it's a very different landscape. On the other hand, I don't want to be invited to something simply because I'm a woman. It's offensive to me whenever I'm invited to an anthology and the person says, "So-and-So said we need another woman and so I'm asking you." I usually politely decline those invitations. I want to be included because I have talent, and because my work moves people, and because somebody somewhere finds value in what I do. But the best thing to do is just roll with it and make the most of the opportunities that come your way.

You can reach Mercedes at <http://www.mercedesmyardley.com>.





MERCEDES M. YARDLEY

# LITTLE DEAD RED

*& OTHER  
STORIES*

"Dear Boss," he wrote in his careful, exquisite hand. "I keep on hearing the police have caught me..." Time. Care. Dipping the pen in the ink pot again and again. Making love to the paper with his words. Handwriting perfect. Everything, perfect.

"I am down on whores and shan't quit ripping them..."

He was a man of precision. A man of great attention. Spectacles always clean, shirt always tucked in neatly. It was all about appearances, wasn't it? To show your esteem? To show your respect?

Even a prudent man has demons. Even a quiet man has something sinister inside. He never would have believed this, but then, that was before.

"Daddy?"

"What, Polly?"

"Mama said I should run in and tell you goodnight."

He turned away from his letter, stopping the ink pot. He opened his arms and his little girl ran into them.

"Be good, my darling one. Dream of sweets."

"I will, Daddy."

She was ribbons and lace and sleeping slippers, smelling clean after her bath. He slipped her a candy from the drawer of his desk, and put his finger over his lips slowly. She smiled back, and flew to the door like a bright bird.

"The next job I do I shall clip the lady's ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly, wouldn't you?"

A promise is a promise is a promise.

He was good at keeping promises.

\*\*\*

Three days later. One night, two women.

The first? Ah, what a disappointment. He was almost immediately interrupted by a man in a carriage. As he fled, he regretted the sloppy slash and dash. Regretted the way it left him numb.

He felt tears in his eyes but didn't wipe them away, and they didn't fall.

He made up for it with the second woman. Took the time. Explored her face and body with his knife, more deeply and in depth than any lover. Kept his promise, as he is wont to do, and left her earlobe barely attached.

He hovered in the dark alleys of the East End, his coat neatly buttoned. His eyes full of shine. His knife tucked securely in his belt, the one on it blood going brackish and ugly, but he didn't want to clean it not yet. It was proof. It tied him to her.

*Find me, he thought. Just find me. Here I wait.*

The police ran around in a shiny-booted panic. Ran past him, several times, even. Each time, his mouth parted in breathless hope, his eyebrows arched in expectation.

"I have a daughter," he said calmly to one as he scurried past. "She deserves better."

The policeman cast him a look over his shoulder, but that was it. That was all.

The London fog rolled past. Like a man shunned for an invitation, a husband whose wife didn't look up when he entered the room, he felt small.

Time passed. He cleaned his knife thoroughly with a rag. Tossed the bloody scrap on the ground. The rag caught the moonlight like something ghostly, the remnant of a person once special to somebody. He waited some more.

Nobody came.

He walked slowly home.

They never found him. They never found him even though he *stood* there, even though he *waited*. Time to up the ante, to force them to look in a way they hadn't been looking before.

A box. Small and precise. Something imprecise inside. Something that had been a treasure, something necessary and functioning, but now it was nothing.

His hair fell over his eyes. He pushed it aside.

"Sor," he wrote. His penmanship was long and loopy, scrawled and uneven. Ink dripped on the paper and he cursed gently, tried to wipe it away. "I sent you half the Kidne I took from one woman and prasarved it for you..." He frowned at the words. Was this how he spelled that? Why did everything look so odd? He was a gentleman of education, of taste, but this looked like it was written by another hand, by another man or monster entirely. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. Shut his eyes, hard, and thought of his schooling, of his business, of the successes that he had earned for himself. He was that man. This was only a letter. It is easy for a man of learning to write a simple letter.

He dipped his pen in the ink pot and touched it to the paper.

"...tother piece I fried and ate it was very nise."

He steepled his fingers and put them to his lips.

A knock on the door. Soft. Gentle.

"Daddy?"

"Just...just a minute, darling."

The box. He closed it, slid it under his desk. It smelled of blood and wine, but surely a little girl wouldn't realize that, yes? Surely she'd be too busy thinking of pretty thing. Of kittens and trinkets and perhaps something her father could buy her? Yes. He'd offer to pick something up for her, the next time he was out. The next time he came back from that place.

"Come in."

She didn't fly this time, but walked in quietly, on her toes. Why? Ah, yes, she was practicing walking softly, like a ballerina. He had forgotten.

"What delicate kitten feet," he said, and kissed her forehead. "What dainty, beautiful steps,"

"Daddy, do you have to go out tonight?"

He paused. Quieted. His mustache remained completely still, not touched by his breath at all.

"Why do you ask?"

She looked up at him with her little girl eyes. Whore eyes. No, little girl eyes.

"Because I miss you, Daddy. We used to play games in the nursery. Mama says you're sick and that's why you leave. Do you see doctors, Daddy? Is that why you go?"

He took off his spectacles, polished them.

"The whore tells you it's a sickness, does she? Some things aren't for little girls to know about."

His daughter blinked, too rapidly, and he realized his voice had changed, that he wasn't her daddy, but something else. He tried to soften it.

"Would you like a necklace?"

"A...what?"

"Would you like a necklace? The next time I go out. To deal with my...sickness."

"A necklace?"

"A necklace! A necklace! Are you too stupid to understand what I'm saying?"

Her hands flew to her mouth, and she took a step back.

He ran his hands through his hair.

"Oh, my darling. Oh, my little girl. Forgive me. Forgive your tired, old father. Come here. Please."

He held his arms out to her, as he had done so many times, and she cautiously walked into them. He buried his face in her hair, smelling childhood and womanhood and rot. He pulled away.

"Go. Go from me."

She padded silently to the door, a princess in her nightgown.

"Darling, before you leave, I have a question for you."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"You're good at your studies. How do you spell the word 'kidney'?"

"Kidney?"

"Yes, like the one we had at dinner."

"It was very good. Why didn't you eat any?"

"Never mind that. Kidney. Spell it for me."

"K-I-D-N-E-Y. Kidney. I...I think."

He looked at his letter. Frowned.

"Did I...spell it right?"

Her eyes, so wide. Her face, so open. Perfect. In one piece, unseamed, seamless, without seams.

She wanted to badly to please him.

He smiled at her. "Beautiful job, my precious one. Dream sweet dreams tonight."

She scurried away, forgetting her ballet walk, and he heard her laughing as she ran to the nursery. His heart ached.

He turned back to his letter.

"Catch me when you can Mishter Lusk."

He stared at the page, the red ink. Felt the box under his desk with the toe of his fine shoe. Noticed the plain space on the upper right portion of the letter. Where was this written from?

He sighed, took out his pen again. His hand shook.

"From Hell."

\*\*\*

Covered with blood, this time. There was no way around it. Not after what he had done. Hours. Hours and hours with this one. In a room with a window, even. Would somebody walk by? Wouldn't they *please* walk by? She had screamed, "Murder!" and his soul had thrilled. Surely somebody would respond to that! To the cries of a beautiful woman begging for her life! But...no. Could any city really become so callous? So careless?"

"I'm sorry, Polly," he had said.

"That...that's not my name, sir!"

He wept while he used his knife.

\*\*\*

He could hardly find his ink pot. It had rolled on the floor. He scrabbled through flurries of papers, and finally decided on a creased envelope.

"Why, old boss?" he scrawled. He pressed so hard that the nib of his pen tore through the paper. He swore and tried again.

"You though your-self very clever I reckon. But you made a mistake. You'll never catch me. Clews and hints I gave you, and you still didnt find me. I have you when you don't expect it and I keep my word as you soon see and rip you up. ha ha I love my work an I shant stop until I get buckled and even then watch out for your old pal Jacky.

Catch me if you Can

Jack the Ripper

Sorry about the blood still messy from the last one. What a pretty necklace I gave her."

He stood up, trembling. Wiped his red hand across his face, leaving streaks across his stubbled skin. He stuffed the letter into his pocket and reached down to pull the ribbon from Polly's beautiful hair. Patted her cheek, or what was left of it. He wrapped her ribbon around his fist, straightened, and closed the door behind him without a sound.

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