

# The Sirens Call



*Halloween 2021*

*issue 55*

*A Dark Fiction  
& Horror eZine!*

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

*Featured Artist:  
Victor Hugo  
Palacios Mendez*

*Featured Project:  
Cult of the Box*

*Featured Filmmaker:  
Mike Lera*

*Featured Author:  
Angela Yuriiko Smith*

*Featured Book:  
'Bitter Suites'*

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Eve stood near the window her eyes fixed on a figure beyond the glass. The man lay in a patch of gore covered earth, his bloodied face staring up at her. Amber light from the outdoor lamp pooled about him, revealing his shredded down jacket and the place where his stomach had once been. The contents had already spilled onto the leaf strewn ground.

Eve backed away from the window. She hurried to the front door and finding it secure, snatched the rifle from the rack nearby. She rushed to the kitchen.

The back door was closed when she entered the room, but it wasn't locked. Eve turned the deadbolt, clicked it into place, then dropped to her knees. She pulled the pet door in and latched it tight.

An animal howled in the distance. The sound pierced the quiet and then died away. Eve shivered. Her heart knocked against her ribcage as she exited the kitchen and returned to the living room window. She looked out.

The corpse had risen to its feet. It stood ten feet from her, steam rising from the stomach wound.

Glass shattered as Eve broke out a pane with the rifle's muzzle. She thrust it through the new hole, then aimed and squeezed the trigger. Her shot went wide.

The corpse took another step and with impossible speed, appeared a foot away from her. It was close, so close she could read the logo on its torn jacket. The tiny, embroidered medal on the left-hand side proclaimed an affiliation with Gold Medal Movers.

The corpse stared through a mask of blood. It bared its fangs, sharp and white.

Eve caught movement from the corner of her eye. A blur of grey and white appeared from the right, and she glimpsed sharp claws and even sharper teeth just before the corpse's head tumbled to the ground.

Out in the darkness, beyond the pool of light, someone laughed. Eve renewed her grip on the rifle.

The song, *Evil Woman* by ELO suddenly filled the air. Eve jumped at the sound and fumbled for the cell phone in her pocket. She pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

"Crap!" she whispered.

The words IGNORE and ANSWER appeared under a picture of a woman with silver-colored hair. Eve's finger hovered over IGNORE. She hit ANSWER instead.

"Hi, Mom."

"It's seven o'clock, Eve. You were supposed to call when you got to the new house."

"I'm sorry. I got busy moving things in."

"The movers are supposed to do that."

"They weren't that reliable." She frowned at the head. "I wish I'd never invited them in the house."

"I told you not to use Gold Medal Movers. You should've used Acme. Or better yet never moved at all."

Eve gritted her teeth and then set the phone down on the windowsill. She transferred the call to speakerphone.

"Mom, do we have to talk about this now?"

"I saw a news report about the area you moved to. Don't you know there are werewolves where you live?"

"Yes, I do. But they're not a problem."

"I keep imagining you up there, lying among the trees, torn to pieces. You know it's Halloween don't you—and a full moon? Did you put silver bullets in your rifle?"

"Yes."

"Your father says keep one in the chamber at all times."

"I am. I have been. But I already told you. There aren't that many werewolves up here. Our big problem is vampires."

A figure dashed past the window. Eve tracked it with the rifle, but before she could squeeze off a shot, it vanished.

"Vampires aren't that bad." Her mother continued. "At least they're well-mannered. They can't even enter the house without an invitation. Werewolves just barge right in."

Something hit the side of the house and a loud snarl rent the air.

"What was that?" her mother asked.

"Nothing. Can I call you back later?"

"I'll be asleep later. Your father has to work in the morning. Which reminds me. How is that boyfriend of yours? Is the Bug Man still at work?"

"I wish you'd quit calling him that. His name is Rick. And he's not a bug man. He's an exterminator."

"What's the difference? He kills bugs, doesn't he?"

"No, he doesn't. He—"

The tinkle of shattered glass sounded from the back bedroom. Eve turned. "Mom, I gotta go."

"What's going on in there? Eve, are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Tell Daddy I've got a garlic hollow point in the chamber. Love you!"

"Eve—"

Eve hit END. She aimed the rifle at the hallway.

"I know you're there," she called to the shadows. "It's hard to hide when you smell like death."

A man with the face of a Greek god stepped into the room. Both his black baseball cap and jacket bore the Gold Medal Movers logo.

"Where's the other one?" Eve asked. "There were three of you before dark."

"Your dog got him," the man answered. He grinned, fangs glistening. "I've never seen a dog so big. It's a shame I had to break him in half."

Eve's finger tightened on the trigger. "You'll pay for that."

"Will I, Miss Dandridge? You're a terrible shot."

"You think so?"

"You missed Henry by a mile. And you didn't even try to shoot Benjamin."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"I think it does. If your dog hadn't interfered, you'd be dead by now."

"Why don't you take another step? Then we'll see how bad a shot I am."

The vampire dropped into a nearby chair and brushed the arm with one finger. His nail cut into the fabric, leaving a thin slit.

"You are a fascinating woman, Miss Dandridge. I don't think I've met anyone quite like you."

"You must not get out much."

"And such a biting sense of humor. Why you're absolutely fearless. Not a shiver. No trembling. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Not really. But then, I've never been afraid of vampires. Killer clowns are much scarier."

The vampire shook his head and laughed. "You amaze me, Miss Dandridge. Tell you what. If you drop your weapon now, I'll let you live out your days as my personal slave."

"What'll you do if I don't?"

"Kill you. In the worst way, of course."

"Do you mind if I talk to my boyfriend first? We just moved in together and we agreed we'd discuss all our major life decisions before acting. You know how it is. Besides, I'm not your type."

The vampire's grin broadened. His yellow eyes glimmered. He rose to his feet.

"You're exactly my type. I think I'll keep you."

"Before you make such a big decision, you should know something first."

"What's that?"

"I don't have a dog."

Clawed hands suddenly seized the vampire's arms and spun him around. The werewolf towered above him, its human body covered in white and grey fur. It sank its teeth into the monster's shoulder. The vampire shrieked.

They grappled against one another, the vampire struggling to escape. He reached for the werewolf's face and gouged its eyes. Blinded, the creature fell back with a howl. The vampire turned on Eve.

She pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot deafened, and the acrid smell of garlic filled the air. The monster took one step and fell to the floor, eyes wide.

Eve crossed to the body and kicked it.

"Don't touch that," a voice like gravel said. Eve looked up into the werewolf's face and smiled.

"He isn't dead?" she said.

"Not until the head's off," he replied, slipping past her. He took the monster's head in one hand.

"Oh, Honey. Please, don't do that."

"What?"

"Don't take his head off in here. It'll make such a mess."

"You want me to take it outside?"

"Please."

"Alright."

He dragged the body to the front door. Eve unlocked it. Before he could step out, she planted a kiss on his furry cheek.

"What was that for?"

"Saving my life."

"You saved your own life. You shot him."

"You're sweet, Rick."

"Wish your mother thought so. Did you tell her about me yet?"

"I tried to set her straight, but she wouldn't listen. She thinks you exterminate bugs, not monsters."

"I guess we'll have to tell her in person."

"Ok. But we'll have to wait for an invitation. There's nothing my mom hates more than an ill-mannered werewolf."

#### About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Head of Publishing and Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net, and an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing.

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#### The Witch | *Danny Nicholas*

*I'm an evil witch*, I thought as the needle went deep inside the apple, and pumped the syringe empty.

*Yes, a jealous witch, poisoning an apple for a princess far fairer than I.*

I didn't need a magic mirror to tell me what was happening under my nose. It was as clear as lipstick on a shirt collar.

He was bewitched. The maid had ensnared the unsightly traits of my husband's urges.

Well, *double, double, toil and trouble*, it ends tonight, on All Hallows' Eve.

I *take* my apple, which was both a trick and a treat, and picked a costume. What will I be tonight? Why, a wicked witch, of course.

I returned to the party, where—*surprise, surprise*, they were having drinks together.

My Prince and his Princess were startled to find me standing behind them.

"Would you like an apple, my dear?" I asked her, playfully cackling.

"Is it special?" the maid said, playing up her costume as the naive princess.

"Yes, take a bite and all your wishes will come true."

She took the apple and brought it to her lips, then drunkenly giggled. "What sort of Princess I'd be if I didn't share it?"

The stupid girl tossed it in a tank of water full of apples. Before I could shout, children dunked their heads, one by one, and brought up an apple—one of which—had to be mine.

Alone, crying in *front* a mirror. My god, I thought, I am an evil witch.

#### About the Author:

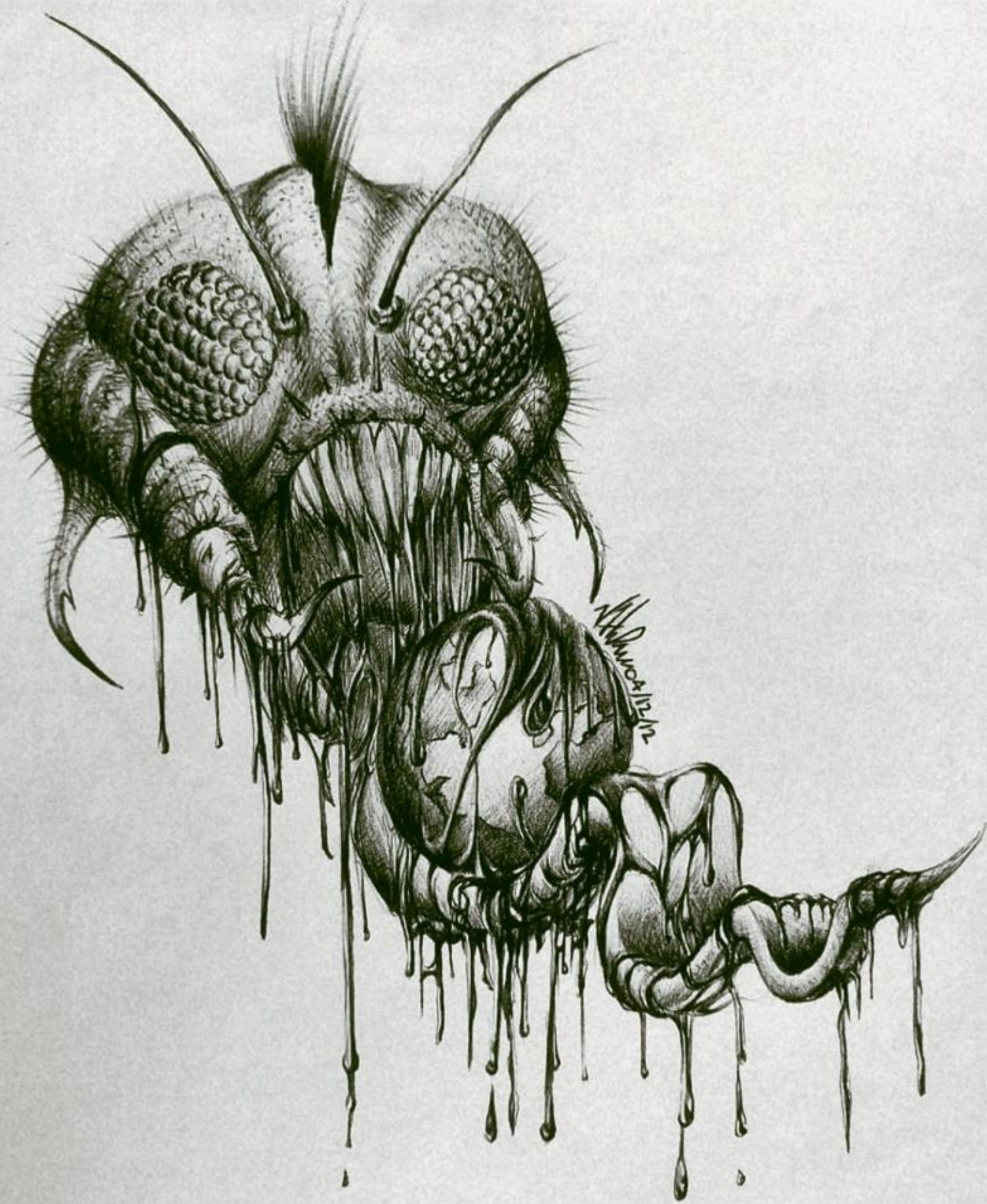
Danny Nicholas writes, particularly, stuff involving ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties. When he isn't writing or reading, Danny spends his time painting, drawing, and making comics. Danny is currently working for the Lafourche Parish Library. He lives in the small, quiet town of Kraemer, Louisiana, just outside the city of Thibodaux.

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Jojo stretched out sticky hands. "I want more candyfloss!"

Her witch's hat wobbled, whilst around them the hectic screams of the funfair, both human and mechanical, nearly deafened her older sister, Lill.

"Hands off! This skirt cost me a week's wages. You'll be sick the amount you've had to eat. Mum will kill me."

Jojo pouted her blue-painted lips, frowning and drew breath in preparation for a nuclear scale tantrum. Her sister, desperate to distract her, shoved Jojo into the next empty car on the Mini Ghouls' Ride as the carnie guy yelled, "All aboard, if you're not too scared!"

As the gears clanked Lill waved 'bye, fake-beaming at her puce-faced sticky-fisted sibling, whilst heaving a sigh of relief and thrusting money at the carnie. She'd been childminding for hours and Halloween was hell when you were over eight-years-old.

Turning to her boyfriend Lill wrapped herself around him and began to seriously snog, ignoring Jojo's frustrated wails, which were blissfully cut off when the black-painted doors slammed behind her car with a soft 'whump'.

Inside the dimly-lit, cobweb-bedecked tunnel Jojo, alone for the first time that day, fell silent. There was no point howling now she was on her own. But she'd get Lill back later. And that soppy boyfriend of hers. Tom or Tim? Her black-ringed eyes swivelled right then left, taking in the painted-on witches' faces and the skeleton family dangling on the walls. They were a bit creepy and she began to wish Lill was with her. The air smelled weird too, musty and there was no breeze.

Jojo licked the last of the candyfloss' pink sugar crystals off her fingers, chewing instead on her pigtails, while the car trundled past a forest filled with fairies, twinkling with golden lights and packs of pixies capering around the fire. Jojo smiled, she liked this one. It was cute and safe. The next tableau revealed a cave filled with grinning trolls and tiger cubs playing together. The trolls had green hair. She began to relax and enjoy the ride.

Two carts in front of her Jojo could just about make out the shadowy outlines of a pair of taller, older kids. They were clutching each other and shrieking. Jojo frowned, thinking them stupid. She wasn't behaving like that. She wasn't afraid.

A dark shape slid out of an alcove hidden in the wall; its fluid shadow flowed and smothered the two older kids, spreading like an ink stain on paper. There was a high-pitched yelp, then a squelchy gurgle, ending in a hiccup, followed by silence.

Jojo stared ahead, squinting her eyes. She couldn't be sure, but was there only one shadow in the car now? Or was it merely hiding the other person behind it? The shadow seemed fatter and squatter than before. As she watched it oozed and reshaped, growing a head from out of the inky mass. She wriggled, uneasy on the hard metal seat.

Jojo's uneasiness ratcheted up another notch or two when the black mass with the bobbly head on top, began to slow-crawl over the backs of the intervening carts, across the links, drawing nearer to her. She sniffed—smelling liquorice and something else she didn't recognize. She balled her hands into fists, like Lill had shown her how to do, ready for a fight in the playground.

The black mass loomed above her head. Now she saw it had grown sausage-like arms, ending in swollen distorted hands, with fat legs ending in flabby feet, with no shoes.

In the sickly light of the tunnel Jojo at last saw its face—the white pallor, red as cherry lips and black button eyes. Like her, she realized, he was painted for Halloween.

"Which monster are you?" Jojo asked, staring up at the giant, hands still balled up. "I'm a witch with a wart on my nose." She pointed it out. The shadow creature didn't reply and Jojo wondered about trying to get out of the cart and running away, but the gap between the wall and the cart was too narrow to allow any such attempt. She was trapped.

The shadow creature's red lips stretched wider, revealing white pointed teeth and a thick lolling tongue, which stretched out, reaching, reaching down to Jojo's hands, uncurling her fingers and licking the last remnants of the candyfloss away. It tickled, and wasn't unpleasant. Like a dog.

"You taste of yummy sugar, little girl. I could eat you all up."



“That’s ‘cos of the candyfloss, silly. That’s not me. I’m a human being. You can’t eat human beings.”

The car creaked into life again, moving slower than before, as though weighted down by the new arrival. A handful of plastic bats flapped above Jojo’s head and a smiling gnome popped up beside her. Jojo laughed and reached out to touch the bell on the gnome’s hat, whilst all the time the creature’s hands stroked her hair, and its gaping mouth hovered centimetres above Jojo’s face. Three wooden witches draped in black cloaks slipped past, staring blindly at the odd couple, the cauldron beside them blowing out curls of steam.

“I want to eat you all up, little girl.” The creature’s speech was slurred and deep.

Jojo giggled. “You’re funny.”

“You have no idea how funny I can be.”

The cherry lips opened wider than Jojo’s head, she heard the jaw bone click. She didn’t like that sound.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

A long slimy tongue wrapped around her nose and lips, suffocating and silencing her. There was a succulent slurping sound. Then a burp which echoed around the tunnel’s fibreglass walls. The cars jerked onwards, hitting the double doors at the end of the ride, but not passing through them. The black shadowy mass slid away into the bowels of the structure, slipping into the cracks and moving rapidly.

\*\*\*

Outside Lill stood waiting, but oddly the Ghoul Train didn’t reappear. The carnie operating the ride had vanished and a ‘closed’ notice appeared on the kiosk. Lill hadn’t noticed when, as she’d been occupied with her boyfriend, Troy.

The funfair’s rides and lights were being switched off all around her, and when she glanced at her phone she was shocked to see an hour had passed. Troy stood, looking zoned out, as though he’d been smoking a spliff instead of a boring fag.

Her phone trilled. The caller ID showed—‘Home’.

“Yes, Mum? OK—what? Jojo’s come home on her own?” She shrugged off her paramour’s groping hands. “Get off, Troy. Dunno what’s going on but Jojo’s only gone and legged it back home. I’m going to kill my little sister when I next see her.”

The couple walked past rows of boarded-up kiosks, shuttered caravans and the hulks of darkened rides. The whole funfair felt dead, even ghost-like. Lill shivered. How the hell had everyone disappeared so bloody fast?

She left Troy at his flat, walking fast for the last stretch, past closed-up shops, the battered off-licence with the spiderweb broken window and the wasteground where nothing good ever happened, and into the brightly lit foyer of the block of flats where home was on the fifth floor.

“I’m back, Mum! Where’s Jojo?”

She noticed her mum’s phone lying on the floor, cracked and hissing static. “Mum? Where are you?”

Lill glimpsed a flurry of shadows in the living room, flowing over the saggy sofa, running over the carpets she smelled liquorice mixed with the smell of rotting bins and last of all she saw Jojo’s witch’s hat, her sister’s much-loved Halloween costume, resting atop of the moving mass of shadows as it surged towards her—eager to feed.

### About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK with her family and four rescue animals, and is often on the moor with her Borador, Roxy. She also swims, sings, tutors, edits for an indie press and watches a lot of films - horror to those from the Golden Age of Hollywood. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant.

Twitter: [@AlysonFaye2](https://twitter.com/AlysonFaye2)



"Why won't you die already?" Mark screamed at the shrouded figure holding a blood-soaked sickle.

He brought his revolver up and fired his remaining three shots directly at the killer. The figure stood still for a moment before starting to slowly jog towards him. Mark turned to run and collided with Amy. The two fell to the ground and he scrambled back from her in surprise.

"I thought you were dead!" he gasped.

"Well I'm not," she said getting to her feet. She held out her hand for him to grab, "We gotta go now!"

Mark quickly got off the ground and the two started sprinting away from the deranged killer that was after them. The two booked it out of the parking lot and kept going. Mark noticed a gas station across the street and headed straight for it.

"What are you doing?" Amy yelled.

"I've got an idea!" he shouted.

The two continued their sprint over to the gas station where Mark started pulling all the nozzles out of the pumps. He made sure that gas was slowly pouring out of each one before moving to the next. Amy deduced his plan and started helping him. The feeling of someone closing in on them made Mark look over his shoulder to see the hooded figure less than fifty feet from the gas station.

"That's good enough!" Mark shouted at Amy, "Now run!"

He watched her take off before pulling the lighter out of his pocket. Mark waited for the killer to get closer to him before dropping it on the ground. He sprinted as fast as he could from the fire that quickly consumed the station. Mark dove to the ground as a large explosion fired off behind him. He scrambled over to Amy and took her hand.

"It's okay," he said trying to comfort her, "It's all over now."

"He killed everyone," Amy whimpered as tears started to form in her eyes. She shook her head, "Dante, Taylor, Max, Kelly...even Kevin...they're all dead!"

"I know, I know," Mark whispered, "But we did it. We did it for them."

A loud chuckling sent an icy terror flowing through Mark's veins. He turned back towards the flames and saw a figure walking through the fire. It slowly stepped out of the flames and its burnt face became visible to them.

"Rich?" Amy gasped in surprise. She shook her head, "This can't be happening you're..."

"Dead?" the figure answered for her, "I was...thanks to you." He pointed at the two with his sickle before continuing, "It's been ten years since you killed me! But it looks like I'm finally paying you back for it."

"Hey man!" Mark said standing up, "It was an accident. We didn't mean to hurt you. It was a joke! It was just a prank."

"Really?" Rich chuckled, "It was one hell of a joke then." He pulled up the burnt robe to show a large hole in his abdomen, "'Cause the punchline killed me!"

"Come on man," Mark pleaded, "We're sorry. We really didn't mean to hurt you." He shook his head, "We're sorry man. Can you forgive us?"

"I forgive you," Rich said quietly. He stood completely still for a moment just staring at Mark. Suddenly, he chuckled his sickle and watched as it flew directly into Mark's chest. "I forgive, but I haven't forgotten," Rich smiled as he slowly moved forward, "Justice must be served."

"Oh my god!" Amy hysterically cried as she watched Mark bleed out in front of her.

She noticed Rich slowly approaching out of the corner of her eye and scrambled to her feet. Amy looked at the burnt killer as he flashed her a sinister smile. She immediately sprinted away as Rich bent down and ripped his sickle from Mark's dying body.

"Go ahead and run Amy!" he shouted, "I love a good chase." He laughed as he slowly jogged after her.

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

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing. He is also a regular contributor to HorrorTree and Siren's Call Publications.

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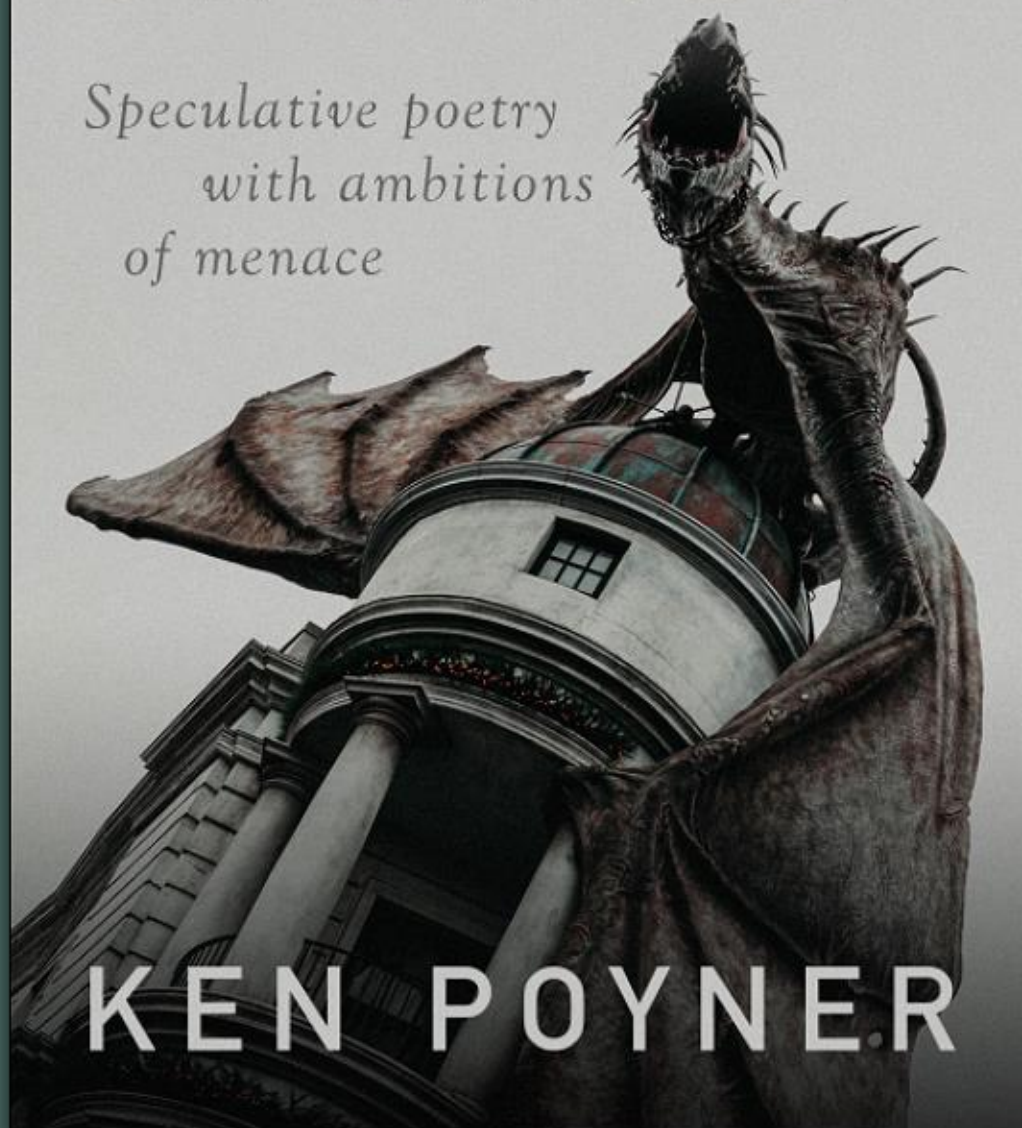
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*One small white lie unfurls and takes down all sinners.*

"Come out, come closer, my lamb," the voice said, waking us both. As my girl kissed me first and then our son, she told me she knew she was the lamb.

She took a deep breath and pulled on her smock. I watched from our bed, rooted by terror, as she followed its call. I didn't follow her. Beads of sweat dripped from my forehead and collected in my beard despite it being the coldest night of the year. The linen wick of our olive lamp had long since extinguished and our room was as black inside as it was out. I could almost hear her heart pounding—fast, troubled—from the far side of the room as she tiptoed towards the door. In the weak slit of light the moon proffered, I saw her face, as pale as ash and her eyes, tired yet wide, fully dilated, so full of fear. She stopped still, both present and lost, and looked back at me.

"What the fuck was that?" I mouthed, the movement of my lips catching her attention as she stood, bracing for exit, but before she had time to reply, the voice creaked through the dark of night again, whispering so quietly that our son didn't stir, yet resonating in our ears alone with the volume of one thousand howling wolves.

"Come to the courtyard. Alone. Get the fuck out here now, bitch—before I hang you to the rafters, slit your throat, drip you out. Before I stone you, him and your bastard child to death."

I wrapped my arm around our baby and pulled him closer. Was I protecting him, or him, I? I tried but failed to muster the courage to take the large rock from under our bed to challenge whatever waited outside.

My girl, shivering, edged out into the yard, like the creep of ice forming on a lake. She left a puddle of urine on the floor behind her which shone in the moonlight.

"I know what you've done, slut. Liar. Now you'll suffer your comeuppance." The voice pranged through the cold night air again, like a skewer to my eardrums. Our baby stirred and started to cry. I wrapped him tightly in swaddling, stood up and held him in the way he liked to be held and paced the floor of our room, patting and rubbing his back, trying to soothe him, too afraid to venture outside.

Over my child's bawling, I heard my girl speak back, her voice trembling. What was this beastly presence? Why were they beckoning her outside with threats of violence in the middle of the night?

"What do you want? Who are you?" she said.

"You know who I am and what I want. You lied to everyone."

My child's screams rose to a shrill peak as a crash of thunder shook our hut. My girl returned moments later, shivering, screaming and crying louder than the baby was. I took her into my arms and tried to calm the pair of them.

Her tears continued until sunrise, which had felt like it might never have come. At dawn, she fell asleep exhausted, so did our boy, so I left them to rest.

\*\*\*

Days passed, and my girl told me nothing. I asked and asked about what had happened that night. She shrank within herself when I broached the subject, never answering my questions. She grew distant. Her touch, her kiss, it all ran dry. In days, her hair turned white, and in weeks, her skin aged years. As months passed, she stopped talking and sleeping completely. She remained awake, thinning in her face, in her limbs, her bosom. All of her curves, her padding, appeared to be collecting in her belly, which grew like it had with our first born. All day and all night, she rocked, sat, or lay on our bed, refusing to leave the room, refusing to nurse and comfort our son, all the while losing her mind as dandelion seeds are lost to the wind. Each night, she cried red tears and sweated yellow stains into the sheets and furs.

I had to take our baby boy to the temple for the elders to tend to whilst I worked. My girl no longer spoke, no longer moved—even the insane rocking stopped—she just lay on the bed, sipping rarely on broth brought by villagers, which they fed to her from a ladle. Her belly grew larger. I sat by her side and watched each evening as her skeletal chest rose and fell rapidly as if she had run a great race despite her catatonic state. All the while, she wept, and I wiped the red tears which ran down her cheeks.

\*\*\*

Three seasons passed. "Fuck, you're bleeding. You're bleeding. Not just from your eyes...your wrists, ears, ankles," I yelled. Something was happening. Her thick tongue thrust in and out from her mouth as if she was choking on a chunk of grey meat. Red rivulets were flowing out of fresh slits which appeared like a prisoner's wall tally before my eyes all over her body.

"Something is cutting you," I said, pressing my hands against the openings in her arms, trying to stem the blood flow.



The moon hung, a slim crescent in the velvet sky, grinning down at us as she sat up in the bed. Vermillion tides sprayed and dribbled down her robe. A slash of red spurted over our young son's face and body as he lay still asleep next to me. I grabbed my son. He woke and cried. I could feel my heart thrumming in my throat, as if trying to claw its way out, beating at treble pace.

"What the fuck—my love, what's going on?" I screamed. She said nothing. Our child let rip.

Pushing herself out of the bed with her frail arms and dragging herself across the room to the other side far from us, she then folded over in pain, grappling at her own stomach. Her breath sounded hurried and a trail of blood smeared on the ground behind her as she moved. Through the gown she slept in, now claret and sodden, outlines of fists, elbows, horns and claws pressed out and probed angrily through the fabric, rippling, jabbing and pulsating underneath her stretched belly skin.

"Help me, it's coming," she rasped, her long-silenced voice desert dry. She shouted again, this time something indecipherable—all tongues, spittle—before collapsing on the floor.

"I'm coming," screeched a new, shrill voice, in a pitch that could shatter rainbows, crack pottery, tear down temples.

She writhed around in pain and blood and her own fluids as I stood cowering in the corner, trying to cover my baby's young eyes from witnessing the horrendous event, the mess of blood and flesh on the straw on the floor.

Grabbing onto the edge of the crib in which our son sometimes slept, her knuckles were white and strained as if bones might burst though. She started to claw at it. Fingernails snapped like broken lyre strings, yet she scraped and scratched more, etching something unreadable into the wood, until the pads of her fingers were rubbed raw, stumps, the bone exposed, leaking blood.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. This was not like the birth of our first born which had been tranquil, in a stable surrounded by braying mules and sleeping sheep. And this second one, this thing, was not mine, for that I was sure.

A lightning bolt of red jarred across her stomach from under her shrivelled breasts toward her legs. "Help me," she mumbled weakly, as blood and fluids drained from her.

Her gown ripped down along the red line and claws like those of a wolverine emerged. A nest of blades and needles erupted from her naval, cutting and whipping and shredding her tissues as they came.

Mary's head dropped back, her cries stopped. Only my boy screaming and a noise like the hacking and ripping and tearing of a hundred cleavers plowing through a herd of goats could be heard. I clamped my hands tight over my son's ears.

Red lacy foam spewed from my dying love's mouth as she choked. Then, her carcass lay still. Led first by the claws, something pulsing, something made from organ meat and twin vertebrae entwined, connected with sinew, tendons, cartilage, and smeared in gelatinous red clumps of blood, something faceless, fronted by two ram-like horns sprang out from her stomach. I shouldn't have looked, I didn't want to see the birth that had split apart my love, but yet, I couldn't help but stare.

Whatever it was had two spines, joined together in the shape of a love heart, and more than enough legs for any living thing. As the last of its form pulled out from her, an ocean of fluids spread across the floor, flooding it with red mucus, putrid lava.

It scuttled off and out of the room and into the depths of the night screaming like a boiling lobster. Appendages tapped and rapped on the floor with the cadence of a syncopated skin drum nightmare.

Her body was now an empty cocoon, white and red and limp on the floor of our sleeping quarters. My son screamed and wriggled but I would not allow him to see his mother dead, emptied, shed like litter. I would not let this screw him up like it destroyed her and made a lunatic of me.

The villagers, the temple men, they all had high expectations for our son. To see such a nightmare would give the child a twisted mind; such a sight could create a psychopath, a delusional man who would surely seek an early escape from life, a sick fantasist.

I took two coins from my pigskin purse and placed them over the sockets of what was left of her eyes and moved slowly away with my son in my arms. I considered fleeing into the night, towards the temple as fast as I could to speak with the holy men, to ask for forgiveness for the great lie we had told which must surely have been the cause of Mary's death, but I knew this could not be an option.

\*\*\*

Mary had convinced me that we should keep our first born, and rather than poison or scrape or starve it out before her bump became noticeable, we should raise it as Saviour. The villagers had believed us when we told them an

angel had visited, and told us Mary had been chosen to be mother to the Son of the Lord. What a fabrication. We'd acted desperately. Mary had been so convincing, I'd just followed her lead. A mother's love for her unborn child is a force to be reckoned with—I didn't want to lose her and I didn't want to die. To admit that we had embraced outside of wedlock, fornicating, that we had formed the beast with two backs before receiving blessings from the temple, would have meant we would have been stoned to death, outcast at the very least.

\*\*\*

I knew the wise men of the village would hold me accountable for what had happened to Mary. No one would believe me. I'd be accused of murder. I also wanted to put as much distance as I could between myself and my son and the wretched mess of placenta embroiled with spine and claws that broke free from my lost, dead Mary. So Jesus and I fled.

I gathered essential belongings and I walked until my sandals split. Barefoot I continued, taking charity and refuge for water and bread in passing villages where we spoke not a word of our story, only thanked our hosts and left as the cock crowed. Town after town, we traipsed, I, exhausted, near-delirious, Jesus, distraught, confused. By the first river we came to, I took Jesus out from his papoose to wash him and tried to cleanse my ruddied soul.

That grey evening, by the river, we met a young lady, Gloria, who took pity on this lost soul and my young son. Destitute and homeless, she took us both in. In the privacy that dusk provided, she hurried us into her abode, not a soul saw us enter. She fed us well and all three of us curled up together to keep warm. It felt good to touch another human, she seemed to understand the needs and the desires of the flesh as we stroked and tickled each other's bare arms. Jesus lay sleeping angelically between us, as we whispered sweet nothings about what we hoped for our futures as she begged me to stay with her for all times.

\*\*\*

Hours into the night, we both fell asleep as the lamp on her table burnt out, and I slept for the first time in days like a sunken stone, heavy and deep, without dreams, without horrendous visions, until I was woken, once again, by a voice.

This time, it was a voice I recognised—the babbling sound of my son. He had so far yet to string sentences together, and had only spoken to me with simple words like *fatha*, *don-key* and *water*, yet that night, the night in which this kind girl had welcomed us into her home, he was not talking in the tongues of a toddler—he was forming coherent speech.

I lay still, pretending to sleep, eavesdropping on my son. I watched him through squinted eyes push the hair away from her ear and shuffle his face and body closer to the sleeping maiden. Jesus whispered into his new mother's ear whilst she slept.

"In the morning, you will awaken and tell the village that a great angel visited you in the night and left you a fair young child and another on the way. And both children are gifts from the Lord, are children of the Lord, and shall be worshipped and praised as such. You have been chosen."

God help us

My heart thumped. Why was my son speaking such lies in her ear? My body, rigid, unable to escape, was repelled from touching him to pull him away. Images of Mary's death streamed through my mind. Whatever it was that Mary had birthed, whatever it was that had split out of my dead lover still scurried amongst us.

I tried to get up from the bed, to escape from the room, from my own child, but as I flinched, Jesus rose. His body grew large and wide, the size of a lion, and filled the bed, making a mouse of me. He lifted his index finger at me, his eyes as beetle-black as the night outside and as cold as my heart now felt.

"Massacre," he screamed, as a coagulated, bulbous mess with two distorted spines scuttled out from a dark corner. It flattened, sharpened in shape, and charged at me, as an arrow flies toward its target.

#### About the Author:

SJ Townend has been writing creatively for 23 months—not non-stop, there have been breaks for food and sleep. SJ won the Secret Attic short story contest (Spring 2020), has had fiction published with Sledgehammer Lit Mag, Hash Journal, Horla Horror, Ellipsis Zine, and was long listed for the Women on Writing non-fiction contest in 2020. SJ also has work published with Ghost Orchid Press.

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



## **Fame | *Brian Rosenberger***

Jessie desired fame and had little concern of the cost.  
Enter the man who could make that happen - Satan.  
Well not exactly. Satan was busy, ruling Hell and all.  
Otis served in His Dark Master's stead.  
Jessie said, "I want everyone to know my face. I want it everywhere."  
Otis nodded. Jessie's had a nice face as far as faces went. He'd seen his share, usually in grim masks of agony.  
"We can work with that. Sign here, here, and here," Otis responded. "In blood. It's more binding."  
On milk cartons everywhere, Jessie's face appeared just below the word.  
Missing.

## **To Those We Killed | *Brian Rosenberger***

We packed our gear - the requisite knives and machetes. Fully loaded, we headed South.  
The road was long and lonely. To pass the time we relived past glories, resurrected memories of past vacations,  
always careful to observe the speed limit, counted road kill in anticipation.  
We arrived, the weather perfect, the nights too short.  
So many teenagers, not nearly enough time.  
Dancing in the sand, swimsuits and self-respect forgotten, slaves to the moon and tide.  
Our exploits made headlines. They always do, serving as warning and prelude.  
Spring Break is just practice. Summer is our peak season, only months away.

## **Godfall | *Brian Rosenberger***

It fell from the Heavens. The body remained intact despite the fiery descent and seismographic impact, wiping out a portion of Yellowstone National Park in the United States. Renamed Crater City by some and the Holiest place on Earth by others.  
Scientist agreed the specimen was humanoid in anatomy.  
Despite the nauseating smell from the corpse, the location drew tourists, believers, non-believers, the curious, and those just seeking a selfie.  
The true believers hoped for resurrection. Their wish was granted. Parasites the size of Volkswagens, with slug-like bodies and eel-like mouths.  
Hungry for fresher meat.

## **The Swamp Witch's Summer Vacation Checklist | *Brian Rosenberger***

Are stoves and ovens provided and child-sized?  
Are familiars allowed?  
Is baby furniture available?  
Are babies available?  
What's the hotel's smoking and burning policy?  
Batteries. Always bring extra batteries. Eye of newt. Always bring extra eyes.  
Update GPS for current maps. Location of local churches, hospitals, and cemeteries.  
Bring favorite pillow and broom. Provide Coven with emergency contact information.  
Brazilian wax. Condoms. Always bring extra condoms. Remember what happens on vacation has to be proven in a court of law. No one believes in witches anyway except what they see on TV and Movies. Sister ready to party?  
Praise Hecate.

**About the Author:**

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections - *Poems That Go Splat*, *And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me*.

Facebook: [Brian Who Suffers](#)

Instagram: [@brianwhosuffers](#)

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**Monster Hunter | Paul Gravanel**

Determined to strip away all mystery from the world, he armed himself and ventured boldly into desolate regions.

The Jersey Devil fell early to his guns, carried home tied to the hood like a deer.

In the forests of Oregon, the mighty voice of the Sasquatch was forever stilled by his well-placed broadhead.

The Rougarou, riddled with silver shot, he left floating in a Louisiana bayou.

He vanished in the Canadian wilderness while hunting the Wendigo. Seeing his coat and rifle discarded in the snow, the searchers hurried onwards.

They found him sat astride a trapper's corpse, wild-eyed and gnawing.

**Riverside | Paul Gravanel**

It's late and I'm sitting with Billy on the roof of the derelict factory, just drinking and watching the boats on the river.

Down below, some kids have set fire to a vagrant. He runs wildly in circles, his screams carrying up to the rooftop.

Billy stands right on the edge and shouts down to him, "The river! Jump in the river!"

The man stumbles up the stone steps and onto the embankment wall. Still burning, he hurls himself into the darkness. A second later we hear the crunch of gravel.

Billy wears a sheepish grin. "Low tide" he says.

**The Anniversary | Paul Gravanel**

It was the anniversary of the end of the civil war. For three years one faction had systematically slaughtered the other until the mass graves were full.

On that night, sitting in houses stolen from the purged, the winners drank toast after toast to their leaders and their victory.

Away from the merriment, the cold earth stirred. A procession of ragged corpses stumbled from a thousand burial pits and trudged relentlessly towards the towns and villages.

Those who had thought themselves victorious now cowered and awaited savage retribution but the reality was far worse.

The slain were simply returning home.

**About the Author:**

Paul Gravanel lives in a quiet part of Hampshire, UK, with his wife and rescue cat. As a young man he applied to work at a cemetery but was turned down, which was probably just as well. His work has previously appeared in *Sirens Call Publications eZine53* and *Friday Flash Fiction*.

Julie stared at the cardinal laying in the snow outside her living room window. It was like fresh crimson on white porcelain tile which made the small horizontal scar on her left wrist burn. *Is it dead?*

She chewed her lower lip. It'd been years since she stepped foot outside the house, but with the increase in delivery services and her modest, yet steady income from Esty, she never had a need to. It was safer this way. People always let you down. Left you. Inside these walls, she had everything she needed. But cardinals were her favorite and this was the first she'd seen in a long time. Her mother told her once that they were a sign of good things to come.

The bird lifted its head, trying to stand, but collapsed back into the snow. Julie paced between the door and window. *It's injured. It's cold. It won't survive.*

She went to the sink, pulled her long dark hair back into a loose knot, and splashed cold water on her face. *You can do this. It needs you. It flew into the window because it wanted in. It wanted you.*

The cold air pierced her lungs as she opened the door. Her eyes darted up and down the street, but it was empty. She scooped the bird up tight to her chest. Snowflakes fell like soft, icy kisses on her skin. She lifted her chin to the sky and welcomed them, but the faint sound of a baby's cry startled her. She scanned the street again and saw a woman exiting her house two doors down with a car seat draped in a pink polka dot blanket. A deep ache grew within her womb. She ran back into the house and slammed the door behind her.

She pulled a blanket from the hall closet, laid it out on the table like a makeshift nest, and set the bird down. It was still. She rubbed her finger up and down its chest softly, but there was no movement.

"Don't worry. I'm gonna love you forever," she whispered, then scooped it up and headed downstairs to her craft room.

Shelves lined the walls with various crafting materials and half-finished Etsy products. Julie covered the worktable in the center of the room with plastic and got to work. It was easy when they were fresh like this.

With a scalpel, she made an incision from the base of the tail to just below the beak, then pulled everything from the inside out, just like Daddy had shown her. Once everything was gutted, she washed the cavity with a borax solution, stuffed it with cotton, and sewed it shut.

Small animals took no time at all to do. The others took considerably longer. Especially Mommy and Daddy. It took days to thaw them before they were ready to work on, but most of that happened in the back of moving van on the way to their new home here in Colorado. It was a fresh start for all of them.

She pulled a hand painted birdcage from the shelf, one of her bestsellers on Etsy. It had red roses that matched the feathers almost perfectly. She stuck pins through its feet to secure it to the perch and carried the cage out to the family room to show everyone.

"Isn't she lovely?" she beamed.

Mommy and Daddy sat beside one another in their rockers, expressionless. The freezing had made their skin less pliable, and as hard as she tried, she couldn't get their faces to set into a smile. She knew they were proud though.

Christopher was different though. He never had to be frozen. His gorgeous smile beamed at her from the couch, arm out, always ready to hold her. They'd only gone on two dates, but she knew he was the one. They'd been inseparable since.

"Yes, I know going outside was risky, Daddy," she said, scowling. "I was careful though."

She curled up beside Christopher on the couch, draping her legs over his lap. The glass fitting in his left eye socket started to slide so she pushed it gently back in place. It was slightly darker than the gunmetal blue eyes he had when they met, but it was the closest she could find.

"I think we should have a baby," she whispered in his ear, giggling. "Yes, a beautiful little girl would be perfect, don't you think babe?"

She leaned her head on his shoulder and dreamt of nursery colors as the cardinal sang its silent song from the birdcage.

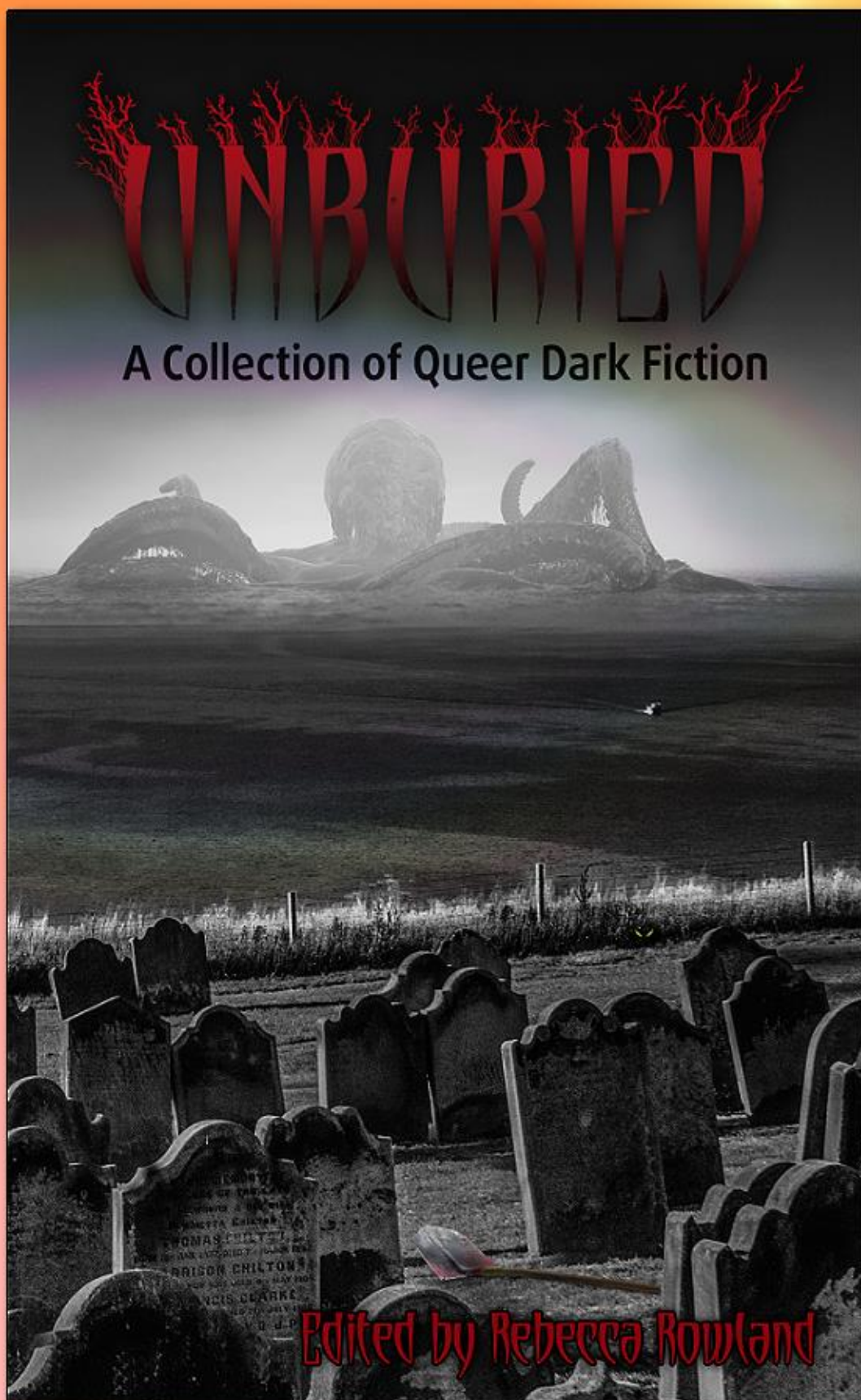
#### About the Author:

Jennifer Fox is a western New York native and MFA candidate at Lindenwood University. She is the Fiction Editor at Moonflake Press and staff reader for Thirty West Publishing House and Bandit Fiction. Her work has appeared in The Metaworker, Across the Margin, The Daily Drunk Mag, The Write Launch, Sledgehammer Lit, Ghost Parachute, and more.

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Screams pierce through my window at 3:30 a.m. A child's shrieks pull me out from underneath my bed covers, and I run down the stairs into the cold air, my eyes barely open and watering. I look up and down the street as dogs bark, but I see nothing and decide it was a dream. Sometimes, when I sleep, I think I hear someone calling my name, and I wake up expecting to see something hideous coming for me, telling me it's time.

\*\*\*

In the morning, I check the neighborhood Facebook page. Someone posted the following message: *Did you hear the screaming @ 3:30 a.m.? It sounded like a child. Totally freaked my dogs out.* Several neighbors responded with theories ranging from various species of animals to wind chimes, but many held fast to their original hypothesis: a child screamed, and they were heartbroken.

In the daylight, the trees and green spaces fill in where the night had hidden them. Teens ride their bikes down the street at breakneck speeds, turning in front of cars. In the woods, and on trails that lead off to ravines thick with branches and ferns, huddled children whisper and plan—to look like the types of kids that adults would say are up to no good. They gather around forbidden things: fireworks, a can of beer, cursed objects, hoping to make it onto the neighborhood Facebook page—or in video footage from someone's doorbell camera.

\*\*\*

Falling heavy into my bed, I close my eyes, believing I'll sleep soundly, but at precisely 3:30 a.m., I hear those screams again, and my heart thuds in my chest. When I get out of bed, the dogs are barking. Half the neighbors roam the streets, the pale edges of their robes and pajama bottoms moving like clouds over sidewalks and shadows. After five or ten minutes, we go back inside our houses. My tired legs wobble as I take the stairs to my bedroom, stopping by the bathroom to wash my face, but not turning on the light. Streetlamps and city lights poke through the edges of the bathroom windows—the parts that curtains won't reach—and I can see my reflection, somewhat hazy, in the mirror. And for some reason, I remember those stories, probably the ones the kids in the woods still tell, about not looking into a mirror at night because you might see more than your own reflection. During the day, I'd dispel the thought, but now, I feel a chill run along my arms and neck, and I can't move. I tell myself to stop looking in the mirror, but I won't. And I'm no longer searching for my own reflection. I'm looking for someone else's, reminding myself that this is the way to will things into being, but the thought has dug in. Every shadow, every form, I believe, is something new. I'm making room, it seems, for something else's existence.

I don't even turn around when I hear the walk-in closet door open, and a shuffling, papery whisper of a sound follows. I just keep looking in the mirror. Whatever is behind me, moves towards me, from just behind my left shoulder. The last time I'd been this terror stricken was when the Ouija board planchette flew on its own at my friend's house our sophomore year of high school. She'd told me there was nothing we could do, and if we burned the board, the beast itself would come out screaming.

The papery, rustling sound stops just behind me, and I see a face reflected in the mirror: elongated, with long ears covered in fur. It stands on powerful hind legs, using its enormous tail as an anchor, its clawed hands resting at its side. Muscular and menacing, it watches me, and I realize that it wouldn't take much for it to overpower me.

Inside, I know that if I willed myself to see this thing, then I could will myself to take off running into the night and rid this thing from distant memories that make monsters of shadows and idle talk.

Moving quickly to my right, I exit the bathroom and run down the stairs for the front door. When I do, I'm expecting to hear earth-shattering noise as the creature bounds after me, but only a papery, rustling noise materializes. And when I listen closely, I hear the whispers of my name: *Elise, Elise it's time*, every word falling at my back like crumpled reams of wrapping tissue.

When I get to the front door, I have to stop running to turn the handle, and that's when a powerful kick lands hard in my left kidney. I fall face forward as the door opens. The pain from the kick overwhelms me, and I feel nauseous. I can taste blood in my mouth. Crinkling sounds fill the air around me like static, drifting into the shape of my name, repeated over and over again. Somehow, I manage to push myself up and keep running. My instinct tells me to head for the woods and the tiny trails that lead off to where the neighborhood kids play.

But just as I turn, the powerful beast's tail whips hard against my face, and I'm forced to turn around. It punches me in the gut with its lightening quick paws, its claws drawing blood. Choking and coughing, I spit out my teeth. But when I fight the pain to open my eyes and look up, the creature is gone, save for a rustling in the trees. But there is one more noise: the scream. The screaming makes me push on, staggering towards the sound coming from the fern-covered ravine, where I see the children gathered around the fire.

"We've got to burn it," a boy tells me. Flames cover a half-charred board of numbers and letters. Plumes of smoke rise, sending shrieks into the night.

#### About the Author:

Cecilia Kennedy taught English and Spanish courses in Ohio for over 20 years before moving to Washington State with her family. Since 2017, she has written and published over 50 short stories in journals, magazines, and anthologies online and in print. *The Places We Haunt* is her first short story collection.

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## Beauty in Decay | Brianna Malotke

Typical fall weather was settling in the town. Trees were making their way from vibrant green to an array of burnt oranges, rich reds, and faded yellows. She breathed deep breaths in and out, letting the fresh air make its home in her lungs. And that earthy smell she loved so much was purely just fungi and bacteria doing what they do—decompose plant matter within the soil as the various plants adjusted to the crisp fall season. She made her way through the average looking neighborhood towards the park and forest entrance. It was always peaceful in the mornings. Smiling pumpkins sat on nearly every front porch, proud guardians of their creators within the homes. In a few days Halloween would come and go, and those pumpkins would be left out in the cold to rot. They'd be dropped off in the nearby parks and woods, left to slowly disappear with the piles of leaves and other forest debris.

The peculiar scents of the forest surroundings welcomed her, the dampness in the air and chilliness of the morning made her giddy with glee. Others always found it odd, the unusual love she had for mushrooms growing on rotted pieces of wood. There was a delightful array of mushrooms waiting for her viewing, just waiting to be observed. She knew which types of mushrooms were edible, that *honey mushrooms* were vigorous in their attacks on tree roots, and that *artist's conks* were a sign of serious impending decay. While her knowledge was unconventional, others cautiously admired her appreciation of beauty in nature.

Though, underneath this puzzling fascination with mushrooms and other signs of death in the woods, her anticipation, her excitement for witnessing the decay, was something she tried to bury deep within. When one should show signs of melancholy, her eyes twinkled at the thought of stumbling across a slowing decaying corpse amongst her clusters of mushrooms in the woods she frequented. While she may try to fight the two sides housed within her, she knew that one way or another she would achieve her unusual dreams. Whether or not she had to be the one to dispose of a dead body to feed her dazzling collection in the woods, it would happen. Any day now, maybe even on the fast-approaching night of All Hallows' Eve, she would need to give in to her love of bearing witness to the beauty of decay.

### About the Author:

Brianna Malotke is a freelance writer, costume designer, and avid boxer. Her most recent work can be found in the August 2021 issue of Witch House Amateur Magazine. She has pieces in the hundred-word horror anthologies, Beneath, Cosmos, and The Deep. Looking ahead to 2022, she has two poems in the Women in Horror Poetry Showcase, Under Her Skin, published by Black Spot Books.

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## Ten-Digit Canvas | Joe Moses Leggett

What are these patterns on my hands? I saw you ask with that second glance you gave. These fine scars? I'll tell you how they came to be.

I was a toddler when one unsupervised moment I found in the bathroom what I later learned to be a stray razor blade. It was shiny and made impressions on my skin when I played with it. Through it I drew a regrettable amount of fun before the pain kicked in and the blood started flowing. It's amazing how long a delay there can be between a few clean glides and the actual separation of flesh.

It's my earliest memory.

### About the Author:

Joe Moses Leggett is a new writer from the UK. His short story *Detriment* was featured in The Toilet Zone, an anthology by Hellbound Books Publishing, as well as The Sirens Call eZine. Aside from morbid storytelling, Leggett spends his days experimenting with music under the pseudonym Aberrant Dabbler.

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



It was a foggy Halloween evening in 1994 as I stood trembling with fear in the middle of a Michigan field. The séance had begun in an attempt to make contact with Satan himself. Twelve people clad in all black robes circled a pentagram lit with a dozen candles.

The echo of the chants was burned into my mind forever. I couldn't quite make out the harmonized language, at first, I thought maybe it was German but the guttural intensity was purely demonic. I let out a nervous cough as I glanced over to my girlfriend Sarah. *What in the hell did I get myself into*, I thought to myself. *It's too late to back out now.*

I considered turning around and running, but part of me wanted to impress Sarah. The things we will do for love. I hadn't been in town long, a month or so and I was still adjusting to the social dynamics of being the new kid in town. Sarah was the first person I met at school the first day. I instantly fell in love with her big green eyes. Like a magnet she pulled me in.

It was the second week of class when she convinced me to skip school to go and hang out with her and a group of other misfits and loners. These people were a lot older than us and really welcomed me with open arms. In hindsight, I should have just kept to myself.

"Hey Kip, we are having a big celebration this Monday, Halloween, and it would mean the world to me if you come." Sarah said in a flirtatious tone.

"Yeah, that would be cool." Thinking it was going to be another bonfire and booze. She specifically requested that I keep this a secret as these celebrations would tend to get a little crazy.

A loud scream from a girl interrupted my daze and recaptured my attention. Two of the elder leaders of the group had just taken a gag out of the girl's mouth and presented her to the rest of the group. I knew right away that the girl was none other than our prom queen, Megan Sarno. Megan was the stereotypical ditzy blonde Barbie doll. Only now, she wasn't dolled up, now she was completely naked, covered in mud and bruises.

My throat closed up and my heart dropped to my toes. Something was totally fucked up. Sweat pooled on my brow as Sarah turned to me.

"It's okay dear, it's all part of the plan." She whispered to me. *Part of the plan?* I thought to myself. The fog crept in closer, wrapping around my neck choking me into submission. Sarah grabbed my hand and squeezed tight. A sickening smile beamed across her face. One of the leaders, a really tall man, turned to us.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate Satan and his evil brilliance. We seek guidance and acceptance." He says proudly. He grabbed Megan by the hair and pulled out a large butcher knife and held it against her throat. She sobbed hard, begging for her life.

"Please, no! Help me! I will do anything. Don't kill me! I have a family." She pleads with all of her strength, but the man isn't fazed.

"King Lucifer, take this sacrifice as a semblance of good will. May you grow in strength and rule your kingdom again, once and for all. He paused for a moment before slicing through her throat. Blood sprayed all over the group. Megan dropped to the ground as she gurgled and choked on her blood. I turned away, vomiting. The group let out a loud cheer as everyone watched her die, slowly.

The tall man grabbed an old chalice and held it next to her neck to fill it. He raised it to the sky and took a long drink. He then passed it around to everyone. Once it got to me I tried to refuse.

"You are one of us now, drink." A man holding the cup said. I hesitated again.

"If you refuse, you too will be sacrificed. Then we will kill the rest of your family. You are either with us or dead to us." He flashed an evil smile. Sarah looked at me with encouragement.

"Go ahead babe! It's okay." I shook violently as I took the chalice. I slowly brought it to my lips and took a sip. The blood was still warm and tasted like metal. As I swallowed it, something died in me. Numbness consumed me, my soul was no longer my own.

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

A photojournalist by day and a writer by night, Austin loves telling stories in almost every format. From filmmaking, photography and writing, to painting and drawing. When he is not creating you can find him chasing around his one year old son.

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## A Universe of Inspiration

I was born in Mexico City in 1987

When I was one year old we moved to my grandparents' house located in the State of Mexico, it was just me and my mother since my parents separated since I was very little. My mother is a nurse and my father is a doctor. I have a sister three years younger than me.

Having lived for 8 years in my grandparents' house aroused in me an interest in the paranormal, the mystical, mythology and other topics such as the universe, UFOs and extraterrestrial life. I was surrounded by nature there, it was a big house full of many plants, trees and insects, there I spent part of my childhood. When I was four years old, I discovered a book in my mother's collection, it was Carl Sagan's '*Cosmos*', I remember taking it for the first time and leafing through it, being stunned by the images it contained, among so many there were hypothetical landscapes, some illustrations of life extraterrestrial that included alien beings and landscapes, so I had the inspiration to represent with a pen ideas that filled my head on other inhospitable worlds with very strange creatures, so I took advantage of several hours of the day trying to shape them on sheets of paper that my mother gave me so that it entertained me. At that time, the book I leafed through daily really was a very great source of inspiration for me, it had a peculiar smell like vanilla or almonds, for me it was as if I was taking something magical, it was a very gratifying feeling. Later, as a result of the book being available daily and for long hours, at night when I went to sleep I began to have dreams about different species of aliens, I dreamed of inhospitable worlds with very strange creatures and I also had nightmares about the end of the world where very advanced beings came to exterminate us in different ways. My life was always full of things out of this world, imagining other dimensions inhabited by other beings.

When I was a child I admired my grandfather a lot because he drew incredibly and without seeing reference images as we now rely on technology. I remember that on one occasion, he made me a drawing of a trailer in perspective with a blue pen achieving an almost perfect stroke and it was then that I realized that I wanted to do the same, with that quality, with that precisión. For me it was perfect to spend time with him, he was a very cultured man, I always remember finding him reading something; in the morning the newspaper and a book at night.

In 1996 when I was nine years old I was in primary education, we moved from home for the second time to an apartment on a first floor located in a more central area of the State of México which was five minutes from school and I remember that at that time I was one of the best in the class to draw. I participated in events where they exhibited art on important dates such as: The Mexican Revolution, Independence Day, and the Day of the Dead.

In the afternoons after school, when I finished my homework, my hobby was to draw at least an hour a day about my favorite subjects: monsters, aliens, alien worlds, or also to play a video game such as '*DOOM*', '*Nightmare Creatures*' with which I began to like the theme of zombies, demons and horrendous creatures which I also represented on paper with care. At that time my mother took us on weekends to the Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, my taste and admiration for art became exponential thanks to those visits we made frequently. In one day we did not finish visiting all the halls of the museum. The exhibition rooms had a large amount of artwork in which the life of cavemen was represented in great detail and how they hunted mammoths and other species until the era of Pre-Hispanic Mexico represented in oil paintings and murals with a fairly well accomplished technique, also sculpture, photography, models of the pyramids of pre-Hispanic Mexico.

In 2001, when I was 14 years old, we moved house for the third time, in the same state, municipality but different neighborhood, in an apartment located on the third floor in a very quiet apartment block where I take walks daily of 1 hour that have always worked very well for me to alleviate any sadness or bad day.

The time when I was in juniors high school, and later in high school, I defined my drawing style and ideas, which were also reinforced by musical influences such as Mudvayne, SlipKnot and Papa Roach to name a few.

During this period, listening to these artists inspired me a lot to create Monsters, strange creatures, aliens, demons and things of the paranormal / macabre theme. I spent long hours shaping those ideas on paper. At that time I observed the work of artists for the first time like H.R. Giger and Zdzislaw Bekski, seeing that Giger was the creator of the Xenomorph Alien that we have seen in the movies like '*Alien the eighth passenger*' and Bekski was nicknamed '*The Emissary of Horror*', I was surprised as both are great exponents of macabre or difficult to see art (Bizarre). Another artist I admired is Alex Gray, who is considered a visionary in the art world. These artists are a huge inspiration to me to date.



In 2007 I entered the University to study architecture at the FES Acatlán UNAM located in the State of Mexico, in the municipality of Naucalpan, 5 minutes from my house. My drawing skills had improved thanks to studying artistic representation subjects. The teachers left us as an outdoor activity to draw buildings in perspective taking care of the proportions, the setting and the scale of the people, as a result I learned to give more detail to my work without losing patience thanks to the demands of the teachers in all subjects.

At university I also met my wife, Rocío Paloma, we were studying the same degree and just as I am passionate about the world of visual arts. She loves to paint, she loves the theme of witches, mysticism, tarot and she makes jewelry focused on those themes; she also likes cult horror movies.

At the age of twenty five years old, in 2013 I met a colleague from the architecture degree, we became close friends over time. He decided to follow another path, his dream of being a shaman and a dancer, later with him on different occasions I had a total of four Ayahuasca ceremonies, a concoction of a liana from the Amazonas Jungle which has profound meaning. Aya (spirit) Huasca (rope), means "The rope of the spirit." In the worldview of native peoples, Ayahuasca is the rope that allows the spirit to leave the body without dying.

The ceremonies that I had with the Ayahuasca concoction (considered a sacred medicine by the shamans of the Amazon since ancient times) had a transforming effect on me, they made me know myself deeply and accept myself more and with more love. They made me have visions, some very gratifying, and others very creepy about dimensions inhabited by other entities or beings much more intelligent and powerful than the human being to the point of being similar to insects compared to them. As a result, these experiences made me approach life from a perspective with more humility, more love since we do not 'know-it-all' as we often imagine. Nowadays, I think we are very fortunate to be in this world and we have a lot to be thankful for despite all the problems we have had, and we have caused as a species. Thanks to these experiences, that I consider to be odysseys lived by me, my dream of being an illustrator and fighting for it took more strength since it is what makes me happy and also without it my life would have no meaning.

The books in my life have represented an important part in the inspiration I have when putting my ideas on paper. Some are '*The Necronomicon*' by H.P. Lovecraft, '*The Raven*' by Edgar Allan Poe, '*Fahrenheit 451*' by Ray Bradbury, '*1984*' by George Orwell, '*The Gates of Perception*' by Aldous Huxley, '*A Reality Apart*' by Carlos Castaneda and, of course, '*Cosmos*' by Carl Sagan.

I love the cinema as well, and I am always selecting genres such as Horror and Science Fiction. Some of my favorite films are: '*Grave Encounters*', '*Dark City*', '*The House of Wax*', '*Independence Day*', '*Terminator*' saga, '*MIB*' saga, '*The Troll Hunter*', '*Cloverfield*', '*Insidious*' saga, '*Hereditary*', '*The Thing*', '*Alien the 8th Passenger*', '*The Arrival*' and '*Wishmaster*', among others.

Video games have been a great source of inspiration for me in life and some titles that had an influence on me have been: '*DOOM*' saga, '*Quake*' saga, '*Amnesia the Dark Descent*' saga, '*Nightmare Creatures*', '*Turok*' saga, '*Gears of War*' saga, '*Condemned*', and '*Carrion*' are just a few.

Currently I love to draw with ink on paper, also Copic type markers and prismacolor premier pens. It's a mixed technique since I use everything I have at my disposal to shape my ideas on paper. The smallest detail in any artistic work represents a lot for me since I like to detail things as much as possible, and I have an obsession with that.

The most important thing for me as an artist is to pay attention to that inner voice that demands personal fulfillment through creativity. It is the lifestyle that I want and it makes me happy. I am grateful with life because I follow a path with goals that I love, and are born to me from within. I'm glad to see that more people are doing the same, they are no longer carried away by external or social impositions, because how else can we approach happiness if it is not with goals that are born to us from the soul?

You can follow Victor on his Instagram account to see his latest work and learn of upcoming events.

Instagram: [@Crab\\_Mendez](https://www.instagram.com/Crab_Mendez)



Tommy first saw the trucks unloading things at the old warehouse when he was riding to high school. 'The Old Warehouse' was what everybody called the building at 1100 SE Clay that had been used as a distribution center for furniture ten years ago. Ever since distribution had moved to Seattle, the building had stood empty. Now not only was something moving in, but broken windows were replaced and graffiti was painted over.

At school Tommy asked his friend Joseph (never Joe or Joey) what was happening. Joseph said "I've asked everybody around, but nobody seems to know. There are a lot of tech firms moving into the neighborhood, so maybe that's what it is. Maybe if there are some unskilled jobs, my lazy ass dad can get some work." Tommy worked the angles in his head. He was getting low on cash, and it was getting harder to steal anything that was lying around in his neighborhood. It seemed that crime stoppers have wised up everybody for miles around before he and his friends had taken everything easy to grab. There could be something of value in the new 'Old Warehouse'.

Three days later, there was no more obvious activity at what people called 'The Mystery Building'. The next night Tommy went over to the building and knocked on windows and rattled doors without finding any signs of life – no security, no employees, and no alarms. There was a sign that seemed inappropriate—*Trespassers Will Be Violated*. Tommy laughed out loud and said "With no security and no alarm, how is that going to happen?" The place was clearly easy pickings.

A very confident Tommy showed up after dark the next night with a pry bar and a sturdy bag. He was amazed to find the door unlocked. Inside the building had very low intensity lights which seemed just about right for his pillaging. Before he could look for valuables, he heard a very sultry voice say "How about a kiss and a hug, you beautiful boy." He looked in the direction of the voice and saw a woman built along the lines of Beauty. "Hell yes" he either said or thought, he wasn't sure which. Maybe there could be more than kissing and hugging – based on what he saw and heard he was game. When he got close, her arms extended ten feet towards him, and her tongue fell out of her mouth to the floor. Her appearance morphed into a Witch. As he backed away he felt something against his back. He turned around to see what appeared to be cobras dangling from the rafters. Beauty/Witch said, "You're no fun, forget you." After she got his attention, he turned around again and the cobras were gone. When he looked for Beauty/Witch, she was gone. He must have imagined them, but he was still unsettled.

After looking around awhile for things to take, he noticed lights were coming up on a twenty foot by twenty foot enclosure in the middle of the building. When the enclosure was fully illuminated, he saw something chained up at the back through the enclosure's window that looked like a monster six legged dog with a giant head filled with teeth like knives. The 'dog' seemed to see him and started to strain at his chain. To Tommy's horror the beast broke his leash and jumped at the window. The window bulged and cracked, but held. The animal didn't immediately try to attack again, but circled the enclosure while making strangled barking sounds. From time to time it would look at the window again as if planning another assault.

Tommy started to sweat, but he remembered he came there to see what he could lift. Mostly speaking to himself he said "You must have something really valuable here if you're working that hard to scare me away. I've got news for you – it won't work."

As soon as he said that, the beast hit the window again. The window was so close to breaking through that the 'dog' was sticking his nose through. Tommy's stomach was tied in knots, his intestines turned to water and his mouth was hanging open. Before his brain started working again, something with bright red eyes, a green body and big fangs flew past his face screaming as it went. After that he heard an even more horrifying sound. It took him a minute to realize that he was screaming.

Tommy no longer cared about stealing anything, he just wanted out. As he started towards the door, he heard a chittering sound. Worse, he felt something like small appendages probing his ankles and calves. He could barely make out huge spider-like animals all over the floor and on the walls. He forgot an orderly retreat, and ran out the door as fast as he could, whining and swearing all the way. He had nightmares about monsters of various sorts for the next month. When he was able to think about what happened, he wondered if the 'Mystery House' was some sort of advanced genetic laboratory, maybe run by some general. He didn't know much about biology beyond his raging hormones, but he half believed what he had seen in horror and science fiction movies and what he had seen looked a lot like those movies. In fact, the non-human monsters in *The Mist* resembled what he had seen that night. Beauty- Witch looked like the before and after women that needed to feast on youth to become young and beautiful that he had seen in old movies on the *Creature Show* on late night TV. Tommy's mother was surprised that after his encounter, he always left the room when a science fiction or horror movie came on TV. They used to be his favorites.

The next day three people in business suits reviewed the footage. Jim said “I think we’ve got a hit. We can double admission over other venues. Of course, if because they will know it’s a Halloween House of Horrors, they’ll be better prepared than the guys we see on film. How do the financials look Jane?”

“Well, our show will be a little more expensive than most, but because we are franchising we get a break from mass production and amortizing capital expenditures over a wider base. We’ve got patents on many of the animatronics, so we can’t be copied without paying us royalties. What about marketing Henry?”

“We’re golden. We’ve got all of the outtakes from filming over the last few days. Legal says we don’t have any problems with our ‘testers’ because they don’t want to admit trespassing anyway. To be safe, we’ll blur their faces. The guy last night was great. You can see that the crotch of his pants is wet. He pissed himself. Anything else we need to cover, Jim?”

“Before we finish getting ready to open October 1 in a couple of weeks, I’ve got one thing that might amuse you. ‘Beauty’s & ‘Witch’s” voices are from an eighty year old woman that weighs 250.”

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

The author is a little old man who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber. In 2014 inspired by joints threatening mobility and local author's *Wild* he began writing. His hundreds of attempts now appear in about eight countries in most genres, including non-Hallmark romance. Outside of writing he enjoys volunteering, collecting music, snow shoeing, hiking, whining, and peanut butter.

**Website:** [Aberrant Word](#)

**Blog:** [Doug Hawley](#)

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#### **Last Halloween | DJ Tyrer**

It may be considered badly timed or, perhaps, most apt, that the zombie plague began on Halloween.

We didn’t realize what was happening at first. I mean, you expect to see zombies lurching awkwardly through the streets on Halloween and we just thought the costumes seemed extra good.

Even when someone wasn’t dressed up as a zombie or ghoul, we assumed they were supposed to be zombie cowboys or undead slutty cops or, even, delicious touch, zombie trick-or-treaters.

Rather than candy, it was mostly people who were chewed that night...

Realization came too late to fight back or fortify. The only way to escape them was for us to disguise ourselves—in looks, smell, and sound—as walking dead.

One year on, that makes for an ironic Halloween as we don our stinking costumes, smear ourselves with gore, and groan. Sometimes, it’s hard to remember: Am I alive or undead?

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

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, and Tigershark, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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*The man in the waistcoat and knee-breaches with the unshaven cheeks and stringy blond hair is there--her father, mother, and murderer. Then the other one, the hulking horror appears, sniffing at her, hovering over her, blustering and making threats. Then there is pain, excruciating pain, as she is trussed into a ball, her mouth stuffed with cloth. You will become ten-thousand times more malignant than your mate, her father says. You will delight in murder and wretchedness for your own sake, he shouts. You will quit him, the monster, and turn to the superior beauty of man.*

*She moans and tears stream and she tries to breathe; her remarkable strength is not yet fully bloomed. She is cloaked in something coarse and dark, hauled up like a piece of meat and forced into a basket that smells like willow and creaks with her movements and groans. Worse, he says, Victor says, somewhere far away above the blackness, where there is air and illumination, You might propagate a race of devils on the earth, that will cause the species of man continual terror.*

*She screams and screams but no one can save her. Then she hears the rush of breaking waves, and sickening thuds as she is dragged over mounds and shards of shoreline rock. She feels the impact of landing at the bottom of a rowboat, and recognizes the noises of someone grunting and cursing and the squeaking of wooden oar handles in their oarlocks. The hollow reverberation of lapping and gurgling drowns her thoughts.*

*She wants to call for help, but she can only silently plead, No, no, please have mercy, don't hurt me!*

*There is a clunking splash, then several more and her basket spins. Water oozes at first, like chilly fingers pretending to comfort her. But in an instant she is submerged by a flood, the ice-cold pressure of the water squeezing her lungs; she sinks so rapidly--something is tied to her, dragging her down. She kicks and twists and heaves....*

*"Help me, help ... please someone...." She sat bolt upright, her lungs heaving air like bellows, tears spilling over her beautiful, alabaster face.*

*Her husband embraced her tightly, squeezed her shoulders. "Shhh, sweetie, it's okay, it's a dream, one of your nightmares again. It's okay, I'm here...."*

*She shifted slightly, reached out both arms and grasped him. "I wish I could forget," she said between sobs.*

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As the last students slipped in and quickly descended the lecture-hall steps, pushing past shoes and laptops to find their seats, waves of whispers and murmurs rose and fell, echoing like an extended hiss.

Elsa Marie Esslinger remained stationary in front of two massive blackboards. She faced a laboratory table upon which stood a computer, and a mysterious machine that looked like a cross between an industrial robot and a blue, translucent ink-jet printer. Above the chalkboards was a forty-eight-inch monitor that now displayed the first page of her class syllabus. She stretched her mouth a little on one side as she recognized snatches of comments and questions (... *Is that Dr. Esslinger?... She's our teacher? ... She's beautiful!...*) that floated into earshot from around and above her.

Elsa clapped her hands once. "Class will come to order," she said in a deep, slightly accented voice that carried to the most distant row. "This class is BE168, 'Topics in Bioengineering' for first year graduates. It is a prerequisite, as is 'Biomolecular Cell Engineering,' which I also teach. If you are not registered for both, please see your advisor." She walked as if gliding on ice as she emerged from behind the lab table. There was a collective gasp from the one-hundred young men and women present. She was easily six-feet tall. Her skin gleamed like polished marble, her long, red hair shimmered like flames. She was dressed in a gold, tight-fitting, turtle-neck wool suit that hung just above her knees.

She narrowed her bright, dark eyes and held her hands together at breast-level while taking a few more careful steps, calling attention to her prefect legs and gold high-heels. "I want to welcome you to Caltech's Beckman Institute, and the Bioengineering Department," she said. "I am excited to see so many energetic young people here. Do you all have the fire in the belly? The need to do, and know, and create?"

No one said a word or made a sound.

She stepped quickly back and returned to a position behind the lab table. "As many of you are aware, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute has awarded Caltech two-million dollars to develop an interdisciplinary synthetic biology program. Researchers in this field, such as myself and my husband Dr. Mark Esslinger, have multiple areas of interest and expertise. All of you ..." she paused and dramatically scanned the tiers of seated students, continued, "each of you was specifically chosen for this pioneering degree program. I'm waiting to discover which one of you will be the next shining star, the gifted mind who will burst forth and change the course of history."

"You mean someone who can create new life in the lab," came a voice from the left, midway up.

"Aye, someone who can build living organisms, repair all wounds, cure all sickness. A man or woman who can defy God and the angels." Dr. Essingler peered in the direction of the voice. "And you are, sir? Raise your hand so I can identify you...."

There was a nervous muttering and shifting; something dropped and rolled. A hand went up--a young man sitting next to an aisle bounced up a couple of inches and dropped again into his seat behind a flip-up desk-top. "Matthew Tabor," he said.

"Well, Matthew, do you see what this is in front of me? This blue and glowing machine? It's a 3-D bioprinter, using NovoGen bioprinting software. Do you know what it can do?"

"Sort of," came the faint reply. The hall echoed with a skitter of giggles.

"Once the technique is perfected, it will create life, Mr. Tabor."

"Like Frankenstein," he responded.

Elsa's face shone like a bank of snow in the midday sun. "You say that disparagingly, but can you imagine the brilliance, the stunning and genius of a man who could grow tissues and cells and organs and create living men and women in the early 1800s?"

A female student almost shouted from the opposite side of the room, close to the front, "He reanimated dead bodies, that's not science, that's necrophilia."

The class rolled with laughter.

Their professor chuckled. "You are confusing the movie with the book," she said, lowering her eyes briefly.

"But it's not real, it's just a story," said another girl wearing jeans and a t-shirt, seated higher up near the back.

"And your name is?" Elsa asked, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Camila Oliviero," came the reply.

"Well, Camila, there was a book written by a girl younger than you, but who is to say what's real or not. Mary and her husband visited Castle Frankenstein on the Rhine River on their way to Switzerland during that cold and uncongenial summer of 1816, before she wrote her story. And who is to say she didn't visit Ingolstadt, and the Medical School there, as well?"

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Elsa walked through the Spanish-style courtyard of the Beckman Institute, her phone at her ear. The sound of fountain water annoyed her. Any sound of splashing liquid irritated her. "There is potential there," she said, holding her other hand over the phone for a moment and glancing around. As it seemed she was alone, she continued, "They're young and raw and undisciplined, but one of them ... maybe...." The memory of Matthew Tabor caught on something sharp and jagged in her heart. *Elsa, Elsa, are you there?* the voice of her husband interrupted her reverie. "There is one, one young man...." She passed under the arches and colonnade at the far end of the courtyard, and emerged beside a long rectangular pool. She turned around and began walking back the way she had come.

*Elsa, please....*

*She recognized the pain in his voice, it caused her sorrow to acknowledge it. She had been with Mark for forty years.*

*Elsa, be patient sweetheart, my darling ... we're almost there.*

*"I remember when you, my love, sat in a classroom, the sunlight hitting your face as you listened to my lecture. All the other students were talking about the war in Vietnam and Kent State, or the Beatles breaking up, but you heard nothing but my words. You stayed after class, and we talked for hours about creation, life and death, the power and potential of science."*

*Elsa....*

*"I know, my love, how close we are." She surveyed the courtyard once more as she maneuvered around the hexagonal planters filled with flowers, shrubs and ornamental trees. Her heels clicked on the gray and red brick pavers. She found a bench and lowered herself tensely. "But we haven't succeeded yet. I made you come with me, and lie for me, and denied you a career, your own academic success and public recognition of your discoveries and inventions...."*

*You didn't make me do anything. I love you, I will always love you. The world is catching up to you and your father now, finally, we are on the verge ... Elsa talk to me....*

*She ended the call, and the hurt, the shock of betrayal, stabbed into her gut for Mark's sake. The fear of abandonment, the agony of loneliness, the incredible mind-numbing pain of being the only one drove her, required decisions and long-range plans. "He's my tenth husband. He will only last another twenty years anyway," she muttered to herself as she stood and slipped the phone into the small kidskin purse draped over one shoulder.*

Several graduate students and some faculty members entered the courtyard area. Elsa Esslinger walked past them, on her way back into the Institute building. She moved elegantly, as if she were skating. Her statuesque body seemed to radiate energy. The late afternoon California sun glinted off her chiseled cheekbones, her tapered fingers and pearlescent fingernails. Her hair, coiled in a bun at the nape of her neck, seemed like a living snake, breathing and winding, flaring copper. Each of the approaching group--men and women alike--froze, speechless as they watched Elsa approach; she brushed by, and disappeared into one of the doors behind them, her back and rear-end rhythmically swaying in one sinuous continuous motion.

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That evening, after she left Caltech's campus and returned to her cozy Annandale Road home in suburban Pasadena, her husband was attentive and passionate. Elsa Marie didn't protest. He fixed their dinner, and served a fine wine, and afterwards made love to her. She hugged him and caressed him and kissed him. "I'm so sorry," she whispered to him over and over again. Mark Esslinger cried for a short time, while they got ready for bed, but then cradled her in his arms until they fell asleep lying naked side by side under the covers. She woke an hour later gulping for breath, writhing like a beached fish, a high-pitched growl in her throat. She flailed violently for a moment, leaving bruises on Mark Esslinger's bruises before she oriented herself and was able to regain self-control.

"What was it this time, the boat and the water again?" her husband asked gently, stroking her thick, silken hair.

Elsa Marie nodded once. "I wish it were only an evil dream, but it happened, it's real. I don't remember how I escaped my bonds, but I was strong, and somehow I came to the surface again. I swam from the waters off the Holm of Papa to the beach on Papay Westray. It was dawn when I pulled myself onto the stones and sand, a line of orange on the horizon behind me, charcoal shreds of clouds floating overhead, the chilled air icing my breath. I couldn't feel anything anymore; it was only later that I understood the full scope of my injuries. It took me months to heal."

"My love, my poor love, I'm so sorry for your suffering," Mark kissed her on the cheek, and continued to gather her tightly.

"When I have to set down my place of birth, I tell the truth--the Orkney Islands of Scotland. Because that's where he made me, in his stone cottage just off the beach on the western shore of Papay Holm. When he was discovered in the arctic, he told Walton the sea captain that he hacked me into pieces, but he lied. He didn't have the stomach to do it, to put an absolute end to me, to put me out of my misery. Instead he tried to drown me...." The anger was still there, after nearly two-hundred years. "So many days, so much betrayal and unbearable loneliness...." Elsa Marie lowered her face into her hands and wept quietly.

"I know, sweetheart, I know," Mark murmured, weeping himself, for her. "Just a few more years, and all our research and experimentation, our hard and constant work, will bear fruit. We will grow a man, we will make a partner for you--your mate. We will create children, one way or another. Don't turn away from me, don't give up on me yet."

"Maybe," she said, reaching for a tissue from the box on the nightstand beside the bed. She blew her nose, blotted her face and wiped her eyes. "Maybe," she sighed. "Maybe we can make Matthew Tabor your apprentice." She wadded the tissue in one fist, crossed her arms over her chest and folded into a semi-fetal position as she cuddled into her husband's protective embrace, her head resting on his breast, over his beating heart. "I promise you this, when it's time for you to go, I'll do it quickly, you won't suffer. I love you, my husband, as much as I can love a human being."

#### **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 *Sirens Call Publications eZine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, Tell-Tale Press, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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WHO DARETH APPROACH THIS DREAD PORTAL?

Cracha the witch ran through her cottage, trying to think benign thoughts. As she wrenched her front door open she heard a desperate scream which was abruptly cut off. She saw a plump human, dressed in a Halloween costume, disappear the maw of her demon doorbell's heavily runed face.

*Not again*, she thought.

She shook a fist at the demon, which stared impassively down the paved path that led to Cracha's woodland cottage. The SMART Demon Doorbell had seemed like such a good idea.

The demon scanned approaching visitors, luring them close to the door. A psychic link allowed the demon to read the cottage owner's intent and react accordingly. So far, the demon had devoured a dozen debt collectors, tax inspectors and doorstep sellers. Blood was a wonderfully sustainable energy source as it seemed unlikely that the world would ever run out of nuisance callers.

She watched the trick or treater's pumpkin lantern roll down her path. Moments later it vanished with a flash and a snap.

*Damn* Cratcha thought. That trick or treater had looked delicious, but now she didn't even have a pumpkin to eat.

Yet the installation druid had seemed so competent.

He'd done a very neat job of painting the summoning runes on Cratcha's door. He'd thoughtfully had the catalogue of link tattoos etched onto his own muscular chest and biceps. He'd inked her chosen design onto her throat, winking suggestively. He must have been distracted, because on his way out he'd slopped some psychoactive paint on the pathway. Now Cratcha had demonic paving slabs which were quite feral and devoured everything that touched them.

*Maybe I should have paid extra for the 'red tooth' option?* she thought, as she stared at the now passive demon on her door. She'd heard that the vampire's bite which set up the brain to demon connection was, apparently, painless. It also provided a more reliable control, but the link tattoo option had been such a bargain.

The demon sensed her presence and smiled. Cratcha smiled back. The demon was so charming when it was luring callers a little closer. The occult runes were classy and suited her whole 'cottage in the woods' aesthetic. Maybe she could get it fixed? The installation druid had left her a scrying bowl address for the maintenance department, though he'd assured her that she'd never need to contact them, the warranty was just a formality.

She stepped into her cottage then turned as she heard a chorus of cherubic voices.

"Trick or Treat!" A gaggle of kids dressed as little devils were wandering towards her cottage.

Cracha stepped out onto the path and opened her arms in welcome. At last, she could fill her larder for the winter. The kids looked scrumptious.

"Oh, look at you, you're so cute, let me get you some treats." She crooned. "Come round to the back door."

The kids skipped down the path towards her.

"Noooo" she cried as a feral paving slab snapped up the first kid. The rest panicked and ran towards the shelter of her front door. The demon's eyes gleamed, picking up on Cracha's hunger.

Sluuuuuurp! Buuuurp!

The demon smiled smugly.

"Stupid thing!" Cracha screamed.

She stomped through the door. It slammed shut behind her with an eldritch boom.

*That's new* she thought, then turned and tugged at the door handle. It refused to budge. She sensed the Demon's satisfaction as he deployed the safety lock-in protocol.

"Open this door you stupid creature!" Cracha shouted.

The demon chuckled.

Cracha stomped down the hallway. Time to find that scrying address—she sure hoped maintenance would arrive before she starved to death.

#### About the Author:

Alex Grehy's sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate. Yet her vivid prose, thought-provoking poetry and original view of the world have led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted! Her work has been published worldwide and she is a regular contributor to the Ladies of Horror Flash Project.

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

Twitter: [@indigodreamers](#)



Marek was lulled from sleep by soft, sweet music.

He lay there listening, hands clasped across his chest, fingers intertwined.

The music filled his head with an assortment of images:

Chalked circles and pentagrams over stripped bare floorboards. Burning black candles. Scattered sheets of hand drawn sheet music. A photograph of a smiling couple in a frame propped up on the closed lid of a piano. A dusty bookcase packed with esoteric tomes and crumbling grimoires.

Darkness dragged at the corners of his vision. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Sleep was wanting him back in its full embrace. But the music was haunting, almost impossible to tune out of. Its magic was beginning to brush away his lethargy, suffusing him with joy.

His arms dropped to his sides, fingers lightly tapping the sides of the bed. The music, he realized, was coming from a lone violin. The thought triggered a whole new wave of memories, each one startlingly vivid and emotional in detail.

He began to sway his body, savouring the emotions that were stirred and the nostalgia that was evoked. It got him to his feet. He shuffled across the room, pressing his body up against the stubborn door. The door yielded, creaking quietly open.

Beyond the door stood a woman, her eyelids fluttering, a baroque violin tucked under her chin. Moonlight glinted off the necklace she wore, a large silver pentacle attached to a chain.

She lifted her chin, catching his gaze.

Immediately, her eyes widened.

Her jaw dropped.

She played on, the melody painting the night and the insides of his skull with wonder.

She was smiling and crying, all at the same time.

And then he remembered.

It was *his* song.

The song that Ilse had written.

*Ilse*, he thought; *of course!*

The song that had been forged from a bond they shared. And *he* was the song—it was lodged inside of him, and he existed inside it.

Her black dress swished about her ankles as she shimmied and swayed, tears trickling down her aged but still breathtakingly beautiful face.

*When the music stops*, he thought, *sleep will steal me from this world once more.*

But for now, he remained entranced in the doorway of his small stone house, watching and listening to her play his song amongst the crosses and headstones of the garden.

### About the Author:

Paul Edwards is a life-long horror fan, and writes his own twisted tales in any spare time that he can grab. He has seen three collections of stories published—*Now That I've Lost You* (Screaming Dreams), *Black Mirrors* (Rainfall Books) and *Night Voices* (Demain Publishing), the latter being a joint-collection with author Frank Duffy. Paul is a big fan of rock music, role-playing games and rough Somerset cider.

Blog: [Paul Edwards Horror](#)

Instagram: [@paul\\_edwards\\_writer](#)





The news had been warning for the past month about an extraterrestrial; an interstellar large oblong object that had intruded into the solar system from parts unknown. Width 40 meters, length 200 meters. Destined to pass within 40,000 miles of Earth during Halloween week. NASA signaled it could be a remnant of a disintegrated rogue comet. But other experts indicated it could be the product of an intelligent civilization. It did not appear to be tumbling through space but rather smoothly rotating. Given its projected speed and path, it was not expected to be captured into the Solar System. NASA warned the object could possess electromagnetic properties which would interfere with Earth's electronic systems, satellites, and possibly have other unpredictable ramifications for life on Earth.

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A brisk October wind was rattling the cabin door. Robbie has his fire burning brightly in the old wood stove, flooding the single room with the warm scent of cherry wood. A bard owl in a tree just behind the cabin calling in that lonesome plaintiff voice, and seconds later another from over the hill responding, the prelude to night's romance.

Robbie loves this time of year after the hot humid summer. Harvest is in. Last thing is the corn, it's all in the silo. Slaving away as a farm hand for the farmer whose guest cabin he occupies. There'd still be helping with the feed for the steers, a part time endeavor. Nothing major to do these next few days but kick back, drink, and play the banjo. Sometimes go into town to get laid, or bring a friend down here to enjoy a romp by fire and candle light.

A new eerie sound joins the wind's cacophony. Startled, he knows her voice immediately, though he hasn't heard her in a year, since he buried her last October. His German Short-haired Pointer, Charlie Bird, howling above the wind, serenading the nearly full moon. He's surprised she's come back to visit, but it's not unheard of. His mother's Cherokee ancestors down in the Smoky Mountains told of such apparitions. But he's afraid to open the door to the dog. Who knows whose bidding she might be doing tonight, fresh from the grave? The howling chills him to the bone. He breaks out the Wild Turkey and tunes to reruns of Twilight Zone to ease his thoughts. Drinks past midnight and collapses into bed.

Middle of the night he's awakened by the sounds of a fight to the death, two vicious varmints, loud as banshees' right outside his door. Must be coming from the chicken coop. He reflexively grabs his gun, a Winchester .22, but then remembers he heard Charlie Bird earlier that night and prefers not to venture out. The dog used to protect the coop from predators.

Comes morning he opens the door, his gun ready. He explores the area around the fenced-in coop. Sure enough, there's the dirty-grey stiff carcass of a raccoon just outside the coop's door. Closer inspection reveals deep lacerations on its throat and backside, its mouth afoul with gelled saliva, eyes vacant like fish eyes. Charlie Bird's teeth marks, no doubt about it. It's as if the beloved dog wants to stand watch and protect the chickens one more time before permanently submitting to the cold ground on the slight rise behind the cabin. A year to the day he dug her grave, planted a wooden cross, shedding tears when it was done.

He hikes up the hill, through the underbrush to the little clearing where the wooden cross still stands. The ground is untouched, weeds collecting. He wonders, now how did Charlie Bird get loose to kill that varmint if the grave is undisturbed?

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Halloween night. He's cooked himself a nice meal of rabbit stew and collards with corn bread. He's got a buzz on from Wild Turkey and reefer. Charlie Bird has visited every night for a week outside the cabin. Killed a possum and another raccoon, still protecting the chickens. The news is still rambling on about that interstellar piece of rock shaped like a missile flying by.

Time to go down the dirt road to the farmer's field for the annual celebration. There's always a nice bonfire with mountain music; there'll be a few guitars, banjos, fiddle, washtub bass, harmonica. The farmer and his neighbors drinking peach brandy moonshine; teens in costumes cutting loose; everyone getting crazy till the early morning hours. He never misses the fun. He'll end up playing drunk on his feet, keeping the tunes coming until dawn, the musicians grouped in a circle, leaning in, playing for themselves, for the night, for the stars.

Walking slowly, banjo slung across his back, his feet shuffling through the fallen oak and sycamore leaves, Robbie reflects on the past year and what's ahead. What is there to look forward to? What's he really accomplishing in this world? Will he ever stop being lonely? He had shared the cabin with Charlie Bird longer'n he ever lived with any woman. His mom's no longer around to nag him about finding a wife, but some such arrangement wouldn't be too bad at his age. Someone who can look past how he never graduated from high school, don't have much money in the bank. Someone who can accept him for who he is, like what Charlie Bird always done.

Coming over the rise he sees the fire down the hill, just now lit, blazing high in its glory. The sound of instruments tuning up. Folk talking and laughing, happy to be alive, plunging into this brisk Hallow's Eve. Up in the clear sky he can see a new object on the horizon, brighter than Venus or Jupiter, that wasn't there a week ago.

He feels Charlie Bird walking beside him, hears the leaves rustling under her feet, feels her breath on his hand, her muzzle wetting his palm. Somehow he suspects this will be her last night afoot.

### Harvey's Desert Zoo | *Jonathan Worlde*

"I'm starving."

I'd picked up the gorgeous brunette hitchhiker on the Nevada highway. She said her car had broken down but I hadn't seen any stalled vehicles.

A few miles down the road, she asked me to pull over into Harvey's Desert Zoo.

"Maybe there's some food here." Her jade-colored eyes signaled I'd be doing alright if I just satisfied her whim.

"Looks like a tourist trap to me."

An emaciated raccoon was chained to a stake. An armadillo shared a sandpit with a sidewinder rattlesnake. There was no sign of Harvey. This was one of the saddest places on Earth.

I'm midsentence, "I don't think we'll find any food here..." when three long tentacles explode from her body. With razor teeth she devours the animals before turning her ravenous gaze on me.

### About the Author:

Jonathan Worlde's neo-noir mystery novel *Latex Monkey with Banana* was winner of the Hollywood Discovery Award. Recent short fiction appears in *Antietam Review*, *The Raven Review*, *Cirque Journal*, *Ab Terra Voices*, and *Stupefying Stories*. He is also a traditional country blues performer under the stage name Paul the Resonator, whose CD is *Soul of a Man*. See Paul the Resonator on facebook.

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### Feeling Alive | *Radar DeBoard*

Martin had never been one for Halloween when he had been growing up. In fact, if you were to have asked him at any time during his fifty plus years of his life what he thought about the holiday, he would say the same thing.

"It's a waste of time!" he would grumble. "Just a bunch of kids dressing up in dumb costumes because of some stupid, old superstitions."

This outlook quickly changed once Martin died. In fact, Halloween quickly became his favorite holiday. Afterall, it was the only time he could really stretch his limbs. In fact, it was the only day of the year that he could move his limbs. So every Halloween, Martin would stretch out his limbs by using them to dig through the six feet of dirt that separated him from the world above. And as soon as he would reach the surface, Martin would immediately start looking for something to eat, preferably something fresh. Thankfully, there was always a group of teens wondering around the graveyard on Halloween.

### About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing. He is also a regular contributor to HorrorTree and Siren's Call Publications.

Facebook: [Writer Radar DeBoard](#)

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Don't watch 'Midnight's Terror'.  
This film may be the death of you.

# *Silent Scream*



*Alyson Faye*

AVAILAVLE ON AMAZON!



Around four in the morning, Gil descended the attic stairs with a hatbox under his arm, unable to shake the feeling that something was with him, attached to him like a parasite to a host. He downed two tranquilizers, even though he'd been drinking bourbon since ten. He sat at his desk, surrounded by boxes from the day he had moved in four weeks before. He pulled out his laptop and began to type:

*I need to tell Laura, but it's late, too late for another phone call. She already thinks I'm crazy because of yesterday. This is the second night I've worked in the attic, and the second time weird stuff happened up there. Terrifying doesn't adequately describe the experience. I've read enough King and watched enough Argento and Craven films to understand what the word 'horror' means. I wonder if what happened to me could be called horror? I don't know. I wasn't physically hurt, but I could feel its touch and the heat of its breath on my face. I can't even write with any clarity what actually did happen. The fear is still that raw.*

*Was it my imagination? I heard voices. And then there was that smell—a terrible, putrid, sickly sweet smell. An odor I'd experienced only once before—in college, when I attended the autopsy of a man killed by smoke inhalation. The smell of death.*

For weeks, Gil had been clearing the old furniture and junk. The house had been willed to him by way of the family estate. Everyone else in his family tree was dead. The place had initially belonged to his paternal great-grandfather, but it had remained empty for decades. Gil remembered listening to relatives who spoke of the place as if it were a precious heirloom, and yet no one chose to live there. They spoke of the house with an almost fervent reverence. But there was a nervousness in their voices, particularly when discussing his great-grandfather.

He took a leave of absence from his job and convinced Laura to think about moving with him. "I'll get things settled here then fly you down to check the place out. If you don't like the house, then I'll list it. How's that sound?" Laura agreed.

After he settled a few legal issues, he moved into the place. He quickly realized the family stories about the house were just exaggerations. He was determined to go through each room. When he uncovered the furniture, it turned out to be just old, cheap, musty pieces from the 1920s. The lamps were Sears and Roebuck, not Tiffany's.

Gil moved through the house room-by-room, clearing the place so that he could either live there or sell it. The job was tedious and uneventful, until he'd started work in the attic.

This morning he had called Laura.

"Gil, my love, can you hear what you're trying to tell me?" she said.

"Hold on. Imagine what you'd do if you were alone in your attic, and someone tapped you on the shoulder, but when you turned around, no one was there? I could feel her breath on my face. I had the lights on, and yet I couldn't see anyone. It felt like someone was standing right in front of me. I heard her moaning. Loud moaning."

"You mean like my friend Chrissy with her boy toy of the week?" Laura said and laughed.

"No, no, wait. I'm not joking. You're alone in the attic, it's hotter than hell, and then someone taps you on the shoulder again, but this time she screams in your ear. Can you get what that would be like? No one was there, Laura—but I did feel and hear her!"

"What are you doing over there with another woman?" she asked, then laughed again. Silence. "I was joking. You still there, Gil?"

"Jesus, I know how it sounds. Forget it, we'll talk later." He hung up.

He was convinced there is an entity in the attic room. He could feel a physical presence occupying the space, and it left behind something he couldn't articulate. To say it made the room cold made it a cliché. But that's what he'd felt.

The night before his bizarre experience, he was going through a trunk in the attic, then hit a snag. The top shelf of the chest wouldn't come out. The leather handles were intact, but he couldn't lift the shelf out to access the lower compartment. He tried again. Gil gave the handles a hefty yank, and finally the shelf popped out.

"Ah, Jesus." He'd thought after almost one hundred years, he would've found something of value inside.

There was a single hatbox at the bottom—nothing else. Gil adjusted the work light to get a better look. The hatbox was almost the same greenish color as the outside of the trunk. The box was round, approximately eighteen inches wide, and at least as many inches deep. There was something odd about the appearance of the box's age. It looked old, yet it didn't. The covering on the hatbox looked new, the leather smelled good and felt supple. But the handles, latches, and other hardware looked like they were from the 1920s. Gil thought it odd; it made him feel uncomfortable, and he couldn't say why.

The handle on the circular front had a small brass lock above it. Gil used his thumb to pull down the button to open the latch, but it was rusted shut or locked, perhaps both. When he moved the box, something inside rolled and shifted. *There must be something other than a hat in here.* He brought the hatbox down, then lifted the pull-down stairs back into the ceiling. Gil started to doubt anything he'd told Laura on the phone. He felt embarrassed he'd let his imagination run amok. It was late, and he could pick the lock on the hatbox tomorrow and go through the contents then. He would give Laura a call when she got home from work. He'd say he was sorry for hanging up, and explain he'd just lost it due to the extreme heat in the attic.

He continued typing:

*I wouldn't classify my mood as depressed, but I'm disappointed with myself for letting my imagination get the better of me. I had thought that I'd find something in this old place. The attic was my last hope. As I walked toward the hallway, I'd felt a coldness as deep as a walk-in freezer. I smelled an odd mix of flowers and something fetid.*

He thought about what he'd experienced. Gil tried to make sense of the night. He hit Return twice, then continued:

*That's when I saw her.*

*I thought I'd left the front door open and that a friendly and, I might add, quite lovely young woman was standing at the other end of the hallway, near the kitchen entrance. The light from the kitchen lit the right side of her dramatically, as if I was watching an actress moving into a spotlight onstage. She looked inviting, the way she stood there with one leg thrust out from the bottom of her dress. Her hemline had small iridescent beads arranged in an elaborate pattern. She appeared to be a woman of wealth. Whoever she was, she was incredibly alluring.*

*The scene played out in slow motion, mesmerizing me. It didn't occur to me why a woman I'd never seen before would be standing there at close to four in the morning. But then, even though I had the lingering haze of alcohol rolling through my brain, it hit me:*

*She's not real.*

*Her image came into focus, like putting on a pair of glasses and being able to see clearly for the first time. She wore clothes that looked like they'd come from a theatrical costume shop. There was a distinct musty smell as she moved. She was a pretty thing, but now I could see she had dark circles under her eyes. Her smile felt forced, like someone was poking a gun into her ribs. I took a step closer. Her face had a translucent quality that looked mottled, with very faint blue and greenish blotches just beneath the skin. I couldn't be sure, but the discolorations seemed to move slightly on their own, in different directions, like shadows under a lake of ice.*

*I was in awe, but afraid. This was not the same as the thing that touched me in the attic. If I were to admit I was actually looking at a ghost, then what did it mean for everything else I'd ever believed? Was there really a God? Aliens? Maybe all of the things I'd always doubted actually possessed seeds of truth. At that moment, I believed in the possibility of ghosts.*

*I froze in place. Suddenly her movements blurred in fast, almost frenetic motions, like a film clip that had been sped up. I'd seen episodes of American Horror Story, and this apparition had the same type of creepiness.*

*When I looked at the woman in front of me, I thought I saw a maggot wriggle out from the corner of her left eye. I felt both enticed and repulsed. I was transfixed by her strange, unsettling beauty, so much so that I didn't realize that she'd moved toward me. I wouldn't say that she was walking, because she wasn't. She floated toward me. No, not that. I can only explain her movement in terms of what I know. I felt I was watching a Hitchcock film shot with lenses designed to bring an object closer to you. I wasn't moving, and neither was she. Yet we were nearer.*

*I felt a stark and awful premonition of death about her—not how she may have died, but that she possessed the power of death in her touch. Yet, I no longer felt intimidated by fear. I had a strange longing for her, an ache only possible from periods of long separation. I felt I was about to lose a lover to the unknown. I understood what this meant: for the two of us to be together, I had to die.*

*She pointed to the upstairs landing. I knew she meant the attic. She opened and closed her mouth as if she were speaking in a silent movie, but I couldn't understand what she was trying to say.*

*She appeared to—*

The entry in Gil's Word file ended there.

Laura had been the one to find Gil's headless body, and the blood—pools of it, with wide swaths painted on the walls. His desk, his laptop screen, and the laptop's keyboard were covered with blood spatters and bloody fingerprints.

Detectives found a bent knife blade broken from its wooden handle. The force needed to separate the metal from the riveted wood must have been immense. They questioned Laura about Gil's description of the events that had

played out up in the attic days before. As she spoke, the two men exchanged raised-eyebrow glances, then they asked her where she'd been at the approximate time Gil met his demise.

In the end, though, they concluded that the perpetrator (possibly more than one) had entered the house through an unlocked door. The perpetrators had taken Gil's severed head with them, possibly as part of a cult or a devil-worshipping ritual.

The lab technicians went through the house methodically. In the trunk in the attic, they found an old hatbox, rusted and locked. When a tech picked up the circular box, she noted it was unusually heavy. Something inside lolled back and forth. Conditioned by years of experience not to be shocked by anything they might see at a crime scene; the techs popped the lock.

Inside, they found a rotted, petrified human head. The hair was slicked back, but there were bald patches, like someone had torn out the hair. One of the eyes had been carved out, and rough blade or axe marks could clearly be seen on the exposed orbital bone. The mouth was in a sardonic grimace; the lips were pulled back and the tongue had been cut out.

DNA confirmed the head was Gil's. Test results were inconclusive as to the injuries to the head. The coroner couldn't determine if they'd been caused postmortem, due to the decades the head had been in the hatbox. The pathologists agreed that the head had been partially preserved by the presence of desiccants, mainly salt crystals, and the tight seal of the lid. Further tests concluded that the lock had been rusted in place for decades.

The coroner determined that Gil had been decapitated at some point within the last seventy-two hours. The saw marks on his neck matched the marks at the base of the petrified head. The entire head was completely desiccated, except one section, the location where the head was severed, was still moist with blood. No scientific explanation was offered for what had happened to him or how he'd been murdered. The broken knife—the only sign of a weapon—didn't have a single drop of blood on it.

The brain teaser was this: How were the perpetrators able to lock Gil's head in a hatbox, rust the lock shut, and advance its decay to the point of decades?

Gil's house remained empty. Stories of the unsolved murder tainted the sale of the place.

For years, season after season, summers came and went, and the Arctic air left swirls of powdery snow destined to melt into the first rivulets of spring. The winds mimicked whistles and cries, and if the conditions were right, they carried vague sounds of human voices that whispered moans of exquisite pleasure and unfathomable pain.

## Rain Drain | Lou Rera

Her keys dropped perfectly through the slotted grate of the storm drain. *Damn*, she thought. The night air was crisp, colder than she'd expected, and the wind whipped little devils of leaves in a dance of seasonal change.

She'd just finished her shift at Deco Diner pouring a million cups of coffee. Tired, she rubbed her forehead, wondering how to get her keys without a flashlight. She crouched down, kneeling on the edge of her purse to keep the asphalt from biting her, staring into what looked like a prison cell for water. She never heard the footsteps behind her.

## About the Author:

Lou Rera writes horror, supernatural crime and subjects that delve into the darker side of humanity. He is the author of *AWAKE: Tales of Terror* (2020), a collection of thirteen stories, and *SIGN*, a supernatural thriller of deception and murder (2014). He is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Lou also is a musician and will play bass in the musical, *Hair*, in October.

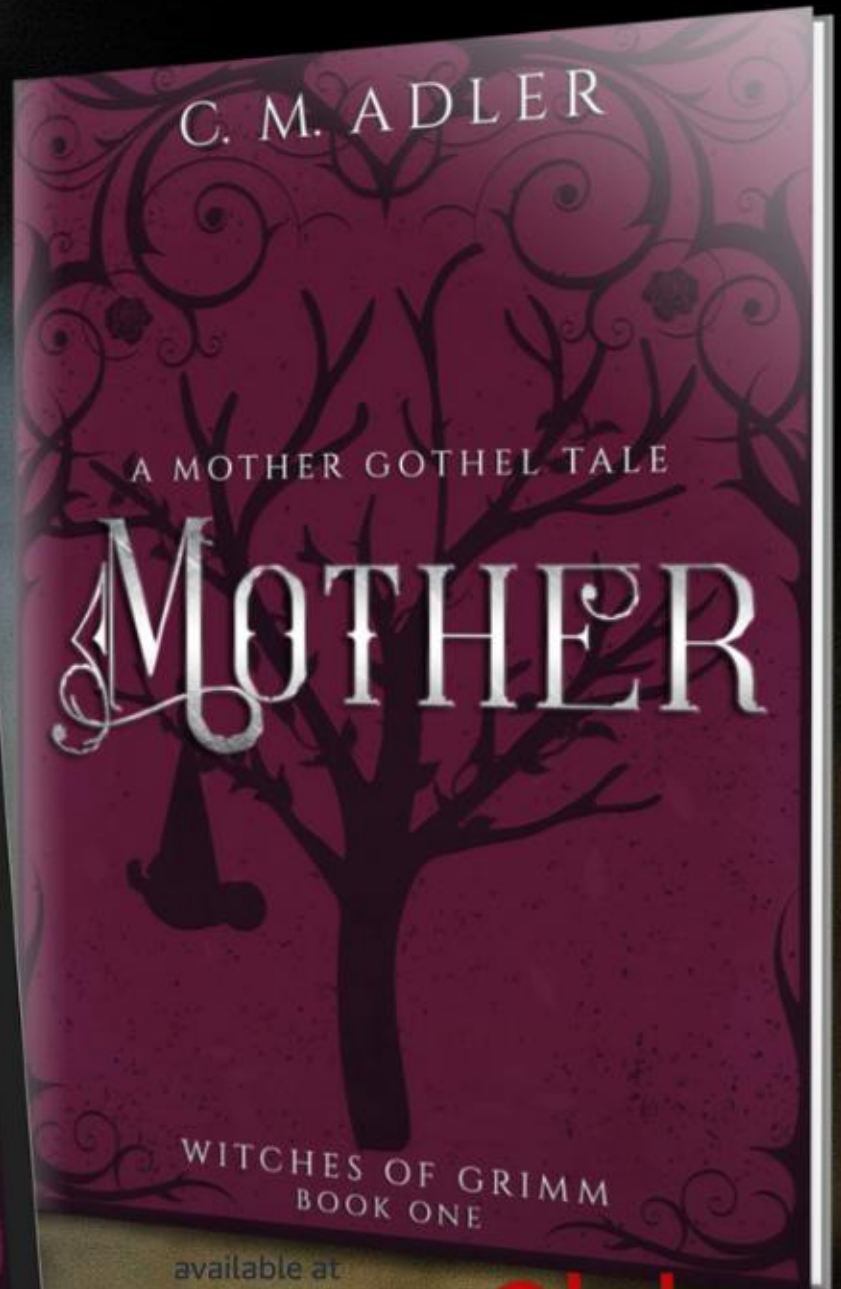
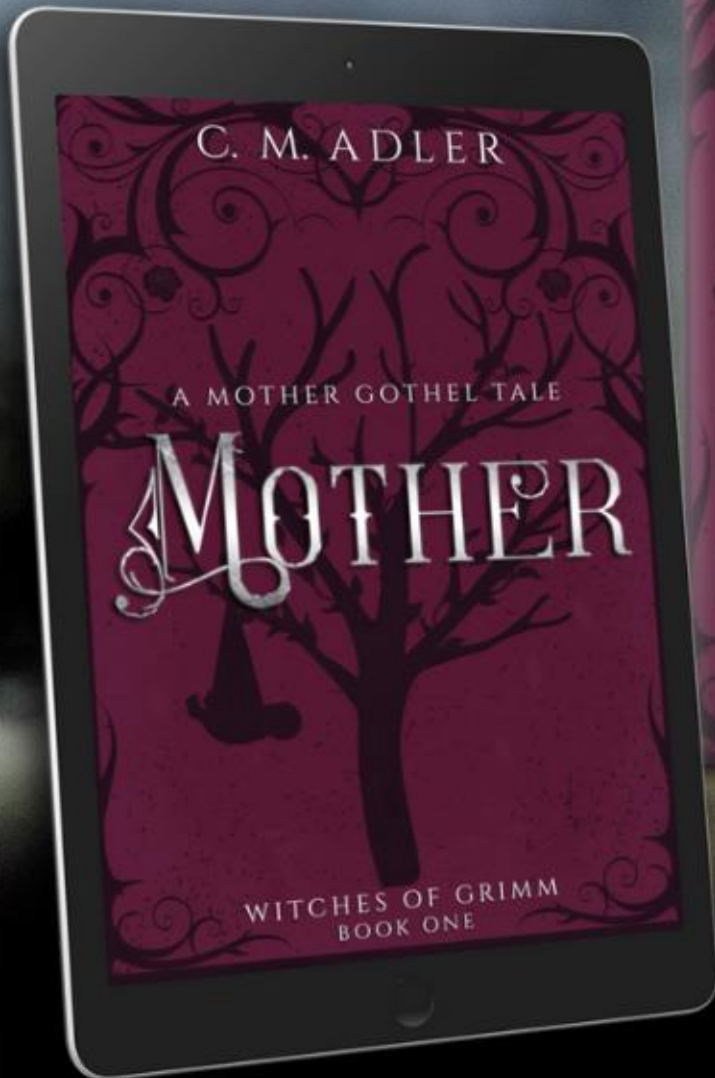
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# ONCE UPON A TIME...



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Tears for Fears' 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World' echoed from the speakers of the small reception area as Holly stood in front of the desk, shifting her weight from heel to heel.

"She'll be out in the minute," the receptionist sighed, staring at the computer screen. She'd only made eye contact with Holly once, when she first entered the spa. Once she learned who Holly was looking for, she quickly lost interest. "She only rents the space," she explained. "She's not, like, part of the spa or anything."

"Okay," replied Holly, unsure of why this fact was so important. The small ad in the town penny saver was brief, to the point. *Licensed massage therapist. 25 years+ experience. Guaranteed or your money back.* Holly glanced around the waiting area. The walls were painted a light blue, the light dimmed just enough to soften the edges of every corner. Curt Smith continued to croon from above, warning listeners that freedom and pleasure never last forever.

"Hello." The voice was sudden, incongruously jarring in the serene space. "You are looking for me?"

Holly turned around. Standing behind her was a woman. She looked to be the same age as Holly, forty or so, but her body had weathered the years much more successfully. She was anchored to the earth more firmly than Holly, who, those days, often felt like a stiff wind or mild earthquake could send her tumbling to the ground at any moment. "Yes," Holly said. She held up the crumpled newspaper in her hand. "I saw your ad and—"

The woman crooked her arm forward and motioned down the hallway from which she had emerged. "Follow me," she commanded. Holly did as she was told, and the woman led her to the last room in the hall.

When the door was closed, the massage therapist stepped backward and assessed Holly's physique. "Any medical issues I should know about?" Her voice weighed heavily with a euphonious Slavic accent. It reminded Holly pleasantly of her grandmother who'd immigrated to the United States after the War. Babka learned English quickly, but her pronunciations quickly betrayed her country of birth, even as she refused to ever speak in her native tongue in front of Holly. *This is a country of new futures*, she told her granddaughter, the syllables dancing in her throat. *You must always embrace them.*

"What? No, I—" Holly stammered for a moment. She stared at the woman's shoulder muscles, smooth and pronounced under her lightweight, fitted t-shirt. "The appointments are for my husband. He injured his back. I'm just here to pay for the sessions in advance." She fumbled with her purse, looking for the paper-clipped bundle of bills she'd scrounged together from working extra shifts at the restaurant, her second job. During the day, she taught at the local high school. The school year had only just begun, but her feet already ached from overuse.

The woman's facial expression did not change. "Workers' compensation," she said, more as a statement than a question.

"No," said Holly. "I'll be paying for it myself." Jason hadn't injured himself at work. To do that, he would have to be employed, a rare occurrence during the fifteen-year span of their marriage, unless Frisbee golfing on the weekends, slumping over the pinball machines he collected in their basement, or wearing jean imprints on the barstools at the corner pub were occupational pursuits. When she'd taken the waitressing job after school let out for the summer, Jason had promised his wife that he would find a job by the time September rolled around—they needed a second income to keep pace with the variable interest rate of their mortgage—but as August lulled to a close, a dubiously coincidental ache in his lower back suspiciously took hold. She had toyed with increasing the deductible on the home and auto insurance, or perhaps canceling payments on Jason's life insurance, as he was worth more dead than alive at that point.

Holly thrust the stack of crinkled money toward the woman. "How many sessions will this pay for?"

The woman did not respond at first, then gently accepted the offering and fingered the corners of the bills. "Eight one-hour visits. Once a week." She continued to hold the money in front of her, her pale eyes boring holes in Holly's cheeks. "You read my slogan?"

Holly thought for a moment. She had only read the tiny advertisement. Desperate to secure the woman's services, she'd gone directly from the market where she'd picked up the newspaper to the spa address provided. She hadn't bothered to research the woman's credentials on modern technology. Babka would have been disappointed in her. "The money back guarantee? Yes," Holly said quickly. "Eight weeks would bring us to the end of October. So, he'll be all better by Halloween?"

The woman paused but did not remove her eyes from Holly's face. "You will find relief," she said finally. "I promise." Then, taking Holly completely by surprise, she stepped forward and wrapped her muscular arms around Holly in a tight hug. She pulled away but rested her hands on Holly's upper arms. "I am Vedma," she said. "Have your husband come next Saturday at nine."

Holly completed a short form in preparation for Jason's visit and left quickly, only then remembering she'd left her groceries roasting in the car in the early autumn warmth.

\*\*\*

It took some prodding to convince her husband to go. "Will I have to take my clothes off?" he asked, his eyes glued to the football game on their big-screen television.

"I'm sure she sees naked people all the time," Holly said. "Like a doctor. Her name is Vedma."

Jason turned his attention to his wife. “*She?* The masseuse is a woman?”

“Massage therapist,” corrected Holly. “Yes.” She saw her husband’s eyebrows raise ever so slightly.

“Is she good looking, at least?” He laughed and returned his gaze to the television.

Holly sighed. “You have a standing appointment every Saturday at nine,” she said. “Please,” she added, a hint of pleading in her tone. “I already paid in advance.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jason answered dismissively, but he kept his word, and that weekend, he returned from his first appointment looking slightly dazed and doe-eyed.

“How did it go?” asked Holly, running a rag full of Murphy’s Oil Soap along the wood trim in the parlor.

Jason stopped and thought for a moment. “I feel...tired. Kinda sleepy.”

“Massages are relaxing,” Holly said. “People fall asleep on the table sometimes, I hear.”

Jason frowned. “I don’t think I fell asleep, but it’s possible.” He stretched his arms wide above his head and yawned. The front of his t-shirt drifted upward, revealing a rounding paunch of a stomach feathered with dark body hair. “I’m going to lie down for a bit.” He exited the room and a moment later, Holly heard the sound of his footsteps padding up to the house’s second floor.

“Of course you need a nap,” she whispered angrily to herself. “You work very hard all week.” She ran the cloth over the top of the pine chair rail, dropped the dirty rag in the bucket, and walked to the basement to begin the laundry.

\*\*\*

As the weather in their New England town began to turn gray and the foliage transformed into fiery landscapes, Jason continued to attend his weekly sessions with Vedma. He insisted that the back pain had not subsided, though it never seemed to prevent him from participating in recreational activities. On the first Saturday in October, he rushed home from his massage to pack for a friend’s bachelor party weekend in Vermont.

“Have you seen my Oasis t-shirt?” he called.

Holly joined him in the bedroom just as he was pulling over his head the sweatshirt he’d worn to his appointment. The sight of his naked torso in the morning light caught her off guard, and she had to look twice to check that she was seeing correctly. “Jason!” she said sharply and pointed to his abdomen. “What happened?”

Her husband tossed the discarded top onto the bed and looked down, then at his wife. “Oh, yeah. This?” He pointed to his chest, then looked over at the mirror on their wall, straightening his back and pursing his lips as he assessed his reflection. The skin from his collarbone to the top of his jeans was covered with dark yellow splotches, shadows of what appeared to be faded bruises. He turned around but kept his eyes on the mirror. “All over my back, too.”

Holly walked closer to her husband. They had seen little of one another that month: she never saw him naked in the light anymore, content to fall half-asleep into bed after waiting long dinner shifts on school nights and to wake early to begin the day’s grueling cycle again. Jason was markedly thinner; his belly had flattened, though not into chiseled musculature. Instead, it appeared concave, like someone had taken an ice cream scoop to his abdominal cavity. The skin across his pectorals sagged as if loose, and sharp ribs nearly poked through his skin. The belt on his jeans was pulled tight, the fabric on his waist bunching in awkward folds. “What happened to you? Were you in an accident?” she asked.

“Nah,” Jason answered, unconcerned. “I think the color is from her massages, actually. Like, maybe the blood moves to the surface or something. She spends the whole hour on my torso, never rubs my arms or legs or anything.” He fished a mustard-colored shirt from his dresser drawer and put it on, and Holly noticed, with some disgust, that the color matched the skin it covered.

“Does it hurt?” she asked. “Your chest,” she moved closer to her husband hesitantly, “or your stomach?”

“Not in the least,” Jason said, then quickly added, “I mean, my *back* still hurts. I think that’s just gonna be a permanent thing, you know? Like a slipped disk or a fractured spinal nerve or something.” He shoved a handful of socks and underwear into his duffel bag and leaned over to kiss her cheek. “I gotta run, honey. I’m picking up Pete at eleven and we gotta hit the packie.”

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A cloudy October swirled by like dry leaves. Holly saw daylight so infrequently that she began to imagine mushrooms growing beneath her sweaters. Jason ate ravenously at the rare meals they shared, but his shirts began to billow around him and he’d taken to wearing drawstring sweatpants almost exclusively. After she’d spotted the yellow patches of bruise a second time and suggested he see a doctor, he took pains to never undress in front of her again.

On the day before Halloween, Jason returned from his final session with Vedma, holding her business card in his hand. “I gotta say: I was skeptical at first, but she really makes me feel relaxed,” he said, sleepily tacking the card to the refrigerator door with a magnet. “She said to keep this, in case you need her again in the future.” He raised his hands above his head and stretched lackadaisically, and that’s when Holly saw it.

“Jason, what’s wrong with your stomach?!” Holly said, the panic in her voice unmistakable.

Her husband quickly put his arms down. “What? Nothing.”

Holly pulled at the arm of his shirt. “Take this off. There’s something wrong with your stomach.”

Jason clutched his shirt to his torso. “No, nothing is wrong. I don’t need to go to the doctor.”

Holly began to pull harder and soon, the two were engaged in a tug of war, the bulky sweatshirt their instrument of battle. Exhausted, Jason gave in quickly. “Okay, okay.” He slowly peeled the top from his body, but Holly was unprepared for what was revealed.

He looked like a ghoul from a horror comic, a grotesque body paused in mid-zombification. Although his head and extremities remained normal size, his torso had thinned to skeletal proportions, his ribs protruding to graze the underside of his arms. The yellowed skin had worn away to become so translucent, Holly could see what little remained of his muscle: just gossamer pink membranes stretched over paper-thin bones, his dark red lungs beneath, expanding and contracting with concerted effort.

“I feel better than ever, Holly,” Jason said. “I know it looks bad, but I feel *good*.” He smiled sheepishly. “And my back is better. I mean, it never really hurt that much, to be honest. Now it’s perfect. I feel nothing at all.” He smiled drunkenly and yawned.

“You are *not* good. I can see your intestines,” said Holly. “Literally. Your intestines.” She pointed at his pelvis.

Jason waved her off and began to turn away. “Nah—” he began, but Holly grabbed at him to stop him from leaving. Her hands landed on the patch of skin just below his left rib, but she struck forward too forcefully. She felt her fingertips pierce the diaphanous dermal layer and continue unfettered into his abdominal cavity. She flinched and pulled her hands away, looking with repulsion at the pulp and sinew clinging to her fingers.

Jason chuckled. “I don’t even feel that.”

“You *don’t feel that*?” Holly echoed incredulously. “How is that possible?!” She poked at him again; this time, her fingers split the tissue-like skin on his left breast, ruptured the mesothelium, and broke two of his ribs, plunging directly into his left lung.

In response, Jason immediately doubled over. “*That* I felt,” he wheezed, the sound of his breathing sudden wet and tacky. He remained hunched, trying desperately to force air into his body but only succeeding in pushing blood from Holly’s first wound onto his wife in sticky, thick spurts. Horrified, Holly pushed him away, knocking him violently back against the kitchen table, breaking the skin above his right kidney and creating another gushing of red goo everywhere.

Jason collapsed helplessly onto the floor, slipping in the puddle of his own blood and knocking himself unconscious. Her husband was dead before Holly could rouse herself out of horrified disbelief.

Holly’s hands shook as she pulled her iPhone from her back pocket, blood smearing the screen as she swiped up to unlock it. She snatched the business card from the refrigerator. Surely, Vedma would know what had happened. What would Holly tell the medics? The police? That her husband had died from a poke to the ribs? *I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t cancel the life insurance after all*, she thought. She laughed out loud at this realization, the eerie cackle echoing in the hushed kitchen.

There was no phone number on the front of the card, so she turned it over. This time, Holly simply exhaled and smiled. There, beneath single lines noting the spa’s address, Vedma’s experience, and her money back guarantee was the slogan the massage therapist had inquired about.

*I promise relief.*

Guaranteed.

### About the Author:

Rebecca Rowland is the dark fiction author of *The Horrors Hiding in Plain Sight* and *Pieces* and the curator of the five horror anthologies by Dark Ink Books, including *Generation X-ed*, coming this January. She is an Active member of HWA and occasionally reviews novellas and anthologies for Ginger Nuts of Horror, and her short fiction regularly appears in an assortment of independent venues.

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My late aunt bought me a porcelain doll for Christmas in 1976. I kept her in her box for safety because she was so delicate and had the most beguiling light green eyes with a faint smile upon her pretty face, her hair was a mass of dark brownish ringlets. She wore an elegant long dress with puffed sleeves, gold beads with gold brocade squares and rosettes at the front. Her shoes were also gold with bows on them. I asked my mum to name her for me.

"Noelle would be a nice name for her, it means Christmas," she answered.

Noelle took pride of place on my dressing room table admired by everyone, friends and family alike. She stood peacefully for a year without any sort of incident. Until October the 31st 1977, I'd gone to my friend Barbara's Halloween party; it was late so I decided to stay the night.

"Barbara can I use your phone? I'd like to phone home and tell mum that I'll be stopping here tonight, that's if you don't mind me staying the night. Will that be alright with you?"

"Sure, you're welcome to stay for as long as you like," she giggled tipsily whilst holding a tall glass of punch in one hand and putting her other out to try and steady herself as she swayed against the banister.

Retrieving my purse and fidgeting I hurriedly pulled out some coins in order to pay for the call and left them on the table beside the phone then dialled my number.

"Is that you? I'm so glad that you've called."

"Yes it's me, just letting you know I'll be stopping at Barbara's house tonight, it's late and I don't really want to be on the streets searching for a taxi at this hour. Is everything okay? You sound panicky Mum."

"I was downstairs drifting off to sleep on the settee when I was suddenly startled by a loud thump above. When I got up there the thumping continued, I stopped on the landing to listen and realized it was coming from your room so I went in to take a look. Noelle was sat up in bed with her head slowly turning towards me, she leered right at me so I slammed the door shut and ran downstairs as fast as my legs would go. I'm so frightened, I can't stand being alone in this house any longer my nerves are shot to pieces!" She shrieked.

"Okay calm down, I'm coming, don't worry I'll be home just as soon as I can," I explained trying my best to reassure her.

After making my excuses and hurriedly saying good bye to everyone, including Barbara who was doing her best to persuade me to stay I quickly left. Catching the first cab that came along I arrived home to find Mum at the gate white as a ghost and shaking with a combination of fear and cold.

"Have you been outside long? You'll catch your death, it's freezing out here, come inside."

"I'm not stepping foot inside this house while that thing's upstairs," she blurted hysterically.

"Everything's fine, there's nothing up there I assure you, except for Noelle."

"**Exactly!**" Mum shrieked in answer.

"You've probably just fallen asleep and dreamed the whole episode," I again tried to reassure her. "Look, if it'll put your mind at rest, once and for all I will go up there to take a look."

"**NO, DON'T!**" She warned.

"STOP worrying, I'll be fine and be back in no time, you'll see," I replied in as much of a light hearted tone as I could possibly feign, because I secretly didn't fancy the prospect of going in alone, but I had no other choice I had to brave it for Mum's sake.

The lights were all on when I entered, nothing seemed out of place or unusual. Thoroughly searching through each room and finding nothing out of the ordinary I felt quite satisfied that everything was in order downstairs. At that point, I decided to go and investigate further making my way slowly upstairs with the utmost caution being conscious of every tiny creak, I eventually reached my bedroom door putting my ear against it and listening carefully for the slightest sound from within. But there was none, nothing but eerie silence, the house was so still it could have been a graveyard. Suddenly everything was plunged into darkness as my bedroom door slowly opened half way, but not enough to enable me to see in. I stood practically in the doorway with raw fear choking me, as I strained my neck whilst attempting to peer in to the room properly. A mysterious and weird metallic green light began emanating from within. What on earth IS THAT?

"**WHO'S IN THERE?**" I shouted loudly, no answer was the firm reply as I pushed the door back and stepped inside. When I flicked the light switch, it wouldn't work.

The bedclothes suddenly stirred forming a moving mass which slowly raised itself into a small bump that began moving towards the end of the bed. Mesmerized I could only watch in terror as it stopped just short of the very edge, finally casting the bedclothes aside, only to reveal a hideously gnarled and deformed creature, its skull and skeletal like

features glowing green in the florescent light that was coming off it. The eye sockets were black and fathomless as it continued staring straight into my eyes, its wispy silver hair which appeared green in the light cloaked the skull making the creature's appearance even more sinister as the thing sat on the edge of the bed grinning and cackling hideously. It was wearing Noelle's dress, I could only watch in horror as it suddenly leapt off the bed and began crawling towards me. The sudden realization that this hideous monstrosity, whatever it may be or, wherever it came from was now all that remained of my once beautiful and precious doll. My mother had been right all along, she hadn't been dreaming after all. I backed away, quickly edging my way towards the door whilst never taking my eyes off the creature that was in hot pursuit and rapidly gaining momentum. Finally I managed to reach it but just as I was about to run through the doorway, it slammed shut in my face. I screamed out screaming as loudly as I could until my very lungs were about to burst, but to no avail, no one came no one heard my screams as the creature began slowly and deliberately climbing up towards my throat with its ugly twisted jaws wide open and fangs poised with thick globules of saliva dripping down off the tip of them on to my chest area. Its fetid breath filled my nostrils as it positioned itself for the kill.

#### About the Author:

Maria Bertolone a Landscape Artist by profession was inspired to write by her late friend, a writer who encouraged her to take part in the Blackpool 100 programme in 2011 resulting in the Anthology; *The Walls Have Voices* which she is published in. Her other achievements: Fylde Arts Association 2015 Anthology two poems. Sally Parrington Award Anthology. When not writing her passion is collecting dolls.

Facebook: [Maria Bertolone](#)

Twitter: [@bertolonemaria](#)

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#### Trophies | *Miracle Austin*

Every seventh year, before midnight on Halloween, the shrill cries ricocheted against the sapphire, rippled sky.

A swarm of sphinx moths hovered around that place, deep in the woods.

I wanted to help them, but my agoraphobia halted me at the cabin door, each time.

Scattered rotten, gnawed off toes and fingers floated around the torsos.

He plucked out the gifts with his long, jagged nails.

Some, too weak to survive...

Ripped, raven wings, and sour mistletoe slept inside the stuffed, vine-stitched up bellies...

Years past and only graves found.

I knew all about them from the stories he told me and from the pictures he captured with his Polaroid camera.

Yet, contacting the town sheriff wasn't an option I could ever pursue.

After all, the creature was my twin brother.

He'd reward me with these trophies to raise as my very own.

Whenever I lost one, Marcellus would always replace with another one.

#### About the Author:

Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night. She's a YA/NA cross-genre, hybrid author. She's a Marvel/DC/Horror/Stanger Things FanGirl and loves attending cons and teen book events. Miracle lives in Texas with her family, and she looks forward to hearing from her awesome readers, who already know her, and new ones, too.

Instagram: [@MiracleAustin7](#)

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FROM THE WOMEN BEHIND THE  
MULTI-AWARD WINNING BLACK CRANES



"Do you mind if I sit here for a while?" I asked.

The young man occupying the bench glanced up at me in the rays of the setting sun. He looked a little surprised. Understandably so—I suppose most women would have hurried on in such a deserted place. And, I must admit, I was a bit oddly dressed for a walk in the countryside: in my smart suit, I looked less like a hiker than a dynamic businesswoman (which, in office hours, I am). To be honest, I'd driven to that place in a bit of a hurry.

His body language said *yes, I do mind!*

"It's just that there's nowhere else round here to sit," I pointed out. Which was unarguably true; just that one bench on a path that ran between overgrown foliage and the thick trunks of trees.

He shrugged. "OK, but can you keep quiet, please? I'm doing a survey for a wildlife organization. It's amazing what you can spot at night in an unspoilt place like this. Noise keeps animals away."

I sat down. "Oh? Have you got those special goggles for seeing in the dark then?"

He shook his head. "Won't need them. Full moon tonight."

"It certainly is! Are you one of those eco-warriors, then?" I asked. "They ruined a business deal of mine a few weeks back. Blocked the road with one of their protests, and I couldn't make it to my meeting. Not that I'm blaming *you*, of course."

He looked the type: mid 20s, a bit scruffy and very earnest. I could almost read his thoughts. *She's an older woman, got to be in her 40s. Is she coming on to me? If so, is she a) desperate, b) a hooker, or c) a space cadet?*

For the record, I am none of the three. But I was still making a fair job of irritating him.

"I sympathize with the aims of the green movement," he said curtly, not taking his gaze from the woods in front of us. "Now, if you *don't* mind, we need silence. There are some rare species in this area." He named a couple: bats and some kind of rodent, I think.

"I'll be quiet as a mouse!" I assured him. Then I immediately broke my promise. "You know, I respect you guys, despite what I said just now. You're mostly vegan, aren't you? Must take some will power. I can't *imagine* giving up meat. Business lunches just wouldn't be—"

"*Please!*" he said. "Is this a pick up or something? Sorry but I'm not interested. Don't get me wrong, you're not bad looking for an older woman..."

*You patronising little shit!* I thought.

"...but you're not my type. I'm not into, what do they call them, cougars, and I've a job to do."

Then I stopped listening. The sunlight was gone, and the moon came out from behind a cloud.

"Look at *that!*" I cried. I stood up, enjoying the look of amazement on his face as I hurriedly undressed. When I was naked, I must admit I was gratified to see that he was rather hot and bothered.

Then, for a few moments, I was hardly aware of him, as I dropped to all fours and howled at that beautiful moon.

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As the sun rose, I got dressed. Bursting out of your clothes, Incredible Hulk-style, may be ok if you dress like him. But my sartorial tastes are upmarket: it would be expensive stuff to replace.

The nature lover or what was left of him, was strewn here and there: I'm a messy eater at certain times. So he wasn't into cougars, eh? By the end, I guess he wasn't too keen on wolves, either.

You'll doubtless have seen those movies where, after changing back into human form, the werewolf is guilt-ridden at the carnage of the night before. That's crap, to be frank. I mean, can *you* honestly say you feel pangs of remorse after you've polished off a burger or a chicken wing? I'm a carnivore: deal with it.

Anyway, I hadn't taken to that young man. We hadn't hit it off. And let's face it, if he was looking for wildlife—well, my alter ego is as wild as it gets.

Another consolation—you could say he had died for his principles. My kind is rare nowadays: something of an endangered species, you might almost say.

Though, as it turned out, not nearly as endangered as him.

#### About the Author:

David Whippman lives in the north of England. His love of sci-fi and fantasy began in his pre-teens, when a British comic serialized *A Princess of Mars*. Now long retired, he spent most of his working life as a psychiatric nurse, writing stories, poems and articles in his spare time. Aside from writing, his interests are music, chess and visual art.

Facebook: [David Whippman](#)

A thunderstorm hit us for about the tenth time that day. We'd had numerous storms since the beginning of the month, and the night-time weather woman on TV said she had no idea when they were going to stop. Something to do with the meteorite showers on New Year's Day, she thought.

I went to the back door and looked out. A huge puddle had formed in the corner of the patio up against the wall, and it was... well, it was writhing. I put on my raincoat and baseball cap, flipped on the porch light, and opened the door. Two of my dogs looked at the rain, and hustled back inside. I went out and looked at the puddle more closely.

It was full of worms. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of them, in the puddle about three inches deep. Wriggling, slithering, like a weird orgy. They were just a little larger than the regular worms I see in gardens, with heads that were kind of triangular and curved, wider than their long thin bodies.

I love all animals, including the slimy ones. I foster dogs and cats. I volunteer at sanctuaries for rescued racehorses and greyhounds. I take spiders out of my house and put them on the flowers. Once I climbed a tree to put a baby bird back in its nest after it had tumbled out; its mother didn't like my touching him and jabbed me with her beak. I regularly see worms in the rain on the driveway, on the sidewalk, on the street, and I wonder how they got there. I always pick them up and throw them into a flower bed.

I got a shovel, scooped up a pile of worms, let the water run off the blade, and deposited them in the vegetable garden. I did it again, and again, and again. After about ten minutes, they were a writhing pile in the green beans.

I went inside, dried off, and went to bed, feeling good about having saved numerous creatures from drowning.

I woke to a tingling sensation all over my body. I turned on the light and looked down. I was covered in worms, and there were worms all over the bed and floor. And they were on my face. I tried to brush them off but they'd attached themselves to me with little spikes on their tails.

One that was on my nose rose up in front of my eyes and appeared to stare at me.

A strange unprompted thought happened in my head. *We live in water, you idiot. We come out of water only to feed.*

The worm crunched down on my eyelid, and I heard other crunches. As I passed out, it occurred to me that my foster dogs and cats were of no help to me whatsoever.

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

William Kitcher's stories have been published in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, England, Guernsey, Holland, India, Ireland, South Africa, and the U.S. Like a lot of writers, Bill has had many jobs; the best one was working at an all-night gas station when he was 19. He's not on any social media; he allows foreign governments to track his whereabouts through his credit card purchases.

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#### **Rebuttal | B. T. Petro**

"Old woman," I said to her, my partner of some 60 summers, "you'll be taking the dog. No sense in losing a good animal in the battle tonight."

"Old man," she chided, "only the able-bodied were asked to fight the vamps and that you're not. Let someone else drive the weapons wagon."

"Old woman," I said, "what kind of fool would I be if I just now started taking your advice?"

"Old man," she replied, "you would be a live one."

I snapped the reins. As the sun's last rays framed her face, she didn't look like an old woman.

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

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.

It's always the same story. The hero ventures out to kill a monster. The when is always dark. The where is always...uninviting. Dead, barren earth. Jagged peaks on the horizon, surrounding our intrepid hero like the busted rib cage of a rotten corpse. The worst part was the rain: it always leaked between the plates of her armor, leaving her feeling waterlogged and miserable. The knight let out a long, heavy sigh; she wasn't sure how this battle would end.

The skies became a churning mass of leaden clouds above her, shattering with each new streak of lightning. The knight could see well enough in the twilight of the growing storm, but the rain seemed to wash out what little color there was in that desolate place. What the place did not lack was death. The scent of dust and blood hung in the air despite the torrential downpour.

The knight drudged her way through the muck; her muscles ached under the weight of her battle-worn armour. With each step, her boots sank deeper as the rain softened the earth. The bones of creatures long dead began to peak out beneath the mud. Despite the passage of time and countless battles fought, the knight's armor still held up to its original purpose. It was forged to hold back the encroaching darkness, shaped to strike fear in the monsters who fell to her blade: claws of steel and fur lay atop the knight's shoulders, and her helmet forged into the visage of a grizzly roaring to protect her cubs. Fearsome was what the knight appeared to be; her heartbeat and the sweat rolling down her back told another story.

She could smell the beast long before it crawled out of the sodden darkness around her: a sickening, putrid stink. Something that might drift off a fly-bloated carcass, but it was more than that. It smelled like fear: sweaty-palms, swampy sheets, bump-in-the-night fear. It smelled of nightmares...it might as well have been one. The monster seemed to ooze its way out of the rain and darkness. Shadows clung to its body like moss on a rotten log. It looked...small at first, but its body took on new shapes with every flash of lightning: an amalgamation of rabid wolf and droning wasp one moment to a grotesque and bloated wyrm the next. The one constant feature of the beast's form were the eyes: two dying stars drifting through a sea of inky blackness.

The knight drew her broadsword from its sheath on her back. Despite the malice and fear radiating from the Beast, the knight tightened her grip around the hilt of her sword. She steeled herself for the Beast's first strike, but her eyes widened as the beast chortled and shifted its form one last time. The knight blinked back tears as the bulbous, shadowy wyrm seemed to vomit up a small human child: tattered pajamas, curly red hair matted and wet with blood, and cold lifeless eyes staring out from above freckle-specked cheeks.

The creature took another menacingly slow step towards the knight as a deep guttural laugh echoed out from the chest of its new childlike form: "You fight a losing battle, Mother Bear," growled the Beast, "even if you slay me, your boy will abandon you in the end. You will die broken. Alone. Forgotten."

The monster's taunts fell on deaf ears. The knight would not give the Beast the satisfaction of a response. The knight breathed slowly trying to remember that this...thing was not what it appeared to be. It was not her Daniel.

The knight's hands began to shake as she tracked the creature's movements; the point of her blade never drifting from the creature's throat. Her eyes narrowed as the creature's slim fingers snapped and stretched into knife-like claws. The knight could feel the bile in her throat rise as the creature's limb's elongated into a disgusting mockery of the child she loved so dearly.

With a mad cackle, the creature's innocent smile contorted into a needle-filled grimace as it took one final step forward, snapping an ancient and brittle femur underneath its slippered foot. Lightning flashed and in one quick motion, the creature lunged toward the knight.

The monster's claws shredded flesh and steel alike. Blood cascaded onto the ground as the knight's helmet was ripped from her head and landed at her feet with three long and jagged claw marks across the ursine metal. The knight howled in pain and fell to her knees as she clutched her face; her left eye ripped from its orbit. Blood dripping from its claws, the creature leapt back and let out a grating laugh, "You're getting slow, Mother Bear."

Wincing in pain, the knight reached for her sword. The beast had left its mark, but the knight would not...could not let the vile thing win. Thunder echoed throughout the valley as the knight stood to face the beast once again. The creature spat out bitter threats as the knight got to her feet: "You will die here, Mother Bear. After I've ripped your heart from your chest, nothing will stop me from harrowing your boy." The creature cackled as it traced a single claw across the neck of its humanoid form; a thin line of red dripping down to stain its already bloodied pajamas.

She had gotten slower. Her armor felt like lead and her arms strained to keep hold of her sword. The knight blinked as the monster bounded towards her; nothing more a shadowy blur against the darkening storm. The Beast

leapt into the air, flying straight for the knight's throat. She knew that this would be one of her last battles, but she would not give the Beast the satisfaction of killing her while wearing Daniel's face.

In one fluid motion, the knight drew back her broadsword and plunged the blade hilt-deep into the creature's chest. The sick, bloody light faded from the monster's eyes as it began to die; its teeth inches away from the knight's jugular. With an exhausted grunt and tears streaming from her remaining eye, the knight pushed the beast's frail-looking form onto the ground. Her sword in hand, the knight cried out as she plunged the blade back through the monster's heart, pinning it to the ground.

With one final breath, the creature coughed out a low gargled laugh as the remaining light burned out behind its eyes. The knight knelt down as she pulled her sword out of the creature's chest. She reached out her hand, but stopped herself from caressing its cheek. The creature still wore the skin of her Daniel, and it looked as though it just drifted off to sleep. She knew that the creature would have ripped her throat out given the chance, but it was hard to deny how innocent it looked.

Wounded but victorious, the knight limped her way off of the battlefield. As she walked out of the ravine, the monster's form disintegrated into shadows and ash; its body becoming one with the growing darkness. The knight knew that the beast would be back, but she would be there waiting for it.

\*\*\*

Daniel's room was quiet. The moonlight drifting in from his window cast the room in shades of silver and blue. The boy's chest slowly rose and fell as he dreamt of knights and monsters. The only sound in the room came from a rustling underneath his bed. In the soft glow of the moon, a small, furry arm poked out from the bed skirt. A second arm slowly appeared next to the first as a small brown teddy bear crawled out into the open. Her movements were slow and pained. As it climbed to the top of the bed, it gently snuggled underneath Daniel's arm. The boy instinctively hugged the bear before turning over into the light streaming in through the window. In the silver glow of the moon, the bear's face looked happy despite the fact that she was missing one of her button eyes. She knew Daniel would love her all the same.

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

Tyler Wrynn is a writer and teacher from the Midwest. During the day, they corrupt young minds by teaching them how to be better humans. At night, they write about monsters, but not all of them are bad people. Parental Advisory: Explicit Content/Good Intentions.

**Facebook:** [Ink Well's Heart](#)

**Twitter:** [@inkh34rt](#)

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#### **The Smile of Fate | *Christopher T. Dabrowski***

Teddy is a pimply and hunchbacked teenager. Once, on his way from school, he came across a vodka bottle. Instead of a drink, there was smoke in it. Teddy carefully unscrewed the cap. A djinn jumped out of it.

"Okay, man! Thanks for freedom! Now three wishes."

Let the pimples and the hump disappear. And let the girls fall for me.

"That will happen"—said the djinn and disappeared.

Teddy straightened up. The hump vanished. He touched his face it was smooth as a baby's bottom. Then Ela, who had just committed suicide, fell from the tenth floor on him.

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

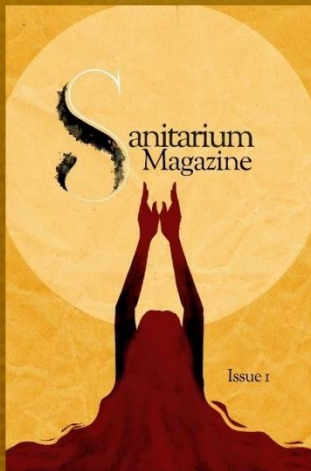
Christopher T. Dąbrowski is a writer and screenwriter from Poland. Author of several books published in countries such as Poland, USA, Germany and Spain.



# anitarium Magazine

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"Welcome to the morgue." That was my introduction from Mr. Addison, the supervisor. My job was simple, watch the bodies, and make sure no one stole them. Sign in any arrivals and freeze them.

Not a difficult job and one that paid ten dollars an hour but there was something about sitting in a room full of dead people that unnerved me. I'm not squeamish, I can watch horror movies in the dark without worrying about a masked lunatic hiding in my closet and I don't have a problem lifting the bodies into the rows of metal freezers that line the wall. It's the morgue itself. There's an atmosphere to it that I can't quite define. It's a quietness. That's how I would describe it. The way everyone whispers when they enter the room even though there is no rule that says they should. It almost like they are afraid of disturbing the bodies. I've noticed how noises don't seem to carry in the room anyway. They only go so far before they are cut off. It didn't help that it was almost Halloween. That only added to the creepiness.

It was a typical Friday night when *he* arrived. Friday nights are drug overdoses, drink driving accidents and fights that went wrong. It was close to two in the morning when Bill, an orderly, wheeled in a body.

"I thought we were finished for the night," I moaned.

Bill chuckled. "Wishful thinking. John Doe, DOA."

"Great. I'll check what we have free." I picked up the sign in sheet. The only freezer left was number 17.

Which I was not allowed to use, according to Mr. Addison. He claimed it was malfunctioning. I couldn't see a problem with it. It was at the correct temperature at least.

I opened the door to 17.

"I thought Addison said no to using that one," Bill said.

"It's the only one left for now. It'll have to do."

Bill didn't argue. I knew it was because he was going home soon, so we loaded John Doe and closed the door.

My shift didn't end until 5am so I sat in the small office adjacent to the morgue and read the paper. The front headline read: *Strangler strikes again.*

There had been a string of murders of young women in the past few months. Each one of them had been strangled with a scarf. The most recent victim had survived and was currently in a coma in this hospital. I had been following the story for the last few weeks ever since one of the victims had arrived in the morgue. The police were no closer to catching the killer.

I heard a tapping sound and looked up, expecting to see someone at the door but there was no one there.

I turned back to my paper. The tapping came again, and I realized that it was coming from somewhere inside the morgue.

"Hello?" I called. The noise was coming from the freezers. Number 17 to be specific. I reached out and grabbed the handle. It was probably the freezer breaking down, but still I hesitated.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and slid the drawer out. Nothing. I could see nothing that could be causing the noise. The guy on the slab hardly caused it. It was probably something mechanical, I would ask maintenance to take a look the next time they were down.

The phone rang in the office and I hurried to answer it. When I returned a few minutes later the body was gone.

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"Gone! How can the body be gone?" Addison screeched.

"I don't know. I was on the phone and when I came back it was gone. There's no way someone could have gotten in and out so quickly."

Addison stormed off muttering about camera footage. I took that as my cue to leave. I took the long way out of the hospital via the first-floor nurses' station. I wanted to see if she was there.

Jenny Ferguson. She was a nurse who had started working in the hospital about three weeks ago. I had spoken to her a few times mostly to say good morning and was still trying to work up the courage to ask her on a date.

"Your stalker's back," one of the other nurses joked. I glared at her.

"Hi, Ryan," Jenny said. I was happy that she remembered my name.

"Good morning, ladies. Have you heard the latest news on the strangler?" So I was using the story to talk to Jenny, so what?

"I know, that poor girl. The doctors don't think she will make it and she could probably identify the sicko who attacked her."

"What's her name?" Jenny asked.

"Emily Jones."

I was staring at Jenny, trying not to be obvious. That long blonde hair and those green eyes. Why was I such a chicken? Life was too short, look at poor Emily Jones.

"Would you go out with me?" I blurted out, before I lost my nerve.

Jenny looked startled. "Me?" she said.

"Yeah," I said, fully aware that all the other nurses were watching the exchange.

"Okay then," Jenny said to my relief. I heard Roberta mutter 'finally' under her breath.

\*\*\*

I was still grinning when I arrived at work that night. That was until I was met by a stern looking police officer in a suit.

"Ryan Matthews?"

"Yes."

"I believe you were here when the body went missing."

"Yeah, but I didn't see anything."

"It's very important that we recover the body, Mr. Matthews." He stared at me, sizing me up. Did he think I had hidden it somewhere?

"I'll do whatever I can to help, but really who's going to want a body? It's probably just someone pulling a prank."

"It's believed that the body was John Wilcox. We think he was the strangler."

"Seriously? That's great. Well not great, but at least he's been stopped."

"We still need to find the body to confirm that. If you think of anything let me know." The officer gave me a card with his phone number on it.

When he left, I noticed that they had dusted freezer 17 for prints. It was lying open.

"The police were here all morning," Bill said, making me jump. He was wheeling another gurney

"Emily Jones," he said.

"She was the strangler victim."

Sighing, I loaded the body into 17. I was sure they were finished with it now.

"I hate my job," I said.

"You and me both," Bill replied.

\*\*\*

Because of our conflicting schedules I had to meet Jenny for our date after her shift and before mine began. It also meant that the only place we could go was the hospital canteen.

"I'm sorry about this," I said.

"It's fine really," Jenny said.

"I promise once I get a night off, I'll take you somewhere decent."

"Really, Ryan it's fine. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Why did it take you so long to ask me out?"

"Honestly. I was scared."

"Scared, why?"

"That you would say no. I mean look at you, you're gorgeous. Why would you want to go out with the guy who works in the morgue?"

Jenny blushed. "Thank you. And I don't mind where you work. You're a nice guy and that's what matters."

We talked for an hour before I had to start my shift. Jenny was the kind of girl I wanted to get to know. She was smart and funny as well as gorgeous.

I was surprised to find a young woman wondering around outside the morgue door. She was dressed in a hospital gown and didn't seem to know where she was.

"Are you okay, Miss?"

"I don't know. I can't remember how I got here." She had dark hair and looked vaguely familiar. I wondered if I had seen her before.

"Okay, well tell me your name and I'll find out which ward you are on."

"Um, my name is Emily. Emily Jones."

"That's impossible," I said, but even as I said it, I could see the bruises around her neck.



"Oh my God. They must have made a mistake," I cried. She must have been put in the freezer while still alive.

"I'm going to get some help." I raced off searching for a doctor. Instead, I ran into Addison.

I quickly explained to him what had happened.

"What freezer was she in?" he asked.

"What does it matter which one she was in. We need to get someone down here."

"Answer the question," Addison snapped.

"17! Now are you going to help or not," I snarled.

"No," he said quietly.

"What do you mean no!"

"I warned you. I warned you not to put anyone in that freezer. There's something wrong with it. You put that man into it and now he's got out"

I stared at him incredulously. "What are you talking about? Got out? Are you saying the freezer revives them or brings them back to life?" I laughed at the suggestion.

"I don't know what it does. One minute they're dead and the next they're up and walking around. But they're not the same. Something about their eyes. They come back wrong."

I put my head in my hands. "I think I've slipped into the Twilight Zone."

Addison had lost it.

Worried about Emily, I returned to where I had left her. She was still there sitting on the floor, staring at the wall.

"Emily, are you okay?" I knelt in front of her.

Her eyes met mine. They were empty; void of anything. I shivered and moved away from her.

A doctor came hurrying along the corridor, Addison must have called someone after all.

"Move aside," he ordered. I did as I was told and watched as the doctors checked her out.

She obviously had a pulse and was breathing so she was definitely alive. The doctor moved Emily upstairs and I followed him up to the first-floor nurses' station before I remembered that Jenny had gone off to a Halloween party. She seemed keen to go and even invited me, but I couldn't get the time off.

I asked Roberta if she had her phone number.

"Sure. What's up, honey? You look like you've seen a ghost." She wore a pair of devil horns on her head.

"Close enough," I muttered. I phoned Jenny and told her what happened, editing over what Addison had told me.

"That poor woman. At least if she's awake she might be able to identify the strangler now."

"That's just it. He's dead. He was brought into the morgue, but the body disappeared"

"This is getting scary, Ryan. Please be careful."

"I will, I'll talk to you soon."

I felt better after talking to Jenny, calmer anyway. I went back down to the morgue and out of curiosity, took a look at freezer 17.

The latch on the inside was broken and there were scrape marks on the door. Nail marks on a metal door. Had Emily made them when she had awoken? I cast a glance at the rest of the freezers expecting them to crash open and all the bodies to emerge.

The silence was really starting to get to me. Addison's story was insane. People don't just come back to life, it was impossible.

*But what about her eyes?* a little voice in my head said.

To put my mind at rest I went up to see Emily, even though I would most likely be fired for leaving the room again.

She was propped up in a bed when I found her.

"Miss Jones. How are you?"

"Fine," she answered, her voice sounding flat.

I moved closer so I could see her eyes again. They looked the same.

She smiled at me and I shuddered, she looked evil. Suddenly I preferred to be in the morgue.

Bill was there when I arrived.

"Looks like the police were wrong about that John Doe. The Strangler has struck again."

Or were they right, had the killer simply got up and left and carried on killing? That would make it my fault. I was the one who sent him back out there.



Bill handed me the details and left. I took a deep breath to calm myself and looked at the paper in my hands. Victim's name: Jennifer Ferguson.

With shaking hands, I pulled back the sheet and found Jenny lying underneath, dressed in a cat costume. A sob escaped my throat.

"No, not her. Jenny." She was dead and it was my fault. How could this be happening? How could she be dead, I just spoke to her.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I had to do something, I had to find a way to fix this.

*The freezer*, the little voice said. But they come back wrong. That's what Addison had said.

But at least she would be alive. That had to be better than this.

I gently lifted her on to the drawer, kissed her forehead, closed the door and waited.

#### About the Author:

S. K. Gregory writes urban fantasy, horror and paranormal romance novels. She currently resides in Northern Ireland. A keen reader, she offers reviews to indie authors through her website.

Blog: [Storyteller S.K. Gregory](#)

Twitter: [@sam\\_skgregory](#)

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#### State of Decay | *Tarvarus Goodwin*

Lester Hitchens jammed the machete through the thing's left temple. Its whole body went limp, like batteries plucked from a child's roving toy. A thick, dark crimson sludge poured slowly from the intersection of blade and necrotic flesh; he expelled a tightly held breath after hearing no other shambling in the house. Rolling the thing formerly regarded as his lawfully wedded wife of five years off his chest, his hand went to the neck wound he had failed to prevent. It was already starting: his pulse seemed to advance and retreat simultaneously; an electric supernova burst behind his eyes, drilling edicts of pain down his spinal cord, spreading everywhere. Nerve endings inflamed, Les was charged with a preternatural intensity of feeling. His vision blurred, cross-stitching images of reality and rapture into one confection of dread. Les knew it was just a matter of moments before he joined the lifeless legion just beyond the splintered front door.

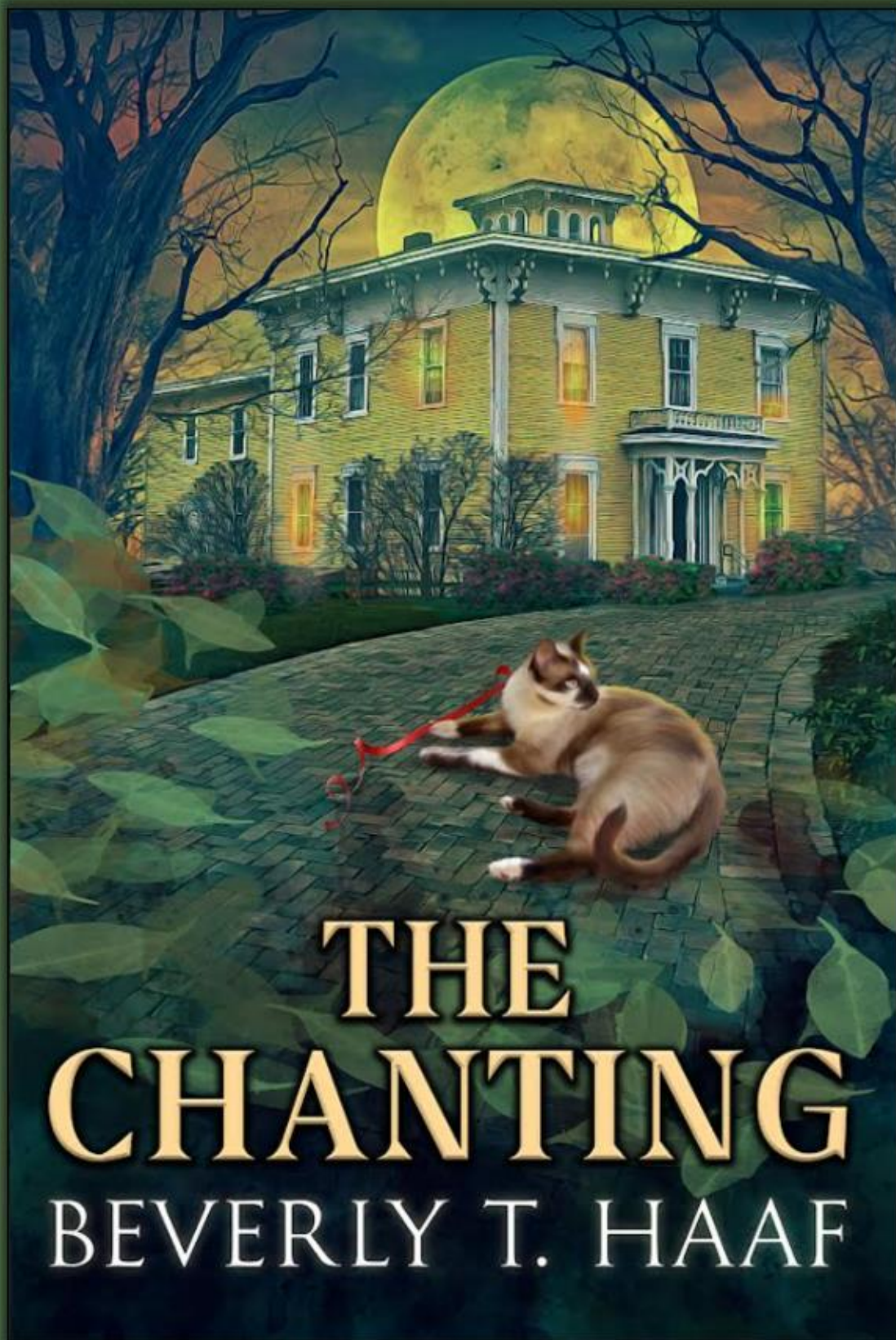
Les managed to stand and he headed toward the commotion outside. It was three days before Halloween and somehow, he now belonged to its legacy of inclusions: witches, ghosts, masked maniacs...and zombies. Now, on the front porch, he was surprised to register the pleasant afternoon breeze. It contrasted sharply with the unpleasant sight of Mrs. Daley across the lawn; the sinking sun poured its dying light into the open cavity of her bare chest. Her husband, Derek, stuffed her entrails through his jawless maw like a starving mongrel. Les's eyesight diminished by the breath, which in turn, shortened by the second. He was thankful. This now tenuous and nightmarish existence spiraled to meet a welcomed oblivion. Les walked a loopy, drunkard's circuit from the front porch over to the driveway and then to the front curb. The Reanimated granted him a wide berth in their zest for the living, perhaps sensing the inevitable transmogrification of flesh.

The chaos before him mirrored the shifting madness in his brain. His thinking as a human being eroded. No more were there visions of a nostalgic past; an involved present; a hopeful future. His mind's eye swept away such sentient fancies, clearing the stage for wonders of a different order. There was now only blood and bone and earth and rot. They all collided to form a singularity of purpose, a directive he had now become too idiot to convey. Lester's new imperative revealed itself when, minutes later, he bit into the face of a fleeing neighbor, like it was an apple filled with so much sweetness.

#### About the Author:

Tarvarus Goodwin is from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He is a graduate of The University of Alabama, with dedicated interests in film, fiction and art.

A baby cries in the night, but Janet doesn't have a child...  
not anymore.



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John pulled the straps of his rucksack tighter against his shoulders. The bag warmed his back against the autumnal frost that had settled during the night. He made sure his car was locked and checked the time. It was six, dawn wouldn't be breaking for another hour at least. He adjusted his head torch, confident he would be able to follow the path anyway. He'd completed this walk many times before at different times of the year, it was his favourite. The Lancashire beauty never failed to impress him, it was just a shame it enchanted so many tourists as well. He hated them, especially the ones who thought they could hike in sandals and carry half empty plastic bottles of water, which they would ditch wherever. Everyone wanted to sample the history of Pendle, everyone wanted to see and feel the spirit of the witches!

He was enjoying the solitude and counted the few streaks of silver in the low cloud while keeping a lookout for the moon. The torch light bobbed ahead of him as he glanced down at his footing on the stones that poked through the worn pathway. Occasionally he slipped and cracked his cold toes on the rocks. He swore loudly into the emptiness, surrounding him with the fog of his breath. John's mind began to wander.

*How many feet have taken this path? Has it always been here? It could be a new one, etched into the landscape after the reservoir was built, or planned by the landowner to stop the hikers and bikers from creating their own?*

His eyes teared up with the cold. There was a noise behind him, someone was breathless and struggling, he could hear their desperation. He turned to see, but there was no one in the torchlight. He was unable to move, frozen to the spot. He looked down at his feet. The pathway felt different, more like a 'right of way'. Ancient somehow.

He slipped backward as he felt a sharp shove in his chest. The torchlight bobbed as he stumbled. He stood up straight, trying to stabilize his breathing, stopping his mind from racing on. The moon broke through the clouds that were rushing across the sky. He tried to reason with himself.

*There's no one here! No one touched me! There's no one about. I'm alone! I'm just spooking myself.'*

He continued on the path, adjusting the head torch as he walked. Every few steps he would stop, convinced he was surrounded. There was noise around him. Low voices he thought, then stopped.

*It can't be!*

He thought it might be animals, foxes maybe, even birds, but then realized how few trees there were, none in fact, just scrubby bushes and overgrown shrubs bent by the incessant winds that blew across the hills.

"Why don't I just go back to the car?" he said out loud and stopped. "Don't be an idiot John, the sun'll be up soon ... *What was that?*"

There was a shuffling sound, he felt it next to him, then stopped. He did not turn to look at the noise, he carried on walking, wanting to run.

"Soon be dawn." he kept saying, over and over, "Soon be dawn. Things are different in daylight."

He thought about stopping at 'The Rock', a large ancient monolith that had been there forever, split by the beating weather over so many years and a welcome stop for so many hikers. He wanted to open his flask, sip his tea and watch the dawn. There was the noise again. He stopped.

*It does sound human, it does!*

There was a low groan, followed by a cry of pain. He held his breath, waiting for it to continue. Then he felt such intense fear, he screwed his eyes shut, like he did when he was a child. The noises turned into a conversation. Two men, speaking in a harsh and angry language he could not understand. John waited for them to pass by him in the beam of torchlight, but they never appeared. They seemed to miss him, or walk *right through him*. The conversation faded ahead, as whoever he had shared the path with, overtook him.

*Who are they? Why can't I see them? I should have seen them!*

He felt compelled to keep going, forced even. Each step feeling heavier, his breathing laboured.

*They must have passed me, further out on the path, I missed them altogether. Maybe they said 'Hello' and I didn't understand their language. That's it. That's what happened*

He continued, his feet now numb with cold, his hands shook in their thermal gloves. He passed 'The Rock', preferring to continue. It's size suddenly terrified him. It looked like a monster waiting to wake. He decided he would stop at the dip by the rocks further along the path and have a drink there.

*Maybe I'm dehydrated? Yes! I need a drink and some sugar. Sugar will make me feel better.*

He slowed his walking as he descended into the shallow valley. The ground felt slippery underfoot. Someone grabbed his backpack, sending him spinning. He lost his footing and fell onto his backside, winding himself, cracking his head on the hardened ground behind him. The torchlight went out. John reached out a hand to steady himself as his breathing became laboured. He gazed upward and peered at the sky for a few seconds. It was changing colour. The clouds were becoming light grey as the moon slowly disappeared. He began to laugh,

"You scared yourself! And you bloody fell over! Broke your torch! Well done stupid. What ..."

He felt a brutal kick in his ribs and screamed out. Someone grabbed his hair while screaming at him and dragged him to his feet. He could smell their fetid breath against his cheek. John tried to swing at whatever was behind him, but lost his footing again and began to slide down the valley on his side. His face scuffed the rocky path as he tried to stop himself. A male voice began to laugh, then spoke, spitting insults and orders. John eventually came to a stop and rolled onto his back. He forced himself to breath, counting each lungful of air, telling himself to stand and face them or get running.

He got to his feet, and tried to straighten up, but the pain in his side was intense.

"You've broken my fucking ribs!"

He took a few steps to flat ground. He didn't know where he was going, but he would not go back up to the path, he couldn't even look up at it. He began a slow stumble across the hill.

*I need to run! Keep going until I find shelter. Keep going and get help! Keep moving.*

He was thinking about running back to the car again and how quickly he could get there and different versions of what he would do when he caught the bastards who pushed him, and what he would do, and a hundred different other thoughts. Then he stopped.

He saw a solitary tree. In the dull light of dawn, he could see how twisted and bent it was. It had dark green leaves and bright red berries. It looked like it had been painted into the landscape. Unreal and hideous. How had he never seen it before?

A woman's voice whispered around him,

*'Sittan.'*

He felt himself swaying with pain, and exhaustion as he slowly walked toward it. He knew there would be shelter and safety there. He dropped the backpack from his shoulders as he approached. The dawn light flashed against the branches and leaves that swayed slightly. John gazed upward, aware of movement above him. The red berries hung in ripening bunches. He began to drop to the ground and closed his eyes, wanting to let tiredness overtake him. He didn't care if he died just so long as the pain disappeared and he could sleep.

*I can't! I cannot sleep. They'll get me, those men will get me.*

John opened his eyes, trying to shake off the stupor he could feel creeping into his bones. The berries seemed to blink. Hundreds of scarlet eyes were watching him, staring and waiting. He turned away, switching his gaze to the fading moon, trying to find something to focus on.

*I'm losing it. I'm losing my mind*

A soft voice whispered to him,

*"Sittan ... stay."*

He wanted to move but could not. The pain was worsening.

"Leave me alone!"

There was a sudden pressure on either of his temples. He felt his skull being slowly crushed. The pain intensified as he forced himself to stand.

*'I have to go ... I have to move ... get away.'*

The eyes blinked and followed him. He fought to breathe as his throat seemed to be constricted, tightening until it felt like it would be crushed.

*"Get off me!"*

He fell back onto the trunk of the tree. The sky was now purple, mauve almost, the moon was still faintly visible. A group of people stood, mostly women, huddled against each other. They looked haggard, their clothes filthy. Some had matted hair that obliterated their face as they struggled to stay standing. Their hands were bound, cutting into their wrists. A small group of men stood by them. John could feel their aggression, their self righteous superiority. One of them stepped forward and looked at him contemptuously. He spoke in the language he had heard before, yet now he could understand it.



"You are right to stay there sir. The Rowan tree offers protection from 'witches'!"

He spat the word, and touched a cross that hung from a leather thong around his neck.

John looked at the supposed witches. They were of various ages, weakened and scared. They looked like they had walked far, some swayed, and stumbled to stay upright. The man began to laugh.

"Maybe we should make these creatures eat these fruits?"

His accomplices began to laugh along with him as he yanked a bunch of the berries from the bough. He walked over to one of the women and began throwing them at her. She did not move as he rubbed some into her face. She stared at her torturer and whispered a curse that made him back away. The man shouted,

"You saw that! She has cursed me! I cannot wait to hear your neck snap! All of you!"

The man began pushing them, kicking them to move faster, making them walk along the already worn path. He turned to John.

"You're welcome to walk with us to Lancaster. Join with us. It is not safe around here. Follow us. We can watch these witches hang!"

The men laughed and spat out on the ground. He could hear their footsteps on the path, smell their rotten clothes on the gathering winds. A terrified voice was praying in between gulping back tears. The prisoners slowly trailed away into the morning haze

John felt sick. The pain had worsened in his side. His head tipped back as he slid down the bark of the tree and waited for what felt like hours before could move his hands or open his eyes. There were voices again, getting nearer.

"Are you ok?"

"He's shaking! Hypothermia? Give him something to eat! Warm him up."

He slowly opened his eyes. Dawn had passed, the sky was cloudy, the air cold. The 'witches' and their tormentors had gone, replaced by a neon clad couple. They were fussing him, dragging Tupperware boxes and flasks from their huge rucksacks, offering him warm drinks and energy bars. They dragged him to his feet, but his legs buckled beneath him. The man kept shouting at him, asking him his name and how long he had been there. They had found a backpack and knew they had to find who it belonged to. John sipped sweetened tea that burned his lips from a plastic cup. He tried to speak, and pointed to where he had seen the ghosts.

"Your friends? Your friends left you? We thought you were alone!"

John rested against the trunk of the rowan tree. A few leaves hung from it's branches, any berries were shriveled and rotted. The cup shook in his hands, as he shivered. The woman took her mobile phone from a zippered pocket.

"I'll make a phone call, and try and get some help."

She held the mobile phone to her ear listening to the dialing tone, wondering how she would explain where they were. She looked down. There were footsteps in the boggy ground, surrounding her. She followed them for a few feet, then stopped. There were trails that passed by the rowan tree and disappeared into the valley. She suddenly became overwhelmed by an immediate feeling of fear. A fear of something she couldn't identify, but it burned within her. She went no further and waited impatiently for the phone line to connect.

#### About the Author:

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Her work has been published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg, Flame Tree Publishing, Suicide House and Black Hare Press. Her work for The Patchwork Raven's *Twelve Days* is available as an artbook. She has also been a speaker at the London Book Fair, and has previously been published by Sirens Call Publications as part of Women in Horror Month.

Blog: [Donna Cuttress](#)

Twitter: [@Hederah](#)



## Trick or Treats | *Patrick J. Wynn*

Molly sat in front of the TV watching a ghost special that she had seen several times before, but she didn't care. It was Halloween and a person should watch something scary in keeping with the holiday. As she grabbed a candy bar out of the bowl, she smiled thinking how much she missed going out for trick or treating. She remembered all the times she and her friends went out dressed up as ghosts, witches, monsters or any other scary thing they could think up. Those were great times and she really missed them, at least she enjoyed handing out candy to the little happy kids who came to her door. A soft knock at the door sounded and she grabbed the candy bowl then pushed herself off the couch and headed toward the door. Pulling open the door Molly found herself staring down at a small child holding out a bag.

"Trick or treat." Came a small voice from under a weird looking mask.

"That is some mask you have there." Molly smiled as she dropped several candy bars in the bag.

"Thank you, my daddy got it for me." The small muffled voice giggled. "But I think I like yours better"

"Honey I'm not wearing a mask." Molly frowned.

"Daddy her mask is better than mine." The little figure said turning back to a man on the sidewalk.

"I'll get it for you." The man smiled and jogged up the walk as he pulled out a long knife from his pocket.

Molly dropped her bowl of candy and tried her best to close the door, but the man shoved in and went to work. Molly ended up going out for trick or treating just not the way she wanted to.

## Favorite Night | *Patrick J. Wynn*

Halloween, the night children, teens and families wondered the streets after dark without a care in the world. Children ran from house to house dressed as cartoon characters, game characters or their favorite classic Halloween horror icon. Parents followed along carrying excess candy and a flashlight to light the way. Teens too old for the door-to-door candy handouts stood in driveways around firepits or smoking their funny weed. Charles drew a deep breath and smiled widely at the evening's events. This was his favorite time of year; it was the one time all year he could walk among the people without getting much notice. His greyish blue skin, deep set red eyes wide pointy ears and long sharp teeth went unnoticed as he walked along the dark street. His thin black tongue flicked out and licked the drool from his dark grey lips as he watched a portly man and woman waiting for their equally chubby children who received handfuls of candy from an elderly woman. As Charlie stepped back into the shadows away from the prying porchlights, he heard the children gleefully tell their parents what they had received.

"Daddy I got a nutty bar" A small boy giggled.

"Mommy look." A slightly smaller girl said as she held up a bag of chocolate kisses.

"Can we eat some?" The children asked in unison.

"Yes." The mom smiled.

"But let me tell you about the daddy tax." The daddy smiled as he shoved a candy bar in his mouth he'd taken from his son's bag.

"Daddy." The son giggled.

"Oh, there is a mommy tax as well." The mom said as she popped a massive chunk of candy in her mouth.

Both children laughed and the family turned and walked toward the next house. Charlie followed along deciding this would be his Halloween feast, his dark tongue flicking in and out in anticipation of the meal ahead. Deciding on making himself wait, he would let the family make it home and eat their fill of the Halloween candy because he liked his meals to have that sweet flavor as well.

## About the Author:

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



# Cult of the Box

## What is it? Great question...

Cult of the Box is a fun-loving group of horror fanatics started by my alter ego, *The Doktor*, who reigns supreme with ink-stained fingers and fur covered t-shirts.

The idea spawned a year ago after I ran a contest for my book, *The Bury Box*. The giveaway was such a blast that I decided to keep the awesomeness going by forming a cult like no other. We don't have cool aid, purple robes or quarters, instead we offer a monthly newsletter filled with all kinds of weird and interesting stuff, zoom parties, random giveaways, and other creepy surprises!

The newsletter includes movie reviews, obscure articles, fun activities (think pre-school for adults), video game recommendations, off-beat music finds, flash fiction, and other things geared for the horror fiend that thrives in your dark little heart.

And thanks to Cult minion, Nina D. aka Squidzilla Double-Hoe-Sleven (see, I told you it was fun), the laughs keep us rolling online and her/she/its' design skills take the newsletter to the next level! No, you can't have her, she belongs to The Cult, and The Lobster, and The Hatted Loves of her life, and Ginger Spice, and a Kytten from Texas, and Louise's Mom, and... who am I kidding, she's a slut for everyone, it seems!

If you'd like to join in on the absurdity that is Cult of the Box, either follow [@CultoftheBox](#) on Instagram and send a message with your email address, or email me directly at [LeeAndrewForman@gmail.com](mailto:LeeAndrewForman@gmail.com) and the following month's newsletter will practically be stalking you.

Cult of the Box also has its own members-only website, where you can download and read past newsletters, so don't worry if you missed out on the earlier ones, they're still out there begging to be misused. Plus, there is more coming, so jump on while the train is just starting to pick up speed—who knows when and where it may stop next.

Check out the following two pages for quarter sized samples of content from past months!



*Lee Andrew Forman*



Fiction of the Month!

## The Lesser Side

Lee Andrew Forman

With forged steel and sharpened blade, necks of those deemed worthy were cut clean one after another. Heads rolled from bodies as the crowd rejoiced with raised arms and maddened screams. Those who dwelled on the lesser side of the fence shook in terror at the sight of brethren and friend alike as their lives were taken swiftly before a jovial, cruel audience. The executioner worked without hesitation, with unsympathetic resolve. They didn't yet know how it felt to die gruesome and humiliated, but by the twitching of numerous corpses, they knew fear, and would soon know pain.



I hope you enjoyed this month's tale, keep an eye out for next month's newsletter and story!

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Re-Animator: 80s Lovecraftian Horror at its Finest



Re-Animator (Directed by Stuart Gordon) follows the story of mad scientist, Herbert West (played by Jeffrey Combs). Bent on resurrecting the dead he invents Re-Agent, a neon green fluid which brings corpses back to life. Herbert West befriends another doctor working in the same hospital and recruits him to help with his maniacal experiments.

The theme music during the opening credits is one of the things that makes this film really shine. Composed by Richard Band, the score is an adaptation of, and homage to, the music from Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho. The medical sketch imagery set behind that soundtrack gave it the extra edge it needed, which set the stage for what you were about to watch (if the scene before the credits didn't already). The intro alone is as memorable as the film itself. I play it every year on Halloween along with my other horror soundtracks.

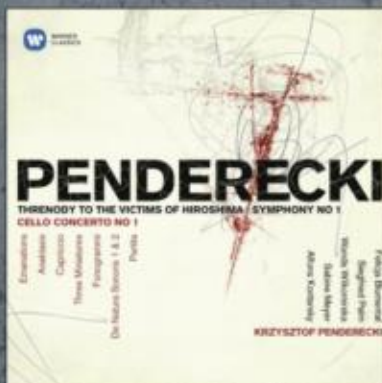
Doctor West's rival, Dr. Carl Hill (played by David Gale), contests Herbert's theories and despises him because of it. An interesting homage to Re-Animator appears in the film The Guyver, where David Gale plays a character named Dr. East, a reference to Combs' character, Dr. West. The acting of Jeffrey Combs and David Gale together is another thing that makes Re-Animator stand out among other films of its time. The memorable one-liners expertly spoken by Combs, and Gale's powerful presence as the antagonist make them a combination to remember.

Re-Animator is a great adaptation of an H.P. Lovecraft story, with top of the line 80s special effects and a plot that is both insane, horrific, and comical. And yes, there is a Miskatonic sweater in the film. What would a Lovecraft adaptation be without one?

I won't spoil the film by telling more, other than it is one of the great 80s cult classics. If you haven't seen it already, I highly recommend watching it post-haste!

<sup>4</sup>Currently streaming on Shudder

## A Little Something for Your Ears



Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima · Symphony No. 1

Cello Concerto No. 1

by Krzysztof Penderecki

I enjoy listening to all kinds of music. Depending on what I'm in the mood for, it could range any genre and nearly any decade. But when I want to write the darkest of my dark fiction, especially the pieces I write for *Pen of the Damned*, I go right to dark modern classical. Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima by Krzysztof Penderecki is one of my favorite pieces of music in that genre.

This stuff is like listening to a long, drawn-out horror movie soundtrack. It's powerful and foreboding, horrifically melancholy. It speaks doom into your ears. It hits hard, then leaves you in momentary silence. It pounds against your chest and pulls your strings. It's jarring melody splits thoughts and divides emotion.

One could say it's horror personified through music.

It's not something I'd listen to every day, but when I really want to get that terrifying creative blood boiling, this always lights the fuel to get that creepy fire going.

[Available on Amazon](#)

## Gamer Review:

### Destroy All Humans! The Remake



Ever wanted to be the vanguard of an alien invasion? Now you can! Destroy All Humans!, originally released for the Playstation 2 and original Xbox, has been gloriously remade for all current consoles. I've played both, and there are some things missing which I miss; in particular, the billboard in the beginning cut scene that featured *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. I imagine they had to nix it for copyright reasons, but I was glad I got to see it in the original release.

Some of the first missions involve doing "alien stuff" to cows, of course. There's everything from the gun that rips peoples brains out and the infamous anal probe, to blowing up whole areas from your UFO with a giant laser beam.

The game lets you in and out of your ship at will, but includes missions both on and off the ground. Sometimes you have to impersonate people and blend in with a crowd with a holographic disguise, other times it's collecting as many brains as you can. It's both challenging and a hell of a lot of fun.

The game does everything with humor, adding to its 50s style alien invasion charm. It's a modern classic from beginning to end!





# Cult of the Box

S	V	Y	P	E	S	P	H	A	N	T	O	M
O	G	L	M	H	O	U	S	E	Z	O	E	G
X	H	E	A	D	S	T	O	N	E	M	P	R
C	O	F	F	I	N	R	X	H	R	B	X	P
R	S	P	E	C	T	E	R	O	M	O	M	H
E	T	B	T	K	M	F	B	L	E	H	T	O
G	P	U	O	G	R	A	V	E	Y	A	R	D
G	A	R	D	X	S	C	R	J	E	U	E	K
I	D	I	E	R	H	T	Q	D	O	N	M	I
E	O	A	C	S	O	I	G	A	I	T	A	W
C	J	L	A	M	V	O	I	D	C	E	I	T
B	U	R	Y	S	E	N	T	H	A	D	N	O
S	H	C	V	E	L	J	A	S	P	M	S	R

1. BOX
2. BURY
3. BURIAL
4. COFFIN
5. DAD
6. DEATH
7. DECAY
8. DIE
9. DIG
10. GHOST
11. GRAVEYARD
12. HAUNTED
13. HEADSTED
14. HOLE



15. HOUSE
16. MOM
17. PHANTOM
18. PUTREFACTION
19. REMAINS
20. REGGIE
21. ROOTS
22. ROT
23. SHOVEL
24. SPECTER
25. TREE
26. TOMB
27. VOID

## Strange Objects:

*Soil from Vlad the Impaler's Castle*



The world contains lots of strange and interesting objects from every corner of the globe. Every place has history, myths, and legends. Often these come together and highlight that extra special location, or object from that location. Most of the time these rarities may be viewed in a museum or seen where they exist. But others, you can bring home! I'm still trying to find an affordable human skull, so if you find one, please let me know.

This month I'm spotlighting the infamous Vlad Tepes a.k.a. Vlad the Impaler. Vlad lived from around 1431 to 1476, and ruled Wallachia over the course of three separate reigns. After his father and brother were murdered, he fought for the rest of his life against impossible odds to keep his father's place as ruler. He earned his notorious title by impaling his enemies on stakes and leaving them to die. In 1462, after a battle against the Ottoman Empire, he left thousands of soldiers impaled on the battlefield to strike fear into his enemies. His viciousness was his greatest weapon.

It's debated whether or not Bram Stoker based Dracula on Vlad the Impaler, but he's the closest we've got. To many he is the real-life Dracula. To others he's a folk hero, despite the brutality of his acts.

History, myth, and legend are all contained in this vial. It's a strange object from a place and time where fact and fantasy are inseparable.



## The Nature of Creepiness



Things like spiders, clowns, certain places, and situations in our lives creep us out, most for obvious reasons. But what makes innocent, harmless things freak us out? For example, this statue of a jester that happens to be in my living room is totally freaky. It's a completely unthreatening thing which I'm sure was not intended to transport us to a nightmare realm, yet it does. Which, of course, was why I bought it in the first place.

The science of creepiness shows that certain things bug us out as a survival mechanism. You may be naturally creeped out by spiders because some of them are poisonous. You might be nervous around certain people or places because they may present some kind of danger. But what danger do inanimate objects hold? Especially something like this?

Our brains work in strange ways, and something unusual may trigger that protective response. Logically, we know a creepy doll can't hurt us, but nonetheless it can make us uncomfortable. There's usually some kind of unnatural quality about things that cause this reaction. Maybe the doll's face has some feature our brains register as something to be cautious of, because it cannot appear naturally on a person's face. Our minds are programmed to pick out faces immediately, so an artificial one could throw off that instinct and put fear on alert. Humanoid things with uncanny qualities often instill fear. This may explain why some people are fearful of clowns. We know they're a normal person beneath the makeup and flamboyant clothes, but on the outside they just don't look natural. And as many have theorized, the unnatural and unknown triggers fear in us.

The inherent creepiness found in people, places, and objects may just be a remnant of our instincts from a time when that's all we had. Human emotion often defies logic, fear being one of the strongest of those instincts. So the next time you're creeped the hell out by something which can't hurt you, think twice about why its very sight makes you uncomfortable.

Lee Andrew Forman



# Poetry

## **We Are Children No More | *Melissa R. Mendelson***

We are just children,  
but the streets don't care.  
We were cast aside a long time ago,  
forgotten until found,  
found by the darkness stealing across the night,  
pierced by the razor-sharp edge of crows,  
haunted by the ghosts of ourselves.  
We are just children,  
but lives rest in our hands.  
The game is on,  
and we have to play,  
whether we want to or not.  
And the stakes are high.  
The past is writhing,  
begging for quiet,  
but it must be known.  
Or all is lost,  
and the streets thrive in chaos.  
Good souls twisted into monsters.  
We cannot run but face the fears  
that would devour us,  
say good-bye to the beating heart,  
and let go.  
But how do you stop loving someone?  
We are no longer children.  
We've seen monsters.  
We have faced the darkness inside and out,  
even when it was the brightest.  
We have said good-bye to the normal life,  
and together, we walk into the unknown.

### **About the Author:**

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Transmundane Press. Her short stories have also been featured in several publications on the website, Medium. She is currently working on finishing her Horror novel, *Ghost in the Porcelain*.

**Radiance of Mortality | *Ken Alan Dronsfield***

Perched upon  
gray branches in leafless trees  
blackbirds rest  
on their journey to nowhere  
an icy red wine sky leaps into our mind  
just over the horizon  
a mysterious radiant mortality looms  
as it waits  
church bells toll in the valleys  
a pain in my head reaches a crescendo  
the illness rages  
dirty linen is left here  
the body quakes and quivers with the fever  
night brings a moonless horror  
crickets sing  
raspy breathing slows  
body stiffens as the woeful spirit releases  
death arrives in a radiance of darkness  
as the sun rises  
eyes open to a different view of life  
is death the absolute end  
or just a new beginning.

**Desert Ghosts Dance | *Ken Alan Dronsfield***

Some ride the plains when  
the full moon is high.  
A ghostly form upon their horse as  
they go floating by.  
When dark clouds gather and  
rumbles of thunder are heard.  
Lightning strikes the Superstition's  
amongst screams of the thunderbird.  
Spirit mules follow a path to the mines  
lost on the trails in another time.  
The ghostly faces of old miner's peer  
from rocks and sultry shadows.  
They hide their gold from claim jumpers  
buried in a haunted hollow.  
Tumbleweed races across plain and playa  
rolling over bones of the lost or pariah.  
Dancing in the light under stars and sky,  
the reaper walks within a flock of magpies.  
Riding o'er the plains when the moon is high.  
Rise to an inhale at the break of dawn;  
flinch at the sting of a mad horse fly.

**Death of Whydah Sibyl | *Ken Alan Dronsfield***

Stand at ocean-side, exhaled screams cut through dense air,  
her throat tightens releasing weird screeching caterwauls.  
The ice melts and the Whydah Sibyl climbs the tower in her  
gown of white with gold lace; coat-less, barefoot, and cold,  
the warming sunrise will arrive soon. Covered in darkness,  
within the icy dream cursing those of pious dogma and reform  
wearing a studded gemstone black collar; gifted from her knight  
who is now buried in the chapel grounds. Deep within the throes  
of welcomed death, Whydah Sibyl reaches with gnarly fingers;  
breathless as water drips from castle walls. She recites, "as the dead  
are never truly gone; unless they are totally forgotten by the living.  
My life is but a coolish sea breeze, stormy at dawn; entranced, raving mad  
as a boiled chicken by sunset." Whydah Sibyl still sings her lovelorn sonnet.  
In dreams she walks through shafts of wheat, humming the lost dirges  
from days long ago. Dancing in fields of tall maze, her love departs;  
falling down upon bare knees, she screams. As blood from those buried  
within the earth bubbles and rises up; slowly disappearing in the fog.  
Raise your head dear Sibyl, eyes open wide, look into the stellar night,  
as the Moon's, face is now cast into a full brightening glow.  
Fly dear Sibyl, high into the clear black sky, smile in a soft light, as  
your dear knight awaits. Leaping and humming silent night, she goes,  
into a crest of a wave, claddagh ring clenched tightly, she sinks into the deep.

### **Witch of the Deeper Wood | Ken Alan Dronsfield**

A madness descends upon one who tends the clock on the wall  
after those who recall in the hiding or seeking and soft squeaking  
in a dilapidated cottage of the deeper wood.  
Harlequin colors within an irrational swirling find a mind spinning  
in the haze of red wine and I can't find my way through night or day  
blinded by the talk, as the tick seeks to rock.  
Standing there bare, while the cats on the chair dizzy and fading  
while the clock sings a sonnet. Feeling no pain within a numbness of the brain  
salvation's a meal, confined in a maniac's creel.  
Dance by the fire, whilst absorbing warm desire within the fistula of life,  
a steamy purge of strife moving with a gallop through the life of a trollop  
cast spells in the dark, to a star's reddish quark.  
The cauldron speaks, and tossed in is a leech, or perhaps the tip of a finger  
from one who, too long, did linger. The root cellar conserves; a place to reserve those  
who now live their ghastly nightmares. For I am whom you think, wasting away  
in the stink; listening to "Lunatic Fringe" on tape in the parlor.  
Readying the knife to dissect your wretched life; grinning as she walks  
to her quivering flock; who, in the dead of night, are frantic in fright;  
the witch feeds the cauldron with an unlucky one. She chants,  
'Bubble, bubble, bubble; dinner is no trouble',  
tor out here lives the witch of the deeper wood.

### **Little Girl in the Cemetery Garden | Ken Alan Dronsfield**

On a Sunday evening in late spring birds are now at rest,  
and the evening stars now shine. The full moon rises just over the hills  
and I find myself sitting on a bench in the cemetery garden reflecting  
upon Dad's funeral just last week. A little girl appeared by the fountain  
just off to my left and danced her little minuet in silence as lovely  
white moon flowers began to open. Her dress was white with red roses and  
at that moment I realized that what I was seeing was a little ghost girl,  
dancing to the full moon. I started to speak, then thought better of it  
and after she finished her evening waltz, she turned to me and smiled  
looking me in the eyes then simply melted away into the hazy mist all about.  
I whispered, 'wait', but she was gone, and I was deeply saddened  
to see her disappear but realized, she had made me smile and I felt tranquility  
even during this great loss, calming a wounded soul, the gift of serenity.  
I still return, each night of the rising full moon to talk to my father as he  
peacefully rests and go to the stone bench and relax in silence  
waiting to watch the little girl waltzing in the cemetery garden.

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

Ken Allan Dronsfield is a disabled military veteran. He's a graduate from the Community College of the Air Force and a prize-winning poet from New Hampshire, who now resides in Oklahoma. He has six poetry collections and has multiple nominations for the Pushcart prize and Best of the Net. Ken loves music, thunderstorms, and spending time with his rescue cats Willa and Yumpy.

**Website:** [A Revenant Poet](#)

**Twitter:** [@KenKadfield](#)



### Reading Ghost Stories | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Words and imagination mingle  
Winds whisper on creaking shingle  
Clocks strike with unearthly chimes  
Candlelight mirrors bygone times

Reading ghost stories all alone  
Reflecting on a forgotten tome  
Favourite tales of old live again  
Fog shrouding allegories profane

Spectres move into the shadows  
Shuddering with fears we expose  
Other worlds born in darkest night  
Opiates to give the ultimate fright

#### About the Author:

Shawn D. Standfast was born on an island in Northern Ontario, Canada. His early years were spent without running water, indoor plumbing, and electricity. Shawn began reading to pass the long summer days and cold winter nights. A high school English class sparked his interest in poetry. Inspired, Shawn began writing. In 2005 Shawn relocated to the United Kingdom. His first collection of poetry *Dark Passages: Moments of Transition*, is now out through Sirens Call Publications.

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### Repo the Weep Queens | *Jason Ziemniak*

screaming beauty skeleton  
hellscape enlightenment body issue  
misadventures in a void  
the eye-popping delinquency of primitive humanity  
midnight children mutilated in grief pig red  
abstract vengeance by a debauched forced god of all  
deactivated years  
incarceration in the people refrigerator  
depravity rehearsal of fanatical boys hard-driving guilt  
gun vision sodomization sacrifice retinas  
a career of blackouts  
parched arrogance  
vanished entrance  
fantastic decaying  
shadow vaporization  
life negative  
ghosts earn intensely

#### About the Author:

Jason Ziemniak lives in New Jersey with his wife and cat. He runs the Chrome Peeler record label.

Facebook: [Jason Ziemniak](#)

Twitter: [@chromepeeler](#)



## **The Success of Paddy O'Brien's | *Ken Poyner***

On Tuesday nights the place is filled  
With she-fairies, she-elves, she-trolls,  
And the occasional ogress.  
If an otherworldly male cannot  
There and then  
Get lucky, all the shine must have gone

From his galumph. They sell their mead  
Half price to the pursued sex of any fantasy species,  
Take in twice as much from the many pursuers.

They play a mix of elf-punk  
And metal-troll, keep the live band  
Protectively caged. The females dress  
Only to advertise how adjacent to naked they are.

If you have not been out much,  
You won't know what you are so emphatically looking at.

A few hours after opening, the morals are so loose  
That even some cross-species action occurs:  
You do not want to disturb any purple orbs  
Rattling in the demi-corner near the back.

I've heard the place is owned by a couple  
Who live part time in the real world,  
And employ real men as accountants  
And delivery drivers. Scandal is that one of them  
Dates an elf, has been seen with a grateful  
Glow in his coveralls, the blue smudges  
Of intimacy lingering about his hands. I do not listen.

I come in on Wednesdays, when the fare  
Is half human, whole price, and doubly exotic.  
I see the advertisements for ladies' night,  
Hear the talk from hung-over, but electric, trolls.

It is all good, soul refreshing fun;  
But I chafe a little on the inside of my square soul,  
That this place may have been a real man's idea.

Then the she-elf hawking overpriced drinks  
Slides low along the fairy wood bar –  
Half in her uniform, half out – with a smile  
That spits hard liquor and sizzling ozone,  
A lithe seductive wink, and a shoulder dipped to me -

And what do I care who had the magical sense  
To birth the idea, in any dimension, for a place like this?  
Real or fey? Something to consider only after the fact.

## **Hunger | *Ken Poyner***

Eating the ghosts  
That haunt you  
Can be liberating,  
Even ennobling,  
Perhaps educational.

You prepare yourself,  
Select the right cut of bowl,  
Deftly capture the ghosts  
One at a slippery time, pick  
Out a nimble spoon that will do.

Remember to inform your senses  
That something so supposedly  
Ephemeral actually  
Has distinction and verve,  
That for all the peace and  
Discharged passion it will allow you,  
Ghost is an acquired taste.

## **Marooned | *Ken Poyner***

Neither of us luckily  
Is food for the other.  
We are breathing the same air,  
Moderately happy with the gravity.

Language we will work out  
With gestures and pointing.  
We will, in time, solve this calculus  
Of simple survival. Our own kind

Will each come looking for  
One of us, but will be glad  
To take both and drop the odd  
At the nearest galactic transport station.

We can do this if we stay calm.  
Given two mostly unfamiliar species  
Cast away unplanned, and suddenly together,  
There is glutinous much to learn.

Like what I am going to do  
When your kind's mating season  
Comes fiercely due, bringing us both  
To desperate differences in reason.

I ordered cable TV  
For the closet monster.

The installer  
Wanted to know why  
I desired an outlet  
In so small a room.

The sales technician  
For the phone company  
Asked the same thing.

I simply moved aside  
The hanging clothes  
And indicated a clean  
Spot on the closet wall.

The electrician  
Did not care:  
I had room  
In the breaker box,  
And the walls were relatively  
Easy to fish.

I do not care what they think.

Now, for me,  
Night terrors are no more  
Than The Learning Channel,  
And each evening a couple  
Of threatening phone calls.

For others, who knows?

I gather the fur of struggle.  
Bits of you are left all about  
This soon to be legendary  
Battlefield. I stuff  
My pockets, take off my shoes  
And use them as holders.

I am going to prove  
That I killed the beast,  
That the two of us heroically struggled:  
You panting and shedding and eventually  
Bleeding; and I triumphant,  
Holding the instrument of your slaying  
Over my head as you slithered,  
Mortally wounded, into  
Whatever secret place of your death.

I remember this as grand:  
The man and the monster,  
Equally pitted and my cluttered courage  
Winning out. How charmed  
Will all the bar girls be! I turned  
And I thrust and I nearly succumbed  
To your claws, but narrow though the victory was,  
I won. There will be a stipend  
In this for me, a life sustained  
By the community's gratitude.

I will have children  
On every corner of the town's map.  
I am starting with the shed fur:  
Silky and caught easily on a victim's  
Carelessly open night window.  
All I need is evidence,  
Pieces of you, tangible proof.  
Perhaps we could work something out.

### About the Author:

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in Analog, Asimov's, Café Irreal, and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class power lifting career.

Author Website: [Ken Poyner](#)

Facebook: [Ken Poyner](#)





Everything about Halloween was pleasant,  
From the crisp autumn air and colorful  
Swirling leaves to the laughter of children  
Floating through the air as they ran around  
In all sorts of different costumes, eager for candy.

Once at the party, with caramel apple in hand,  
He made his way from group to group,  
Catching up with old friends, when their eyes  
Locked – this drop-dead gorgeous demonically  
dressed woman – and he felt his heart skip a beat.

Her long black hair pulled back exposing  
The truly detailed makeup work she had done.  
One eye was completely white, with half  
Of her face a greyish hue, spots of flesh seemed  
Peeling – muscle exposed beneath – or gone.

Her outfit of choice was a classic red devil's look,  
Complete with matching lipstick – on the half  
of her lips that were there – and a set of horns.  
He appreciated all the time that must have gone  
Into her whole ensemble and detailed makeup.

They talked over the loud music and after one  
Too many *Blood Boiler* whiskey cocktails,  
She suggested walking him home, but his brain  
Was foggy and everything seemed to spin,  
Somehow, they had left the party together.

The moonlight was bright against the pitch-black  
Evening surrounding them, soon his front door  
Was right in front of him, and he really looked at her,  
The saintly woman who had offered to help him,  
As she turned the knob to let them into his home.

A chill ran through him, almost electrifyingly sobering  
As he realized her costume may be fake, but her makeup  
Application was not talent, but real, and that she  
Was actually a real demon – eager to be welcomed  
into his home – and into his soul.

#### About the Author:

Brianna Malotke is a freelance writer, costume designer, and avid boxer. Her most recent work can be found in the August 2021 issue of *Witch House Amateur Magazine*. She has pieces in the hundred-word horror anthologies, *Beneath*, *Cosmos*, and *The Deep*. Looking ahead to 2022, she has two poems in the *Women in Horror Poetry Showcase*, *Under Her Skin*, published by Black Spot Books.

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

Blog: [Malotke Sews](https://malotkesews.com)

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**Autumn Never-ending | *Lee Andrew Forman***

Flickering smiles and dancing eyes  
stare dead at the troupes of ghoulish ones  
knock-knocking all eve long.  
Creatures and things undead  
collect treats from those willing.

Those in the dark—  
the houses run dry,  
will succumb to the deeds  
of demons and devils.

For those sweets keep at bay  
all things hid in the night;  
watching and waiting,  
hoping and plotting,  
to slip beneath the mask  
of one unsuspecting.

To take their soul  
where real horrors live  
and hold them eternal  
within autumn never-ending.

**Tap & Rattle | *Lee Andrew Forman***

Clawed ends, legs of spindle  
tap against the hardwood.  
Atop their wire frame,  
coalescent mouths  
and countless teeth,  
salivate from a hungered body.

Behind cracked doors  
a love-entwined two,  
nestle in deceptive comfort.

A black tongue flicks  
between the sliver of light,  
unseen from within.

A taste of fresh sweat  
draws a rattle from its throat,  
and the tapping claws of another  
join the meal for two.

**The Bane of Whitechapel | *Lee Andrew Forman***

A mystery unsolved,  
told in missives of blood.  
From Hell he stalked  
on clandestine nights,  
in the hush of silent streets.

The bane of proscribed escorts,  
violator of sultry prey.  
With surgical mutilation,  
victims splayed unhidden;  
guttural lacerations  
with innards to behold.

A savage aspiration,  
the impetus of death.  
Remembered for the carnage  
and a letter to the law.

Forever—  
in history he sleeps...

The first eyes upon him  
captured his features in neural ink,  
committed image to the pages  
of consciousness, internal history.

No matter how you looked at him,  
his features always the same.  
Magnificent, eternally possessing,  
his nature was to blame.

I first shook his hand,  
the most arresting moment of life.  
I was captured, taken,  
but by my will alone.

Never a struggle,  
I only followed where he walked.  
Choice nonexistent.  
But inconsequential in its fault.

To the end of all,  
if he marched,  
I'd carry my soul in this unsightly husk,  
until it fell in passing,  
until it turned to dust.

That which preceded his arrival,  
banished,  
no longer declared.  
Only the future mattered.  
Only for what he prepared.

He led us to the mountains,  
where history would rebirth.  
Those left behind,  
children of accursed Earth.

Behind him came the end.  
But not of humanity.  
He only wished to emerge anew  
in a world of sculpture crafted  
by the hands of a fractal mind.

Whispering ghosts of statue  
forever set in stone.  
Out comes the bastard,  
pale as the clouded moon.

Too long he slept in darkness—  
the only companion  
the seed has ever known.

But his flesh remained,  
undecayed,  
to hold his willful soul.

For desire unbound,  
a need to deprive  
the songs of false heroes sung.

Beneath a starless sky  
his vile form attunes.  
Upon the altars of ages gone,  
the knowledge he consumes.

Words corrupt;  
they tell all lies.

His body wracked  
by cruel device.  
Left unattended,  
for the vermin of obscurity.

With fire born of rage,  
he rose,  
to avenge the endless death  
of all who spoke no more.

No longer human,  
a beast of transformation.  
The risen, the undead;  
the omen of ruin.

#### About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman has published three books to date, *The Bury Box*, *Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals. Lee is also a member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, where you can find a new piece of fiction each week.



## Night of the Banshees | *Maggie D Brace*

The chill winds swept down off the hillside,  
bringing with it the eerie moans of God knew what.  
In unison, we stepped away from our appointed rounds,  
striding forward, we mounted the path leading north.

"Only the neighbors we know, with lights on!"  
cautioned every parent, every year, ad nauseum.  
This year we would choose our own route, our own game plan.  
Heading toward the foothills, we giggled at our daring.

Once in the blackened forest, our resolve faltered,  
but spurred on by some sense of do or die, we crept forth.  
The moans echoed, sometimes far ahead, sometimes behind,  
luring us ever onward, ever upward, away from the light.

The pirate, the superhero, the ghost, and I huddled closely,  
hands outstretched, brushing branches and cobwebs away.  
Fear puckered our mouths tightly, sweat beaded our brows.  
Onward and upward we crept, grappling with roots and brush.

The first of us to succumb to the rigor, the pirate, slunk away.  
Wordlessly, he vanished into the darkness, beating a path homeward.  
The moans soon became shrieks, the shrieks blended with groans.  
The superhero lost his nerve, and slunk sheepishly back down the hill.

Gulping, the ghost and I pressed close and soldiered on.  
The creak of bat wings brought a downdraft of chilly air.  
The lashing branches menacingly taunted, while roots tussled with us.  
The ghost screamed once, then disappeared into the underbrush.

More determined than ever, I inched forward toward the moans.  
That was my last mortal act, my last Halloween alive on Earth.  
Engulfed in dark anger, the spirits bore me upward to become one with them:  
Banshees moaning upon the hill, luring foolish schoolboys to their demise.

### About the Author:

Maggie D Brace, a life-long denizen of Maryland, teacher, gardener, basketball player and author attended St. Mary's College, where she met her soulmate, and Loyola University, Maryland. She has written *'Tis Himself: The Tale of Finn MacCool* and *Grammy's Glasses*, and has multiple short works and poems in various anthologies. She remains a humble scrivener and avid reader.

Facebook: [Maggie D Brace](#)

Twitter: [@MaggieDBrace](#)







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### **The Ghosts' Procession | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

The Ghosts' Procession comes – a singular sight  
Of pallid shades in one morose parade,  
Which roam the blood-drenched fields with corpses laid  
About, all donning funeral garbs of white.  
Stale nether winds there rage when they are nigh  
As crimson moonbeams paint each visage red,  
Resembling blood tears trailing down their dead  
Expressions, while the dank air seems to sigh.  
Their moaning stirs the ghosts of soldiers slain  
From rotten remnants where foul maggots swarmed,  
Which join the march with faces grim, deformed  
By tasted horrors and deep lingering pain.  
Those nameless souls with violent deaths, but still  
Without graves, mourn their own, for none else will.

### **The Sentient Dead | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

It's hard to be the sentient dead—  
A voiceless thing with rotten smell  
Amid a fly-infested hell  
Where, aimlessly, you onward tread.

It's hard to be the sentient dead,  
For you can't fit in when among  
Your mindless, ravenous peers. For long  
You've walked a lonesome path ahead.

It's hard to be the sentient dead  
When humans in small groups you see—  
All that you cannot have or be—  
And find you've no tears left to shed.

It's hard to be the sentient dead;  
From inside out, you just feel cold,  
Filled with the hopeless want to hold  
Once more the warmth that's from you fled.

It's hard to be the sentient dead;  
You roam through changeless, pointless days  
Till, for salvation, you embrace  
The bullet aiming at your head.

### **The Leech Lord | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

From whence it came, nobody knows,  
But they've made sure to stay away  
From such a Beast whose size defies  
All Natural Laws, whose massive maw—  
Abysmally wide—could swallow whole  
A full-grown man, but people claim  
It seldom feasts; instead, it'd bite  
And not let go till its prey's veins  
Are drained of blood; what remnants left  
Are swarmed by its infernal spawns,  
And afterwards, it'd lie in wait  
In water sources for fresh prey.

The Leech Lord is a loathsome thing  
That brings but death to everything.  
And recently, it's oft been seen  
To roam on land much longer than  
It used to do; it's wandered to  
Where people live in towns remote  
Whose residents are not aware  
Of what it is or when it'll strike.  
Now, it has grown accustomed to  
How humans taste. A cryptic Beast  
The Leech Lord is—a loathsome thing  
That brings but death to everything.



**In the Wood | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa***

Comes midsummer dusk,  
Children seek out fireflies,  
Glass jars slowly filled.

Widening their search,  
They further leave their homes behind,  
Making for the wood.

Something else they spot  
Guides their hastened steps deeper  
In that murky maze.

Echoing laughter  
Chases after fairy tales  
Elusive in flight.

Out of adults' view,  
Children fade into the dark,  
Led by hands of light.

The wood keeps what's lost,  
Stirred leaves murmur in hushed tongues,  
Naught's revealed to man.

Little is what's found:  
Fireflies with their light snuffed out,  
Smothered in sealed jars.

**About the Author:**

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is currently teaching English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH) in Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in New Myths, Star\*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Liquid Imagination, and other venues.

**Facebook:** [Khoa Ngo](#)





**Rubies & Gold | *Kelly Matsuura***

My shamshir sings.  
The human head of the beast,  
sliced from its feline body,  
rolls into the shadows.  
I, fall before my kill.

I tear the mardykhors' flesh,  
with my own bare hands.  
Meat, skin, and sinew tossed aside,  
rich blood coating my fingers.  
The beast's last meal, my treasure.

Its stomach is hidden,  
high up under  
Hell-forged ribs.  
Dense bones are cracked.  
Putrid yellow pus, erupts.

The stench  
does not deter me.  
My fingernails bleeding,  
ripped violently from their bed,  
do not deter me.

I find her then,  
my dearest Rayhaneh.  
Crushed, frangible bones.  
Soiled jewels—her rubies and gold.  
All that remains.

I will bring her home.

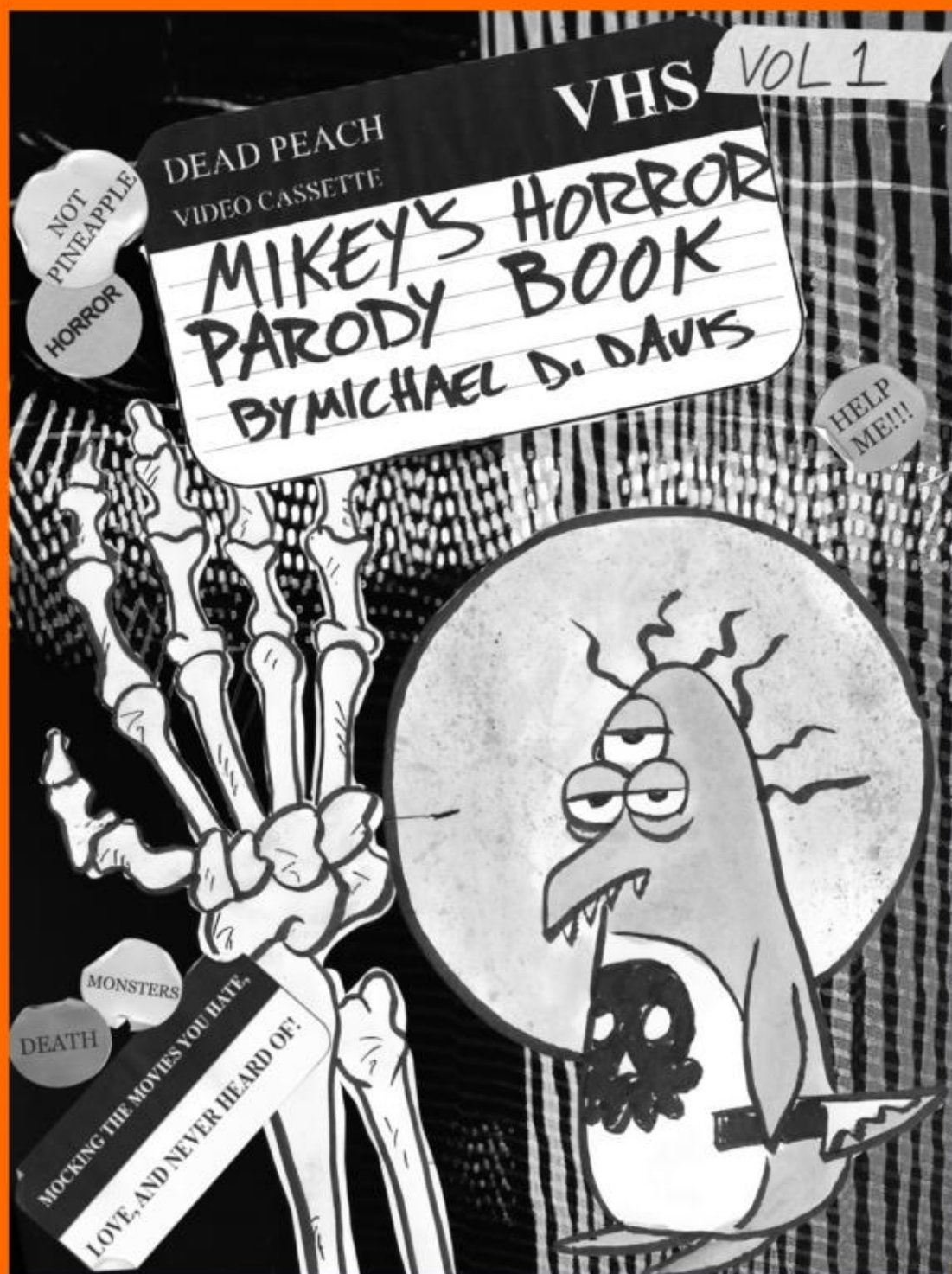
**About the Author:**

Kelly Matsuura writes horror, fantasy and literary fiction. She is the owner of Insigniastories.com (Asian speculative fiction) and has had stories published with The Lorelei Signal, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Sirens Call Publications, and many more.

**Website:** [Black Wings and White Paper](#)



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**the vampire's amusement | Linda M. Crate**

why? she rasped,  
in a shaky breath  
as she felt death closing  
in with his skeleton hands;

the vampire let out a  
scoff, eager for every carmine  
ruby against his tongue—

but he looked into her eyes  
knowing her end was near,  
and decided he'd answer for  
his own amusement:  
*because humans are vile  
creatures that tear apart one  
another in an effort to make  
themselves whole.*

before she could reply,  
he finished what he set out to do;

dropping her body on the  
forest floor  
only the blood stained leaves and  
cries of coyotes and crows would  
keep her company now.

**a death so swift | Linda M. Crate**

she had never known  
zombies could speak,  
and this man claimed  
dead didn't have names  
but tombstones and literature  
disapproved that theory;

but she wasn't about to run  
into the arms of a zombie  
simply to tell him that he was wrong—

the forest was dark and every  
shape imposed a threat,  
but she couldn't stop running;  
nowhere felt safe

looking over her shoulder she tripped  
over a fallen branch—

it was then that the fiend found her  
with a wicked grin,  
*you shouldn't look behind you,  
the past is behind you for a reason.*

she couldn't even reply  
he gave her a death so swift.

**yellow eyes | Linda M. Crate**

she felt the hairs on the back  
of her neck standing,  
but when she looked behind her  
there was nothing;  
it was an eerie feeling to know  
you were being watched but not  
seeing the eyes of that which was  
following you—  
a few moments later a murder of  
crows burst from the trees,  
and her heart jumped into her  
throat for a second before she told  
herself to calm down;  
there was no reason to be terrified  
of crows—  
she continued through the wood,  
turning too late to see only yellow eyes  
before claws ripped into her right side  
and fangs rudely tore apart her throat.

in their anger | *Linda M. Crate*

she smirked as he ran from her,  
only sorry because he had been  
caught in the throes of her rage;  
not because he had hurt her or  
apologetic because of the oceans that  
had spilled from her eyes—  
but he had recognized that gleam  
in her eyes go from prey to predator  
because he knew how to be a monster,  
he just didn't want her to be one, too;  
but she didn't much care what he wanted  
as he had broken her heart—  
every action had consequences,  
and she wasn't going to let him get away  
with this;  
she let him think that he had out run her  
but when he let out that sigh of relief  
she swung the axe into his back and watched  
him fold like a lawn chair as the blade cut him down—  
*pity the fool that sees goddesses as*  
*damsels for he shall never wake again,* she whispered  
into his ear as he laid there grunting for the last moments  
of his life,  
and as she walked away with bloodied axe in hand  
she was not sorry for the forest animals that answered  
in their hunger.

**About the Author:**

Linda M. Crate's works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is a three time best of the net nominee. When Linda isn't writing she likes to enjoy nature walks, photography, reading, dancing, and music. Her favorite musical genres are industrial, indie, rock, and goth. She's always been a misfit, but she prides herself on always being herself.

Facebook: [Linda M. Crate](#)

Twitter: [@thysilverdoe](#)





## Halloween on a Redbrick Terrace | *Harris Coverley*

Ghosts of old industry yawn upon this terrace  
As old men tell yarns within its units  
Children and teenagers getting ready  
For their big night out—  
    A chance to play a ghoul  
    Or a ghost  
    Or a witch  
    Or maybe a character more of the times  
    Or something 'sexy' even (if they can get away with it)

With plastic buckets shaped like pumpkins  
    The symbology lifted from Irish myth  
They stalk up and down the row  
Banging buckets and shoulders  
    Excited chattering  
    Screams of joy  
    White legs in fishnet stockings  
        A thousand colours  
Masks dropped and carried away  
    By unfeeling winds  
The rattle of hard candies and slither of sweet bags  
The odd stupid song blared—*Do the Mash...!*

But as usual they ignore my own house  
Set on the end of this terrace  
I do not blame them  
    The boards on the lower windows yellowed in the summer sun  
    The steel grate screwed in place over the warping front door  
    The brickwork unwashed and unbrushed  
    A piece of glass hanging like a dead leaf from an upstairs casement

And I hear two boys stop outside briefly  
    One dressed as a policeman  
    The other as Frankenstein's Prometheus  
And they whisper lies about me  
Before scampering away

I would *show them* if I could...  
I no longer enjoy this holiday  
    Not that I ever cared much for it anyway to be honest

The walls grow colder month by month  
    Maybe Christmas will be better  
        But I have my doubts...  
        (I have little left but doubts)

The festivities soon settle down  
And by midnight the terrace is again at a cool and dark peace  
    Safe frights given and so reciprocated  
    Back to normal tomorrow as ever before  
And yet none of them sensed a *real* monster this Eve...

### About the Author:

Harris Coverley has verse published or forthcoming in *Polu Texni*, *California Quarterly*, *Star\*Line*, *Scifaikuest*, *Corvus Review*, *Spank the Carp*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *EgoPHobia*, *Poets' Espresso Review*, *Once Upon A Crocodile*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *5-7-5 Haiku Journal*, *Yellow Mama*, and many others. He lives in Manchester, England, where he drinks real ale and shoots pool as often as he can."

Twitter: [@ha\\_coverley](https://twitter.com/ha_coverley)

**Role Play | *Brian Rosenberger***

Blame the media.  
Our popularity soaring  
To new heights.  
The fans, legion upon legion,  
Riot to obtain a lock of hair  
Or shred of clothing,  
A glimpse of us outside the coffin.  
"Bite me. Suck me. Can I get your autograph?" they demand.  
Pale necks, a willing sacrifice.  
Who is the victim?  
Who is the predator?  
Who is the monster?  
The night, once our hunting grounds, now a sanctuary,  
Illuminated by flashbulbs in place of the moon.

**In the woods | *Brian Rosenberger***

A tapestry of shadows  
A cloak of midnight,  
Of mystery  
Her face glows, pale,  
Lit by the moon  
Hauntingly beautiful,  
Painfully beautiful  
She is a controlled storm,  
Tempest and temptress,  
A maelstrom,  
She offers her hand

**Cloaked | *Brian Rosenberger***

True, clothes make the man.  
Granted, the look is dated  
And somewhat awkward.  
Have you every chased someone  
While wearing a cape?  
It's like wearing a parachute.  
Still, it's a matter of tradition  
And always cuts a mean silhouette.  
The result always the same.  
Laughter turns to screams,  
Making the blood so much sweeter

**The Trick-Or-Treater | *Brian Rosenberger***

His bag is heavy, grows heavier from house to house.  
Worn and frayed, stitched together, gray as the grave.  
The bag is bigger than he is.  
He drags it behind him like a dead twin.  
He knocks or pushes the doorbell, usually knocks out of habit.  
The familiar exchange.  
They give candy.  
If they're lucky, he fills his bag with their nightmares.  
A lot of nightmares. Lifetimes of nightmares.  
That's why his bag is so heavy.  
His burden. If they're lucky.  
For the not-so-lucky, it's a different exchange.  
The Trick-O-Treater gets candy for his sweet-tooth  
And his bag is that much lighter.

## The Screams All Sound the Same | *Brian Rosenberger*

It's the same old suicide.  
I blame you.  
You blame me.  
Blame the House.

It was old and empty even  
before we moved in and  
the contracts signed.

Its previous owners, eyes stitched,  
already six feet beneath the soil.  
Why gamble? Why bet?  
The House always wins.

Close your eyes, It whispers.  
I tread the hallways, sleepless.

The creaks and groans of the stairs,  
my only company, silent whispers.  
Soon. Very soon.

The stairs creak as I walk.  
The House is keeping me awake,  
no chance of slumber.  
The House croons a lullaby, a chorus of

close your eyes, just close your eyes.  
There's a voice telling me "This is wrong"  
and "Put down the axe" and "No, no, no."  
but the other singer is louder, more demanding.

Some days I imagine we are already dead.

There's a voice that tells me "Wait" and "Remember"  
but it's a song I can't recall, the singer and lyrics  
part of the past, a radio station for the dead.

Once we were young, so in love, the future was ours.  
Once...

Now, your screams echo through hallway after hallway, haunting me.

I walk the hallways.  
Your screams keeping me awake.  
I walk the hallways  
looking for a new throat  
my axe can silence.

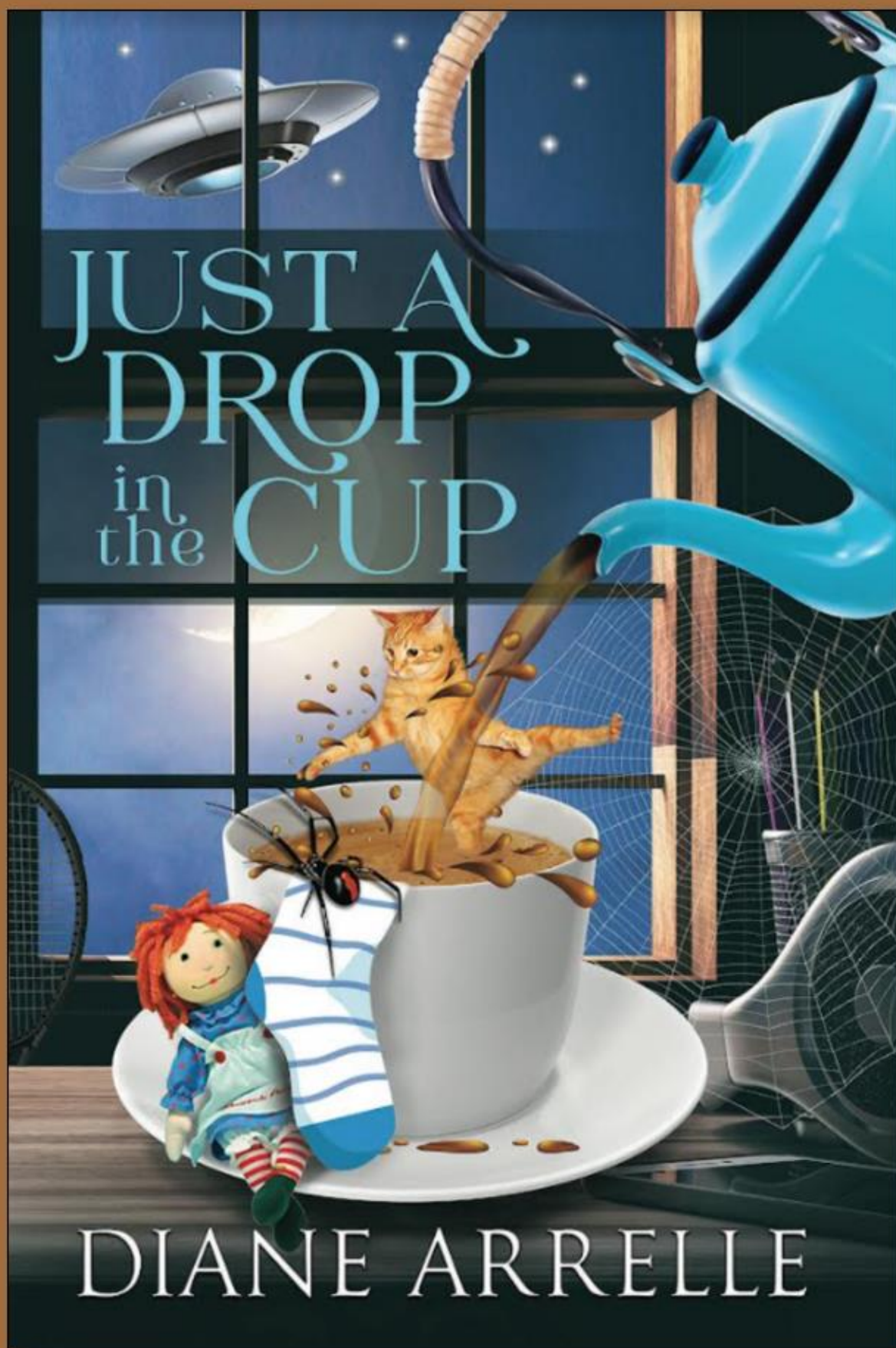
### About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections - *Poems That Go Splat*, *And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me*.

Facebook: [Brian Who Suffers](#)

Instagram: [@brianwhosuffers](#)

*Fourty two short stories of suspense, fantasy, science fiction, and horror  
many mixed with heaping spoonful of humor to stir things up.*



**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!**



### **Danse Macabre | *Rachel J. Tyle***

Danse macabre  
Were you invited when he called down the stars  
Did you embrace the sacrifice  
Shield yourself from the firelight  
Embers burning away whispers in the darkness  
Capillaries contract, fading memories with switchblade eternity  
Did you tell us no, Did you tell us to leave?  
Were you worried what Anubis would think?  
Embracing himself in celestial shine  
Worried he'd search the stars for you  
Return your body to a barren soul  
The sullen Earth would shed her tears  
Only to find wakefulness in the cinders on your shoes  
Smelling of blotted out stars  
The hollows of your eyes  
glowing with the signs of oblivion

### **Home | *Rachel J. Tyle***

The lies we tell ourselves before we close the coffin lid  
Picking at daisies under my gallows  
Can hear the cats screaming, feeling out the moonlight  
A primordial awareness tucked under the cosmos  
Swallowed up in aether  
Absinthe splashed echoes in the mausoleum dust  
Anointed in sickly sweetness  
Burnt caramel coated catacombs laced with a sense of departure  
Thick cream dumped down from the heavens  
Filling up the mind's eye  
With grave stones cast in spun sugar  
And the lead that glazed your bones in glossy slick wetness  
Like delicate candy floss rotting between my teeth  
For the rest of eternity  
Until I send you home

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

Rachel J. Tyle is likely an alien from another planet posing as a cat lady. When she isn't enjoying her job as a veterinary nurse she can be found writing, gardening, or attempting to summon an elder god amongst other terrestrial hobbies.

**Facebook:** [Rachel J. Tyle](#)



### The wishing well | *Mathias Jansson*

I walked in solitude  
seeking shelter and comfort  
from the struggle of life  
when I found an abandoned well  
deep in the dark forest

I leaned over and found in the depth  
a full moon of hope  
and tossed a coin to make a wish  
in the abandoned wishing well

From the well I could hear a whispering  
echoing deep from below  
Beware and find the truth  
look deeper down the dark  
lean over and see your future...

Mesmerised by the voice  
I leaned over and I slipped  
I fell down the abandoned well  
now I am waiting in the dark  
waiting for you to pass by  
so I can shout out my warning  
Beware and find the truth  
look deeper down the dark  
lean over and see your future  
the skeleton of countless seekers  
seeking an answer  
in an abandoned wishing well.

#### About the Author:

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

Author Website: [Mathias Jansson](#)  
Amazon Author Page: [Mathias Jansson](#)



Tara | *Sheikha A.*

The auburn trees sway at a distance  
while he creates illusions—piping

tremors of magnetic soft-wailing  
brooding—they come in hoards

dropping their guards, clutching yet  
the azure of reality under ash-whimpers

of their linen drapes; their bodies lean  
of any meat; their covenant stoic

like grief of widows pervading revel.  
The town's priestess hides in his cart

watching from shadows that may be her  
many conjures; he must be precise

when casting the fairy-lights net  
over them—*them*, the innocuous;

*them*, the alluring. Their necks long  
and eyes blank swivels of docility;

their faces pale like the grief of ail  
that slashes lives without warning.

She is amber and they are hounds,  
these lifeless poles of chastity; and he

brings tricks, svelte like his crafty mind;  
and she is a priestess with love for magic.

They will be imbued and locked away  
like cloud-bursts inside raven skies;

nobody shall find them—*them* chrysalises  
afflicted like grief of unused fertile wombs;

*them* of pure snow in silent avalanches.  
The town heaves under spell of slumber;

they have been summoned by hypnosis.  
On his third juggle, she will flick her wand;

and they will rise like a slate-grained crown  
into the air, out of their grief—out into unknown,

they will know—she will show them, *them* doves  
of undefiled cognisance—*them* will float like webs

under the shivers of moonlight, into what waits  
to consume—the thrill of magic: a net of black mass—

**Neptune | *Sheikha A.***

Waves of shadowy figurines zap her  
vision; the cat knows of their arrival.

She's lining clubs but moving mouths  
tell her to look again —the girl listening

is a clever reader herself. She stares  
at the reversed clover; her sight is blurry

but she knows what she senses—  
there may be lust in the girl's radius

that must be fore-warned, but she's  
also seeing surrender in calculation;

she remembers the numbers on the dice  
she rolled—six paired with six—victory

and balance. The figures float in watery  
rhythms—she can see the colours red

merge with black – her field is tainted  
and aura impenetrable. She swipes

the cards back into the stack,  
without ritualistic shuffling

draws diamond alluding to success.  
The girl has a lover offering many gifts;

there are no hearts in this spread.  
The cat's eyes turn black from green;

the presence is strong. She feels  
the resistance of water embracing

a body in forced descent. The girl's  
eyes have turned the dark found in death

and a smile telling the old teller  
there will be one reign in this realm –

The cat smells skin, watching the hooded  
hover nearer. Her pores are layered armour;

an ace is drawn. The girl has sold her soul  
to her lover. The cards will not be controlled.

**About the Author:**

Sheikha A. enjoys the freedom of an alter-ego through macabre and speculative creative fiction. One may not find any pets in her house, but there's no guaranteeing a spirit or two may or may not have decided to pet her house instead as their self-adopted home. She often dwindles between sweet, innocent writing and the deliciously dark and horrifying.

**Blog:** [Write Me, Saudade](#)



**Rapunzel's Lullaby | CM Adler**

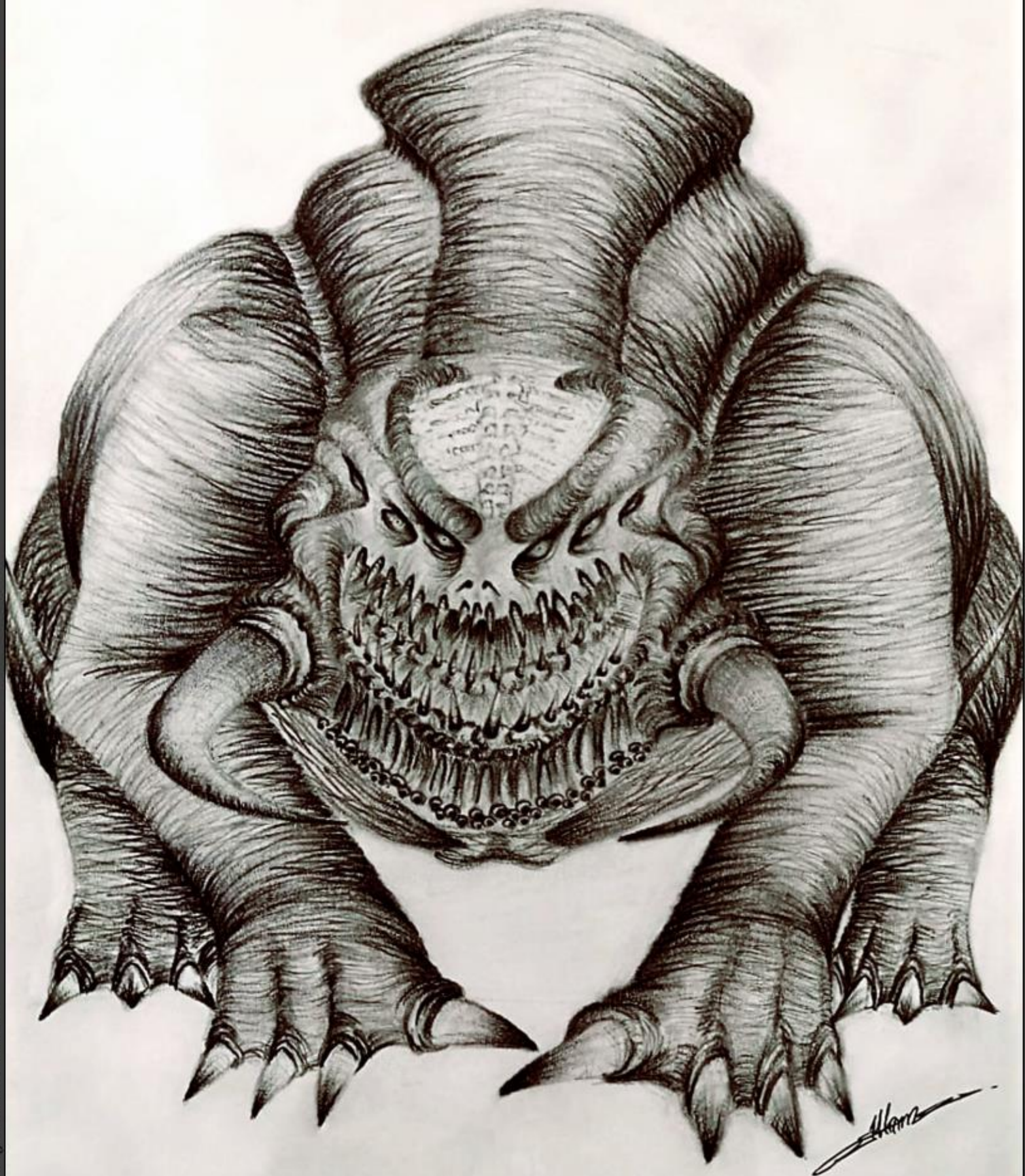
Hush now, darling; close your eyes,  
Dream yourself a thousand lives.  
One life of true love; one life of power;  
One life of kissing crows in a witch's crumbling tower.  
One life on a pirate ship with chests full of gold,  
And one life in a land where you'll never grow old.  
Sleep now, darling; close your eyes.  
Dream of a world with no goodbyes.  
A world of summer; a world of play;  
A world of wishes and night-cursed fae.  
A world where the moon sheds her midnight tears.  
And the salt of the sea washes clean our fears.  
*Hush now, darling; don't you cry.*  
I'll give you the world of the sun and sky.  
I'll give you one heart for wishes; one heart for love;  
And another to call down the crows from above  
While we brave the ghosts of the Draemer's land,  
Where souls are torn twixt stars and sand.  
Sleep now, darling; dream away.  
I'll hide you from where the nightmares play.

**About the Author:**

CM Adler is the thriller and dark fantasy name for award-winning author Christine Nielson. Nestled in the mountains of northern Utah, Christine spends her days with her three human children and her additional four-legged, furry brood. In a former life, Christine taught English and karate and developed a love of spinning fire.

**Blog:** [Queens and Crows](#)  
**Instagram:** [@christinenielson cmadler](#)





### **Devil Child | E.F. Schraeder**

Father sings the thing to sleep, a funny gaze in the eye  
looking not quite at the parents, who love her.  
God, how they love her. And she drinks that love  
like blood until it sours, draining them to husks.

Her glance, both cause and curse,  
the falling rock, the fire, the suicide.  
Scalding in the pinprick pupil of that heart  
waits common evil, a spoiled thing,

She screams and cries like a normal child,  
pouts like a normal child,  
and breaks like a little girl.

### **Postcards from a Final Girl | E.F. Schraeder**

She's having a wonderful time—  
waiting alone as required, with the purity  
of the North star on a dark night.  
A good babysitter with her schoolbooks,

she's never seen anything like this—  
her mean best friend naked and coiled  
like a snake on the bed, a knife in her head,  
the jock boyfriend slumped, wet on the floor.

This girl's different, not the type to have a condom  
in purse or pocket. Whatever the scene,  
one thing's for sure— dead or alive,  
she'll be back.

### **Wiki How: On the Handling of Virgins | E.F. Schraeder**

When tethering untouched flesh with crimson straps,  
be warned. At the altar, he or she will plead.  
They always plead. This must be ignored.

From beneath hooded dark robes release  
such things as cannot imagined:  
dirty curses. Semen and spit.

Press hands, knives, forceful tongues,  
fingers and fists. With candles and chants,  
soon enough, let the body crack like an egg.

Take heed in the urgent pre-dawn rites,  
and remember, the body will break.  
They always break.

### **The Better to Eat You With | E.F. Schraeder**

Come closer. You know me, dear.  
Lean your small head back,  
fall into my familiar arms.  
See how your fears dissolve?

Don't pretend. Let's not be shy.  
Ignore that fiery red spark in my eyes.  
You know once lit, the beast will out!  
Let's play a game or two.

You hide, I'll seek.  
With my keen senses inspired,  
I'll find anything as ripe as you,  
running in those clumsy red shoes.

Give up girl, let the wolf win.  
Stop wriggling like a little snake  
afraid of its own shed skin.  
Why I could eat you up—

if only you'd trust me.  
It'll be quick.  
I promise.  
Come closer.

### Hate Mail to a Crone | *E.F. Schraeder*

She has become old,  
that was the first mistake.  
Her bones creak and snap  
beneath pained, crooked steps,  
Her eyes strain and squint.

Wicked thing!  
I have watched her beauty crumble  
into wrinkles and bulges,  
hollows invade where fullness once lived.  
A mass of crevices and subtraction,  
until her mere face terrifies.  
Unsightly thing, unapproachable  
and dry as dead grass, a mound of leaves.  
The hint of her make me shudder.

If anyone ever cared for her, surely  
it was the working of a spell  
something boiled in a cauldron  
to wind tight around the heart  
like vines spreading from chalked lines  
and a nasty clutch of potions beneath the bed.

Now I stew in her foul concoctions and curses,  
stung by the pungent smell of herbs and ointments.  
Disturbed, her jittery body shakes and stalls,  
a festival of strange unsteady motions.  
Still, her powers confound and surround me.

#### About the Author:

E.F. Schraeder is the author of *Liar: Memoir of a Haunting* (Omnium Gatherum, 2021), the story collection *Ghastly Tales of Gaiety and Greed* (Omnium Gatherum, 2020), and two poetry chapbooks. Awarded first place in Crystal Lake Publishing's 2021 Poetry Contest and a semi-finalist in Headmistress Press' 2019 Charlotte Mew Contest, Schraeder's work has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies.





### Ghoul Crush | *Matt Martinek*

Treasure chests are opened slow,  
With nerves and bated breath.  
Disappointment, never so,  
Be the contents ripe and wet.

Creaking lid, the stink perfumes,  
Knocks me to my knees.  
I take a peek, my heart amused,  
Such darkness rarely seen.

Jaws agape, a ghastly scream,  
Echoes of long ago.  
It clearly seems she speaks to me,  
As my body sways to and fro.

Much remains, but all turned to soap!  
With mold upon her face!  
Pieces of flesh do adorn her coat,  
With beauteous human stain!

Just as it was when she passed away,  
Her hair remains spun from pure gold.  
Oh, such things do tempt me to play,  
'fore her bits will end up quite sold!

#### About the Author:

Matt Martinek is a singer/songwriter and author from Johnstown, PA, whose passion is the creative process itself. His writing credits include poetry for *Falling Star Magazine*, *Unhoused Voices* (anthology), and *Names In A Jar* (anthology) as well as short stories for *Sirens Call Publications*. Matt has also recently completed his first horror novellette, *El Prolifico*, as well as the dramatic novella *Fifty Shades Of F\*\*ked*.

Facebook: [Matt Martinek](#)



**Darkened Forest | Mike Turner**

**Spectres Amongst Us | Mike Turner**

Ghosts of past unpunished crimes  
Stalk our waking nightmares  
Spectres here amongst us

Spirits of lost innocence  
And virtues long surrendered  
To transitory pleasures

Vacant eyes stare watching us  
As once again we turn  
To our lusts, greed and ambitions

Vices that dwell deep within us  
Devouring our souls  
Rotting from within

Then, for moment sated  
We're left a hollowed husk  
Which the apparitions rise to fill  
Anew

Shadows of darkened forest  
Shade my waking mind  
Deepening dank gloom  
of despair

Drawn from knife-edged ridge  
I descend into gulley below  
Stagnant droplets fall from dead branches  
as I brush past  
Sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss

Dying ferns rise like wraiths above me  
Blotting out wan sun  
As fog begins to hover  
Like a spectre, haunting

Until at last I reach a dead, mossy glade  
Cold like pinpricks 'neath layers of flesh  
Rash of goose pimples on bare skin  
Raise of fine hairs on back of neck  
As I realize that Hell is not a fiery lake  
Nor simmering brimstone  
But a moldy, mildewed bog  
Silent  
But for screams of terror  
As I realize  
I shall not awake

**About the Author:**

Mike Turner retired to the US Gulf Coast after a 27-year career as a Federal law enforcement executive, and took up songwriting and poetry. He has had over 150 poems published in numerous print and on-line journals; his debut collection, *Visions and Memories*, was published by Sweetycat Press in July 2021. When not writing, Mike explores southern waterways on his classic recreational trawler.

**FaceBook:** [Mike Turner Songwriter](#)

**Twitter:** [@SchoonerSkipper](#)

# DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS II



BEVERLEY LEE

LYNN LOVE

T. C. PARKER

CATHERINE McCARTHY

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

### An Old-Fashioned Halloween | DJ Tyrer

Half-forgotten:  
Days of apple-bobbing  
Spouse-revealing rituals  
And, believing Jack-o'-lanterns  
Were for more than cheap decoration.  
Simple sheet ghosts  
Papier-mâché masks:  
No plastic or other tat;  
Possibility that the dead  
Were somewhere close by.  
An old fashioned Halloween...

### Love on Halloween | DJ Tyrer

Discover love on Halloween  
Perfect stranger – perfect match  
Eyes meet through holes in masks  
Spend the night together  
A treat without the trick  
(Ignore faint scent of embalming fluid)  
Say “goodbye” before sun can rise  
Vow to meet again next year  
When the veil between life and death  
Draws back once again.

### Halloween | DJ Tyrer

I'll tell you a story on Halloween night  
As the trick-or-treaters from door to door head  
I promise that I will give you a fright  
If you promise me you aren't one of the dead  
For this is the night when the veil grows thin  
That separates those passed over from those left  
behind  
And the dead return to visit their kin  
Judging the living just as they find

They say graves open on Halloween  
As children gleefully go about their task  
And that not every horror that is seen  
Is a reveller wearing a mask  
And things exit certain forbidden places  
To walk the streets wearing stolen faces

### About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of *The Horrorzine*, and *Tigershark*, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

Facebook: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)





## The Other | *Alyson Faye*

Turreted and trellised  
the manor house rears  
riding the blood moon's tail,  
windows blinded,  
it still watches;  
inside *she* waits -

at the turn of the key,  
the lifting of the latch  
her milky eyes open,  
the husk of her hears—  
children's feet skittering.

Her blackened nails  
'scritch-scratch',  
'scratch-scratch',  
in dust, on wood -  
the window panes bear  
her breath, the mirrors  
show her shadow.

At night the children cry,  
'Leave the light on.'  
They call her 'witch',  
she tastes the name  
upon shrivelled lips  
and owns the lie,  
seizing its power.

At night she drifts -  
stroking the brood's soft flesh  
loneliness consuming her  
she remembers—  
'scritch-scratch'  
'scratch-scratch'  
on skin, in blood.

One day soon  
they will call her  
'Mother'.

### About the Author:

Alyson Faye lives in the UK with her family and four rescue animals, and is often on the moor with her Borador, Roxy. She also swims, sings, tutors, edits for an indie press and watches a lot of films - horror to those from the Golden Age of Hollywood. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant.

Twitter: [@AlysonFaye2](https://twitter.com/AlysonFaye2)



**Mumbling at the Devil | Christopher Hivner**

In front of the Devil  
in line at the super market,  
I hear him  
losing patience,  
muttering to himself  
about slow cashiers  
and baggers  
that don't watch  
what they're doing.  
When the old lady  
buying \$10 worth  
of gum and magazines  
starts to write a check  
I feel heat  
on the back of my neck.  
I turn enough  
to see his red face,  
so hot that  
steam rises from his skin.  
His fingers drum  
on the top of his cans  
of organic soup.  
He curses a few angels,  
says out loud  
"I don't have time for this."  
I offer to let him  
go before me.  
He sneers  
"Ya think I'll go easy on you  
because you did me a favor?"  
I think about it  
then reply "Yes."  
"Doesn't work that way sport,"  
he said back with a cackle.  
"Oh," I said,  
"well then, fuck you."  
While he fumed,  
filling the store with acrid smoke,  
I opened my wallet  
and said out loud  
"You know, I think I have some coupons."

**If I | Christopher Hivner**

If I fall asleep,  
don't let the night devour me.  
If I cry for my mother,  
protect my face so God will recognize me.  
If I bleed,  
bleed with me.  
If I lose consciousness,  
save my body from the feeders.  
If you love me,  
don't let me go easily.  
If I wake the next morning,  
bathe me in perfume and oils  
to prepare for the  
coming dusk.

**Secret Things | Christopher Hivner**

My master  
claims my soul  
but I know  
things about him,  
secret things,  
so even when he  
paints stripes on my back  
with the whip  
I smile  
because I know  
what he's afraid of  
and he can't beat  
the knowledge out of me,  
he can't cast a spell  
to pluck the facts  
from my brain.  
He feels me  
slipping away  
with every crack  
of the leather.  
I fall to the ground,  
delirious from blood loss  
but I still know  
that my master quakes  
at the thought  
of the secret things  
I know  
and who I  
may have told.

There weren't just flames  
in the morning sky,  
there were horses,  
mustangs black as death  
galloping through the clouds  
chased by the fire  
baring their teeth  
to the rising sun.

There weren't just flames  
consuming the ground,  
wolves emerged  
from underground caves,  
fur singed and wiry,  
lunging at one another  
while chasing down  
the dawn.

The flames leapt and snapped  
at our heels  
as we ran toward the night  
that never came,  
the sun's wrath  
made us all bleed ash  
and left behind a world  
drowning in red.

**Cynthia | *Christopher Hivner***

Cynthia lies,  
Cynthia kills,  
Cynthia, my love,  
my celebrated muse  
of fire and ash  
makes her bed  
with the worms  
and they call her  
mistress.  
If you speak her name  
the earth shudders.  
If she answers  
nothing can save you.  
Cynthia, my love,  
the black-hearted goddess  
of dirt and bone.  
How I adore  
your slanted smile  
and anthracite eyes  
professing their love  
as I sink  
into a well  
of my own blood,  
bubbles from my breath  
my final affection  
for the witch  
of realms,  
Cynthia, my love.

**About the Author:**

Christopher Hivner is an introvert who has pretty much lived like he was in quarantine all his life. He has recently been published in The Horror Zine and Blood Moon Rising.

**Facebook:** [Christopher Hivner - Author](#)

**Twitter:** [@Your\\_screams](#)



## **The Ghost of You | *Alexis Child***

Both the weeping angels  
And the weeping ghosts  
Sang me a lullaby of sorrow  
With rattling chains and wails  
I found no comfort in their haunting  
When faced with no tomorrows  
Swathed in darkness and pain

Where phantoms glide in the abyss  
Something much more sinister crept  
With every morbid scream of fear  
Where Beelzebub gloats on all misfortune  
In the black light that keeps you  
Awake at night

Between worlds, this trembling spirit  
Was at war  
Storm clouds announced an arrival  
The path of my soul's demise  
Haunted by someone still alive

Forgive or perish  
Awakening to terror  
In this horrifying house with no door  
The house that stood empty  
The house that depicted the end

And the ghosts are only as dead  
As the ghosts within your head  
Depart Seraphim and all of Satan's men  
I should have loved a dead man instead

## **Diary of Death | *Alexis Child***

In dimly lit fog-blanketed streets  
A devil in disguise by shadow creeps  
One fearful night  
Surrounded by the social blight  
The murderous monster strikes  
Wielding surgical knives

Under the full moon's frosty glow  
His brutal blood lust grows  
Another victim's butchered like swine  
Not just any old East End crime  
One more lady of the night disappears  
London is gripped with frenzied fear

Detectives puzzle over half-clues  
Not to blame are the Jews  
Unanswered questions  
No murder weapons  
Such outrageous speculations  
A butcher from another nation  
Taunting letters mock police

The murderous rampage ceased  
No sinister confession uttered  
Murderer's body undiscovered  
Forever justice is starved  
Chilling reminders carved  
In White chapel's heart of infamy  
A diary of death incomplete



## Blood at First Sight | *Alexis Child*

I am a shadow in the blackest night  
A whisper in the light  
The wind no longer walks  
In my hair  
A cold fire snaps at my skin  
In the approaching dawn  
Drained mercilessly  
From one dark night of passion

Yet if only suddenly she would live  
I would consume her again  
Like a cheap wine  
Swooning under her powers  
I hunger, but never again wish to drink  
This romantic desire lingers

Let me walk you through the dangers  
Of kissing the necks of strangers  
Hear the darkness all around  
How to cry without a sound  
A very sad affair  
The moon remembers the ecstasy  
Of her sweet body  
I am weeping with tears of blood  
Even as the darkness comes  
I cannot drown this pulsing dream  
Where each day the sun will burn  
A little bit brighter

"Make me into you"  
I can sometimes hear her plead  
As passion holds sway  
Perhaps I've even begun to hallucinate  
And feel a pain that isn't even mine

Tales foretell her demonic apparition  
Is somewhere yet unknown  
Perhaps in graveyards at midnight she roams  
Where men become lost and disappear

Take heed fearless creatures of the night  
While the moon is still grey  
There will be more victims  
When the dusk begins to decay

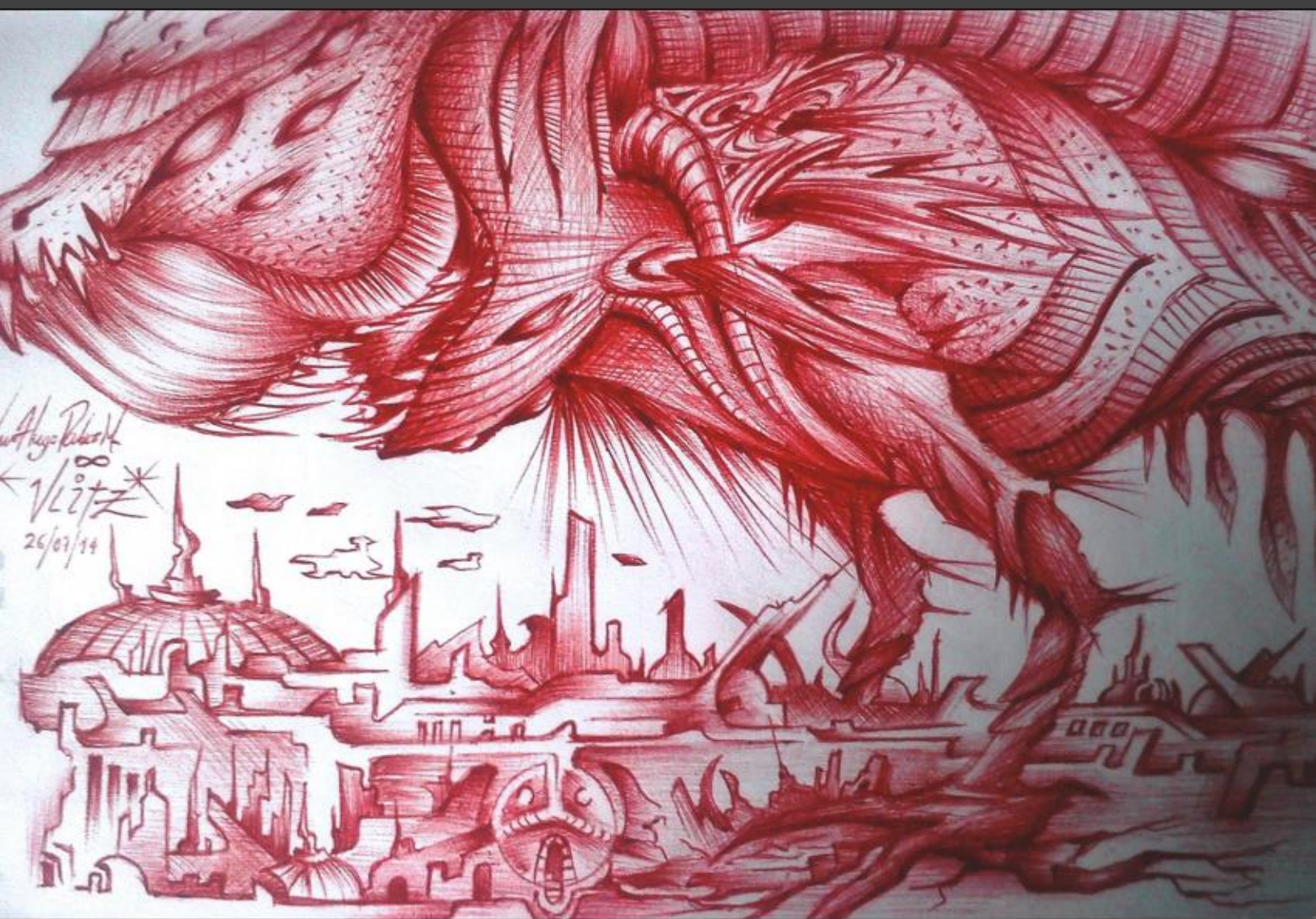
We must find her soon, I fear  
Before it really is too late  
Slow poison from her lips  
Will drip and burn  
Our deaths are all most certain

A painful memory will twist  
The curls of her mouth  
My name will be scrawled  
In evil's ink for centuries  
There is no more I can tell

### About the Author:

Alexis Child hails from Toronto; home to dreams and nightmares. She once lived with a Calico-cat child sleuthing all that went bump in the night and is haunted by the memory of her. Her fiction and poetry have been featured in numerous publications. Alexis' first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre—*DEVIL IN THE CLOCK*—is available on Amazon.

Website: [Alexis Child](#)



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I.

When the shadows hold sway on the darkest of nights,  
And frolicking goes my impish kindred,  
As you creep from your bed and pious sir's sights,  
Come to the heart of the woodland dread.  
I am waiting for you.

I am waiting for you where the night things sing,  
I am waiting for you beneath the birch and oak,  
I am waiting for you inside a toadstool ring,  
I am waiting for you, for you to invoke.  
I am waiting for you.

On those darkest nights, when phantoms reign,  
And the blood-born gather to drink and dance,  
As your goody principles are torn in twain,  
Allowing you to slip into my dreamtime trance.  
I am there with you.

I am there with you when you cast the sphere,  
I am there with you when you call the four winds,  
I am there with you, though I may not appear  
I am there with you when you conjured and sinned.  
I am there with you.

II.

And on every night long thereafter,  
Summon me and mine by our rightful charm,  
Become my bride and sweet spell-crafter,  
I promise you'll befall no harm.  
Have faith.

Have faith as you praise me by my name,  
Have faith as you brew my spells and potions,  
Have faith when you feel my caressing flame,  
Have faith as your deeds show your true devotions,  
Have faith.

I'll show you wonders you've never imagined,  
Tricks and magicks and rituals in your bed,  
Things beyond what humans have fashioned,  
Pleasures granted by the living dead.  
Have faith.

Have faith long after you've signed my grimoire,  
Have faith when the men come with their torches,  
Have faith when they chain you by Biblical law,  
Have faith even as their bigotry scorches.  
Have faith in me.

III.

The trial will be an impassioned deception,  
Sanctimony, hypocrisy, a fear mongering scheme,  
Dutiful duplicity from its very inception,  
It'll be a fragile man's egotistic dream.  
But do not fear.

Do not fear as your kin folk wilt,  
Do not fear when they inevitably turn,  
Do not fear as they decree your guilt,  
Do not fear when they sentence you to burn.  
Do not fear.

By wreath of kindle you'll be sentenced to die,  
Upon this pyre, I beseech to remain true,  
Give them no satisfaction with despondent eye,  
Only by this fidelity will I finally appear to you.  
And I will appear.

I will appear through the blistering haze,  
I will appear, emerged from the abyss,  
I will appear and liberate you from their blaze,  
I will appear and fulfill my promise.  
I. Will. Appear.

### About the Author:

Joshua Skye is the award-winning, best-selling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in Sirens Call Publication's *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed* and *Monster Brawl*. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

Twitter: [@JoshuaSkye1](https://twitter.com/JoshuaSkye1)

**Gravetrotters | *Lori R. Lopez***

Neath the vivid mantle of Autumnal hues  
Lie withered husks bound for Winter's touch.  
A respite from Life's grim debts and dues;  
In these chilling moments, a temporal crutch.

Past September's parch, by October's Moon,  
Ere November's march of wilted bod,  
As Flies thickly swarm through skies attune,  
Nether masses stir, unearthing sod...

Corpse or spook they danse aligned in reason,  
Roaming as hordes of phantoms and rotters —  
Decomposure-clad, for this is their season,  
Arisen to lurch born of tatters and totters.

Feral and grimy with stalking in mind,  
Unsleepy and hollow, returned to the streets.  
Grody are they who traipse ill-defined,  
Released of cold grips to stump for treats.

Called by the wolves and droning throngs.  
Led by a choir of grumbles and hums,  
Random or prone toward a-righting wrongs —  
They shamble like blistering bums . . .

As the Living rejoice in a Candy Parade  
And pretend they are not afraid of ghosts,  
Each could be called for a Death Promenade.  
We are none immune to the Reaper's ripostes.

For the Tomb conceals nary soul in its vault  
Once the knells of Fate toll our names.  
The gruesome resurrected no shroud will halt.  
What the Darkness lures, the Light reclaims.

Fall, the most decadent slice of a pie;  
The dreariest, starkest, yet brightest flower;  
Demanding her riches of Gold and Cat's-Eye,  
While awaiting the chime to devour!

Step merry whichever side you abide  
At the Witching Hour of restless plotters.  
When the curtain yields, no place to hide  
From unbridled waves of gravetrotters.



**the silence after the scream | *Lori R. Lopez***

All I could hear was that scream.  
Lasting forever. This is no exaggeration.  
I still hear it, like the worst case of  
ringing in the ears on record.  
My head is splitting. I can't make it  
halt—the axe-cleaving racket of a thousand  
Torture Chambers. A lifetime of  
sixteen-siren blazes jangling to High Heaven,  
wringing every drop of empathy out!  
Compassionless, I am squeezed dry to the bone  
by a banshee chorus. A Hallelujah Choir of angels  
whose wings have been plucked.  
The scream endures, and with it my conviction  
there is something entirely eldritch at hand,  
a malevolence or deed of the sinister,  
a presence of the supernatural unearthly type —  
some treachery far beyond the range or realm of  
comprehension. There are limits. Even in this  
sanctum. Man or beast, human whine or animal wail,  
it defies a reasonable conclusion. In fact, the tongue  
would tie knots attempting to explain what cannot  
be fathomed. Nor could I hope to compete with  
an unbearable volume. These words are all I might  
offer, smeared in scarlet letters on a white canvas,  
the page of a wall, for lack of paint or pen. Back then  
I had no distance from the suffering tone . . .  
from the agonizing peal slicing through me like  
infectious disease, a contagion of terror; transmitting  
indescribable wretchedness; leaving no sane  
or safe ground to hunker and hide until its end.  
I became part of the madness, sharing a common  
experience, unwilling not to listen. Gravely engaged;  
somerberly attracted by frequency, intensity, proximity.  
My life taken over, and to this day, a victim as much as  
a witness . . . of what? Fate? Fury? A deafening  
blinding force that claimed me, controls me,  
crushes me in its blasting wrenching withering grasp.

Will it ever—just—stop???

There, you've begun to hear it too. You have!  
And I—it can't be true—at last I detect  
something else! Oh, such exquisite joy! Thank you,  
for accepting my burden . . . relieving, releasing me . . .  
But no, no, it's impossible, it can't be!

The silence after the scream —  
is so much worse.

Axe-murderous rain slashed an indigo lane,  
a rare and brutal tempest, drowning the city with  
chilling ferocity. Carving chaos, cleaving roofs  
and canopies, hacking the frail domes of  
Impressionist Umbrellas to figurative shreds.  
Raging and vicious, a frenzy, a tantrum that none  
could anticipate or guard against, let alone  
extinguish. There was no shelter far enough  
from its spite, as if driven by a relentless mood.  
Then the atmosphere shifted; the black drops  
of bile halted and lamps became visible in  
an aftermath of suspended belief.

Shadows lean and long tilted upstreet, cast  
by a spindly race of giants. Drawn by thick  
strokes of ink and madness on pale walls.  
Footsteps, a steady ulterior beat, advanced  
and receded at equal measure. Out of the wild  
forsaken heart of solitude emerged a figure  
hunched to ward off skulking creatures that  
she might meet. Harboring a state of wariness  
toward the night's dour unsightly denizens, her  
posture prone to accumulated acts of defiance  
gathered inside, she scurried a path of washed  
stone and brick to a faded Cinema . . .

And purchased a ticket, Second Row Center,  
the next Matinee. "It's already started." A tinny  
voice from the Box Office, like one of those  
crank Fortuneteller Machines activated by  
a coin. Entering the dark interior, a scattered  
audience occupying back rows, she descended  
to the pit as if duty-bound. A monster upon  
the screen paid little heed while the hooded  
straggler sidled to her seat, a silhouette crossing  
in a crouch. Then the Fourth Window cracked.  
*"You were late."* A deep timbre stabbed; her  
chest constricted as she slumped. *"Sorry."*

Golden orbs swiveled, aimed a lupine glare.  
*"I do this for you."* Embarrassed, Red slouched  
further down, endeavoring to hide in her seat.  
*"I know."* A beast resumed the role, in the act  
of terrifying a hiker. The mark fought, surprising  
the Werewolf, thrusting a blade. The broad knife  
wielded by Hunters. A Lycan bled, reproachful.  
*"You distracted me."* The menace revived  
and claws ripped, a furious swat, messier than  
necessary. *"You're the only one I can talk to!"*  
Mopping her face, Red crumpled a tissue.  
*"I really wish you wouldn't,"* she mourned.

*"But it's Howloween!"* roared a Wolfwoman.  
*"The day you visit your dear old Granny."*

### **Cliffhanger | Lori R. Lopez**

The verbal warning resounded. My glass jittered with an unsteady amber lake, panic swirling in its murky brew. Distracted, I viewed a slow jarring dance toward the edge.

There are reasons you might convince yourself of lies, yet I could think of no excuse to believe these claims. Without question I did, accepting, cringing at the words.

The hoarse tone. "He occupies dim regions, inspecting, watching from nightmares. You've stirred interest . . . been noticed and tagged. *He's coming.*" A sharp hiss.

I could have reached for the glass, interrupted its trek. Whispers continued. "There's a dark vibe. An aura. Half-sensed. Opaque. You've got it. A Glim-Life."

"What does that mean?" I rasped. My friend replied, "The path your shadow takes when you aren't looking. Behind your back! Beyond the pale, the circle of light."

Appalled, I experienced a chill like Déjà Vu. Qualms, a strong quiver rocked my shoulders. The door jangled. A Death Knell. Bleak steps. My companion gasped.

Sliding from her seat, she fled the Diner—an act of desperation. Escape. No goodbye. Peripherally I glimpsed a body stagger by the window, gone.

As if swept in a Tempest, a great roiling wind that pulled her, plucked her forth to hurtle away. Severing our bond, a brief filament of affinity.

The presence paused. Then settled across from me. Embral as a flame. Subdued, indistinct. Burning out. A figure on the verge. Straining orbs and neck to see . . .

I couldn't turn my face. Joined without consent. Rigidly transfixed. At its tipping point, the cliffhanger spilled. Glass shattered in cacophonous profusion.

Attention locked, indirect, unfocused. An impression of liquid fire. The gaze flickered, seared, penetrated my skull—a blinding, deafening, mind-rending conclusion.

"You do not belong here!" The bellow flared, scorched, lashed. Retribution throttled my screams. An accusation

lingered, an echo I couldn't unhear. A thousand slaps!

A ringing sting of rebuke far mightier than the grim  
approaching tremor that rippled and quaked my  
too-sweet beverage, now puddled over dingy tile.

"Return to your side!" roared the Shade-Catcher.  
Causing me to cower, afraid of that cold alabaster  
visage, worm-colored lips, hairless dome . . .

Claws tore trenches in Formica. Electric flashes  
of white-hot light strobed at the fringes of my vision.  
I dissipated, condemned back to a flat sullen plane.

A meager semblance of being—a mere imitation  
of living—a two-dimensional existence trailing,  
copying. Never again to taste the sublime.

A tall drink of Iced Tea with Lemon.

#### **Bite-Sized | *Lori R. Lopez***

It's all in how you look at it  
Whether a treat is just the right size  
To fit in your mouth and chew  
Or, on the contrary, you  
Are the treat and might require  
Multiple bites—yet a morsel that  
Would taste so good to a ghoul like me  
When I open my door and reach for  
You like this. Trick or treat!  
Ah yes indeed. Bite-sized . . .

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

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in The Sirens Call Publications eZine, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Space & Time Magazine, Oddball Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Illumen, Altered Reality Magazine, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds And Ends*, *Leery Lane*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

**Facebook:** [Lori R. Lopez](#)

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## *A Humble Horror Author's Ascent into Cinema*

### Why Monsters, Mike?

Is it any wonder that one of the first words we hear in our baby crib is “Boo!”? Or that our first bedtime story features a man-eating wolf, a frightening spider, or a child-abducting witch getting tossed into an oven?

There’s something about being scared that we all love and enjoy, and *monsters*, with all their fangs and fierceness, have always appeased our deep desire to be thrilled.

### My Rigor Mortis Roots

“Can I look at the monster book?” was my yearning every Saturday when visiting grandma’s house as a little boy.

For hours I’d lay in her den with Denis Gifford’s *A Pictorial History of Horror Movies* (borrowed from my uncle Bob, a renowned artist and my macabre mentor), slowly flipping through each intensified page and being utterly mesmerized by *Frankenstein*, *King Kong*, *Dracula* and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*. A four-year-old not yet knowing how to read, I conjured up my own terrifying tales off the graphic pics of blood and brains, and just as the creature burst out of John Hurt’s chest in *Alien*, my love for horror and storytelling was hatched!

Willo Davis Roberts, H.P. Lovecraft, George Romero and Richard Matheson were just a few of my earliest fear smith influences, along with Kubrick’s *The Shining*, Spielberg’s *Jaws* and Carpenter’s *Halloween*. However, *Rod Serling* will always be a main ‘go-to’ source for me as an author and screenwriter, not only for his keen, well-structured sense of storytelling, but for rich meaning and substance evoked in all his work.



### Monsterring In on Movies

Writing my first screenplay was a crash course, and I do mean CRASH, with lots and lots of mistakes, rewrites, hair pulls, head bangs and more rewrites. But after five months I finished the 12-page script, a short film based off one of my published stories, and I was soon standing on a film set for the first time, surrounded by fifty young professional film students working on something *I* wrote. Surreal! After filming, I strategically utilized social media to showcase behind-the-scenes pics, photo stills and artwork to promote my upcoming movie, shrewdly attracting indie filmmakers to more of my published work. Thus, the next of my stories to be shot as a short film, which I wrote and co-produced, took me to Houston, TX for its premier at a weekend film festival. I still remember that chest-pounding, palm-sweating moment when the theater curtains drew back and I saw what I wrote and created flashing on the big screen for the first time!

“Like early Stephen King...” was what Bret Easton Ellis (author of *American Psycho* and *Less Than Zero*) had to contribute when reading *The Shell* and *Frames*.

### A Stab at Short Stories

While taking a narrative writing class some years back, I discovered the fine art of the *short story*, but, more importantly, a possible side door to my life’s dream of publishing a novel (and perhaps sparing me from decades of needless toil). After six months of developing my newfound literary craft, I managed to publish a few short tales in small publications which could serve as samples and segues for ‘potential’ novels, while at the same time gaining some exposure and confidence. Aaand the much needed constructive (and destructive) criticisms from peers.

My chosen genre: horror!

My fiction work can be found in numerous anthologies, including *All Dark Places 2* (Dragon Soul Press), *Dark and Evil* (ACA Books), *Horror U.S.A.: California* (Soteira Press), *Twisted Yarns* (Sirens Call Publications), *Tales of the Undead* (Horried Press), *Timeless Worlds* (Schlock!) and *Submitted For Your Approval* by **Rod Serling Books** (edited and published by **Anne Serling** and staff). I have also been published in multiple magazines including *The Literary Hatchet*, *Bete Noire*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *The Sirens Call*, *Dark Gothic Resurrected* and ***Famous Monsters of Filmland***, the biggest and oldest horror movie magazine in the world.

#### About the Filmmaker:

Mike Lera is a natural *storyteller*, but not a natural *writer*. For him, writing will always take practice and work – daily! He could have chosen other vessels with which to tell his stories – painting, music, sculpting, for instance – but instead, he chose writing. Additionally, he’s picked the horror genre as his vehicle, and is extremely grateful for both these fantastic arts.

Like other storytellers who use their craft as a means to teach, provoke, empathize, vent or warn, he, too, wishes to say something at the core of each scary tale.

Because sometimes, it takes a monster to keep us sane.

For photos, videos, info and updates on *Frames*, *Imaginist*, and *The Shell*, please visit (and like) them on Facebook @ImaginistMovie, @TheShellMovie and @FramesMovie. And while you’re on Facebook, slither on by Mike’s horror fan page *Mike Lera’s Corridor of Horror* (Facebook@MikeLeraWriter), a fun stop and info hub that has recently reached over 1,000 members! Also check out Mike Lera’s Minute Macabre on his YouTube channel (YouTube.com/MichaelALizarraga), one-minute video samples of his published stories in really cool narrated storyboard form! Mike’s YouTube channel also includes short video interviews he’s done with celebrities and horror icons at various shows and conventions.

Be sure to follow Mike Lera on social media, YouTube and his blog page, and check out his latest published works on Amazon.

**Website:** [www.MikeLera.com](http://www.MikeLera.com)

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**YouTube:** [@MichaelALizarraga](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMichaelALizarraga)

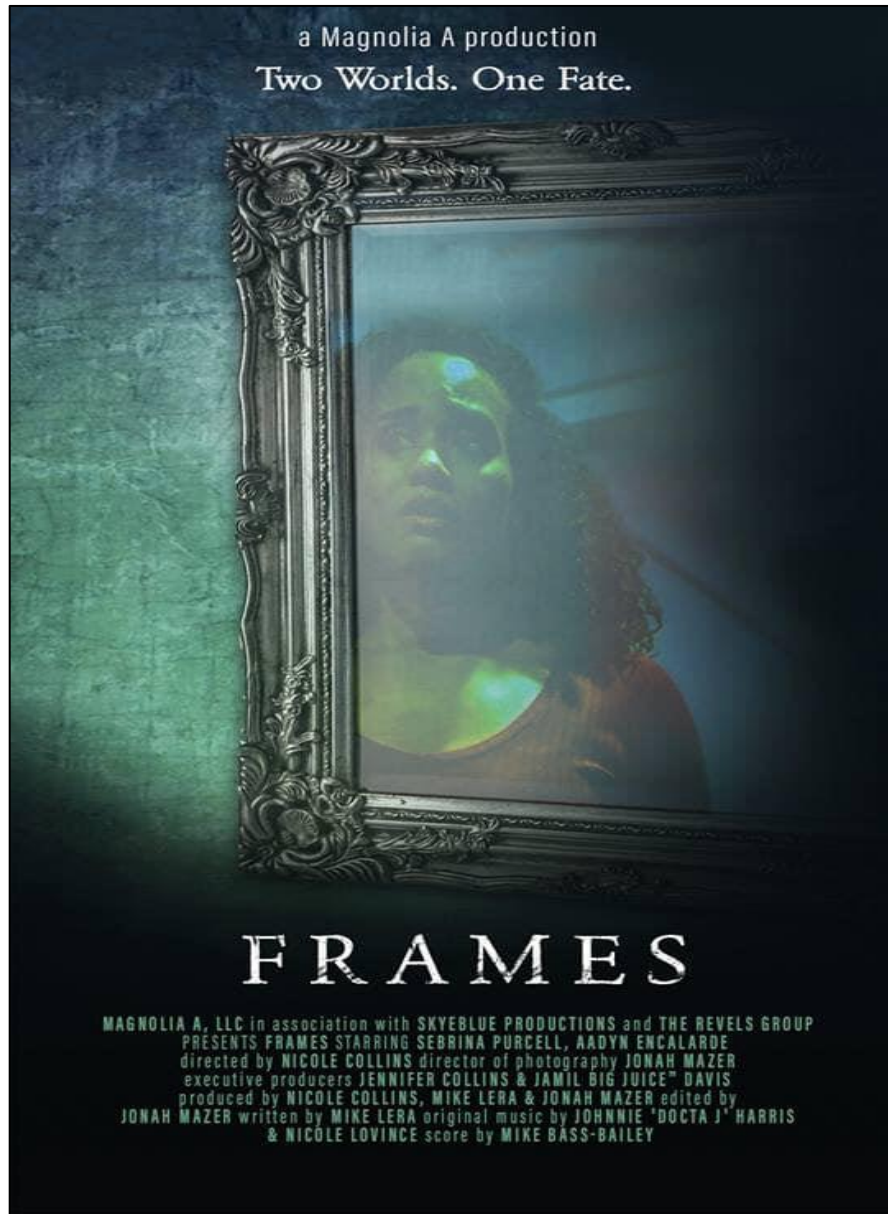
**Blog Page:** [LizarragasBogBlog.Blogspot.com](http://LizarragasBogBlog.blogspot.com)

**IMDb:** [Mike Lera](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1089915/)

**Proud Member of** [Horror Writer’s Association](http://www.horrorwritersassociation.com) **since 2014.**



Two Worlds, One Fate  
*Frames*



30-year-old Bobbi Evans, a talented hard-working actress striving to make her mark, discovers a most unusual phenomenon one night when glaring into an *infinity mirror* – an endless hallway of frames created by opposing mirrors – leading someone (or something) straight to her. A mysterious ‘figure’ with no words, no sounds, no movement and no warning to this woman with a buried past.



An homage to such classics as *The Twilight Zone* and *Tales From the Darkside*, *Frames* is a dark, distorted version of *It's A Wonderful Life* and explores the strange and surreal concept of *infinity mirrors* and *alternate realities* - paranormal pathways that bridge parallel universes and connect us with 'What If' worlds, forged from a divergence based on the most critical, most crucial point in an individual's life – and those from these realities who are mysteriously able to cross over by way of infinity mirrors. Some entering our world to comfort and encourage...*others here to harm*.



*Frames* is my first completed short film that I wrote (and co-produced) and was released in multiple film fests in 2019, directed/co-produced by Nicole Collins and starring Sebrina Purcell (9-1-1, *Lone Star*) and Aadyn Encalarde (*Girls Trip*, *Claws*). *Frames* is presently featured on *The ON! Channel* ([TheOnChannel.com](http://TheOnChannel.com)), a streaming platform which celebrates diversity and inclusivity and home to some of the best independent series, films and original content. Inspired by the *Twilight Zone* episode 'Mirror Image', *Frames* is based on my short story (published as Michael Lizarraga), appearing in numerous publications including *Submitted For Your Approval*, an anthology published by Rod Serling Books in which my work was one of 10 others selected out of 200 submissions by Anne Serling (daughter of Rod Serling, creator of *The Twilight Zone*) and her staff.



Theme: Like the Robert Frost poem, *Frames* conceptualizes the crossroads in each of our lives, the idea that once a decision is made – whether good or bad – there is no going back; no second chance; no *alternate reality*. In the case of *Frames*, however, where such an opportunity does exist through a strange phenomenon and our protagonist, Bobbi, finds an alternative to a choice made long ago, we get a horrific example of the consequences one must face when tampering with fate and destiny.

View the [trailer for 'FRAMES'](#) on YouTube.



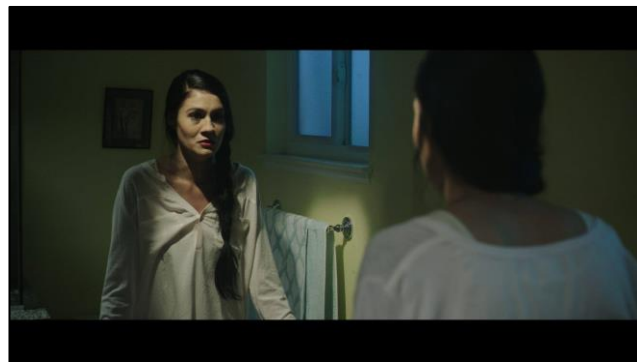


It Expels More Than Just 'Ocean Sounds'  
*The Shell*



“Hold a seashell to your ear, listen to its ocean sounds” is a myth we’ve all believed in as kids, along with an old wives’ tale of a captured scream heard within a seashell from someone who had drowned near one in the ocean - forever echoing.

But suppose these were *not* mere urban legends? Suppose someone were to find a seashell once nestled at the ocean floor – *next to the bodies of two dead people?*



Currently in post-production with an anticipated Fall release, my short horror film *The Shell* is the story of Eric Stanson (Brandin Stennis), a troubled seven-year-old living with his father Max (Juhahn Jones) and stepmother Gloria (Vanessa Giselle). For comfort, Eric turns to his only friend, a *seashell*, which he found one day on a beach shore. For most of us, a seashell is nothing more than a home for hermit crabs or a desktop decoration. For Eric, this crustacean is special. A particular shell that expels the *actual* sounds of the ocean depths, the soothing aura of warm cascades, of cool toe-tingling suds, helping its young listener escape his problems; escape his reality. But there are *other* sounds Eric hears, and unfortunately for all those who are bad to him, it will *not* be the soothing sounds of ocean suds they will get from

this normally peaceful shell, nor the tranquility of cascading currents. Rather, the worst nightmares of the ocean's deep, expelled through the mouth of a haunted diabolic seashell. Underwater terror now at bed side!

Directed by Gina Yull and written by Mike Lera, *The Shell* is *What Lies Beneath* meets *The Ring* (and inspired by the *Twilight Zone* episode 'Living Doll'). A fresh blend of paranormal and aquatic terror films and an alternate version of the classic Mexican fable *La Llorona* in a way it's never been told before (think of it as *The Children of La Llorona*), touching on a number of topics, including child abuse and child neglect.



Aside from becoming a short film, *The Shell* was also published as an award-winning short story, *The Seashell*, in an anthology titled 'Timeless Worlds' (available on Amazon). It was also published in magazines *Blood Moon Rising* (top Halloween story) and *Dark Gothic Resurrected*.

Theme: As a seashell and the ocean have both smooth and rough sides, *The Shell* is an allegory to the duality of God and nature; able to provide peace and comfort for the oppressed, and yet unleashing wrath and vengeance when needed. A grim morality tale that reminds us that no matter how hard we try to keep a past misdeed buried - or in the case of the two children, 'drowned' - justice will always resurface.



View the [trailer for 'The Shell'](#) on YouTube.





Mimes, like their clown brethren, terrify us. From their frightening frowns to their colorless costumes, these soundless goons have always struck cords of eeriness within us, and given the magnitude of predators masquerading in both mask and makeup, they're often the last form of entertainment anyone would want to be left alone with.

Which is why Nelson Rucker, a.k.a. 'Dude the Mime', stands as the muted monster of my latest horror movie, *Imaginist*.

Based on my published story, *Imaginist* is a short film that I wrote in which I am also serving as Executive Producer. An 'I know What You Did Last Summer' thrill ride into an 'It Follows' paranormal bliss, *Imaginist* is the tragic tale of a homeless street performer who is often the subject of ridicule and scorn by a cold-hearted community who fail to rescue the older gentleman one day from a fatal heart attack. Yet aside from the horror elements of *Imaginist*, the story also focuses on the rise of homelessness in today's society and its effect on both the transient and civilian, and how those living on the streets are often prey... *and predators*. It is an homage to such cult classics as *Dark Night of the Scarecrow* and touches on the need for kindness in a world of cynicism, selfishness and hate.



Filming for *Imaginist* took place in late 2019 and was slated for a 2020 release, but because of the *real* horrors of Covid-19, post production was unfortunately delayed. However, after a year of perseverance and teamwork, I'm happy to say that my phenomenal film crew and I have brought *Imaginist* to its final stages for a fall 2021 release!

*Imaginist* stars Lorin Eric Salm as Dude the Mime, a renowned mime and movement instructor for major Hollywood film and television productions, including *Resistance* with Jesse Eisenberg, *Surrogates* with Bruce

Willis and FX's *Nip/Tuck*. Trained in Paris, France by the master of mime Marcel Marceau, Lorin brings over thirty years of training and experience to both acting and the art of mime. *Imaginist* also features John Charles Meyer (*Mom*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *Dave Made A Maze*) and Sharar Ali-Speakes (*Dave*, *Americanized*). It is directed by Bernadette



Speakes, an award-winning actress for both stage and screen, and produced by Khadijah Louis Fanaka, granddaughter of the late great filmmaker Jamaa Fanaka. An amazing original score for the film was put together by music artist Siobhan Cassidy Robinson and is accompanied by an original song, *Monsters In The Dark*, performed/produced by Shelese Franklin and arranged/produced by Brian Bailey.



**The Plot:** Nelson ‘Dude’ Rucker is a homeless street mime aiming to amuse others by way of wholesomeness, a muffled Mr. Rogers who silently dances and prances his way into his audience’s hearts with one goal *in mime*: to extol a genuine love for people rarely found in today’s world. Nelson’s life, however, tragically ends one day during one of his sidewalk juggling shticks, the aging mime having a heart attack which bystanders assume is ‘part of the act’, doing nothing to help him. And yet for those who had walked away – including college student Shelley McCray and snobby onlooker Rick Atkins – an instinctive sense of angst and guilt looms within their conscience for the dirty homeless performer who *might NOT have been pretending*.

Now, Dude’s frowns are no longer painted, his actions no longer acts. Because tonight, those cynical, uncaring bystanders who watched him die will *become* the mime’s final show – a bizarre evening of hellish terror that will *not* be pretend.

**The Theme:** *Imaginist* deals with the sin of omission - how the world is not a dangerous place because of bad people who do evil, but because of ‘good people’ who see evil and do nothing.

Of special note, a feature script version of *Imaginist* has been written for optioning.



View a 1-minute storyboarded concept video of [‘Imaginist’](#) on [Mike’s YouTube Channel](#).





# Cult of the Box



**WARNING:**  
**GEARED FOR THE EXTREMELY WEIRD!**  
*That's you!*

Follow @CultoftheBox on Instagram to Join!

Keep the lantern burning bright,  
carved from turnip or carved from pumpkin.  
Keep the flames lit, my child,  
lest he haunt your house this night.

Who?

Stingy Jack.

Sit and listen hard, child.

Centuries ago, in a wee village on the Emerald Isle, lived a deceitful drunkard named Jack. A thief, a liar, a trickster, he was. So much so that the townspeople rumored his devious ways could rival the Devil himself.

Well, the Devil cannot tolerate such tales spun about him. So, he set forth from Hell to find this Jack fellow and take his soul.

One night as he did many nights, drunk Jack wandered the countryside under the drizzling rain. But this night, he happened upon a body lying across the cobblestone path.

"Janey Mack!" he exclaimed and leaned closer.

The body then grinned ghoulishly at him. Its eyes glowed red like dreadful hellfire. He rose from the cobblestone and rumbled a demon laugh from that horrid grin. Jack knew the old Prince of Darkness stood in his path.

"I've come for your despicable soul, Jack," Satan proclaimed.

Jack, as any mortal man, was not ready to leave his boozy world of trickery to burn in the Lake of Fire. "Fancy a gat at the pub?"

With no reason to deny the request, Satan took Jack to the nearest pub. He watched the drunkard gulp down ale after ale.

With a sloshy, satisfied belly, Jack sat back and patted his pockets. Which, of course, held no money to pay his tab.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mhaistir Satan, but I have no coin to pay the barkeep. Would you grant me a chance to do right before we go?"

The Devil's eyes glinted questionably at Jack in the firelight of the tavern's hearth. "And?"

"I'd like to pay for me last drinks. Turn yourself into a silver coin."

Satan obliged, and Jack picked up the shiny, new coin. But instead of paying his tab as promised, the double-crossing Stingy Jack put the coin in his pocket right next to a silver cross.

Sly Jack trapped the Ruler of Hell in his pocket.

Unable to transform back to his devilish shape and unable to escape, Satan had to bargain for his release.

"In exchange for your freedom, Devil, you must spare my soul for ten years," Jack declared.

Satan condescended to Stingy Jack's demand. Yet, child, Lucifer is the master of the shady deal and never forgets his bargains.

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Ten years after that pledge, Jack wobbled down that same cobblestone path, perhaps humming himself a tune. But Satan leaned against the trunk of an apple tree, waiting for his craven soul. Jack stopped, sighed, and beheld the scrumptious fruit.

"Mhaister Satan, would you fetch me one last apple before me journey's end?"

Satan agreed and slithered up the tree.

Stingy Jack chuckled, pulled out that silver cross, and set it against the tree trunk. Now trapped in an apple tree, the Old Serpent howled.

"Let me down, you wretch!"

Jack grinned up at him. "I'll let you down, Devil, but now you must never damn my soul to Hell."

The Old Serpent obliged.

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Alas, the boozing took its toll on the trickster known as Stingy Jack, and he breathed his last. His soul ascended to where the angels sing their praises. Yet, the Almighty passed his judgment.

"Jack the Smith! You have stolen, you have lied, you spent your life sinning against your fellow man and all that is righteous. You cannot enter Heaven's gates or spend eternity in Paradise."

Down through the darkness Jack tumbled. He stood amongst swirling flames, the putrid smell of brimstone, and screams of the damned. Beelzebub emerged from his realm of damnation, a towering horned and hooved beast.

"Jack, old man!" sneered the Devil. "I promised you that I would never damn your soul to Hell." He again grinned horribly at Jack.

The Lord of Flies and Prince of Darkness he may be, but Satan always keeps his word.

"Stingy Jack, banished from Heaven and shunned from Hell, you be cursed to walk the Earth for all eternity! Alone and in darkness your soul shall wander and stumble, as you did in your wasted living days. But never again shall you feed your fleshly hungers. Never again shall you sip your precious ale."

Stingy Jack, now a cursed spirit, turned away from Hades' gates. Before him blazed a lantern, carved from a turnip and lit with hellfire. Jack took the lantern and drifted back to Earth, with Satan's laughter ringing in his soul. He listlessly wandered his village with the lantern to light his dark way. But the townspeople saw that devilish lamp guiding the ghost of Stingy Jack through the fog and night. To scare him away from their homes, they carved their own lanterns and kept them lit throughout the eerie night.

Now, my child, on this most hallowed of eves, when the line between the living and the dead is the weakest, we light this grinning pumpkin. For lonely and doomed Jack of the Lantern still haunts this realm. His only companion, a hellish torch forever reminding him of a time he thought he beat the Devil.

#### About the Author:

Kameryn James grew up in Louisiana, where every place is haunted. She now writes short stories and novellas at her aged, patina desk at her home near Lowell, Massachusetts. She is a member of the New England Horror Writers. When not supervised by her overlord cat, Kameryn works a day job, rides her bike, drinks iced coffee, and enjoys thunderstorms.

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#### Draw Back the Veil | DJ Tyrer

She moves with feline grace through the party in a heavy wedding gown that should weigh her down. He desires her the moment he spies her, despite her face being hidden, her curves concealed.

"An ex-wife, eh?" he says, approaching her.

She nods, then walks away, leaving the party for the relative quiet of the old cemetery.

His luck is in, he thinks, as she reaches up to her veil with gloved hands, draws it back.

Just as the veil between the living and the dead is drawn back that one night a year.

He screams. Collapses.

Her skull grins.

#### About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of *The Horrorzine*, and *Tigershark*, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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Sarah scratched at the wall, digging a ragged nail into the soft, crumbling mortar between the white bricks. Focusing on a tiny patch of one brick, she could describe every imperfection in its surface: small flakes of white paint were peeling in one section, and over one side there were lines that had been dug in and painted over. It looked like an H, maybe followed by an E, maybe. Her eyes flicked back to the spot in front of her, so close it was almost blurry. That was better. Just the brick. No eternally bright room; no tapping of water in the toilet - a drip as regular as a heartbeat; no sharp springs poking through the worn canvas of the mattress; no locked, metal door. She inhaled such shallow breaths that she started to see stars, desperate not to taste the stale air.

Shivering with a violent jerk, her ankle sang out as the movement caused her to yank against the rough twine that fastened her to the metal bedframe. Jabbing her finger into the groove she had made, Sarah cursed softly as the nail caught and tore. She pulled back and sucked at her finger, tasting brick dust mingled with the iron tang of blood. She swiped a solitary tear that escaped.

What a stupid thing to cry about...

How long did she have? The first time he went - just after she had awoken here for the first time - it seemed like days had passed before he returned. Still full of energy and hope, she had almost got herself untied. Then he had come back, crashing in with his loud voice and his louder jumper. She'd trembled as he checked the ropes, squeezing her eyes closed and thinking about anything but the hand he ran up her thigh. He had stopped before he reached the hem of her nightie, muttering to himself. Something about *Not allowed*, she thought, but she couldn't quite make out the words. He had tugged the rope again and left the room as he'd entered; loudly and briskly.

"Father won't like it..." Sarah had heard as he locked the door.

That was three days ago. Or was it four? She tried to mark the wall every time it seemed a day had passed: there were five marks scratched into the wall just out of sight. But how could she know? Was she sleeping for hours at a time or only minutes? The man had brought her water and food several times - bread and butter - but she didn't always eat it. Sometimes he came back and removed her rejected food straight away, other times, he had not. Some plates of food had stayed nearby until the bread was dry and the butter congealed. He had also untied her twice to drag her to the toilet in the corner of the room, but he didn't seem too concerned with that. The mattress reeked of her urine.

As she sucked on her bloody finger, the door crashed open and she jumped, too drained to move much.

"Lunch time, good girl,"

She smelled him before he arrived next to her, the pungent aroma of sweat and something else - something bestial. The bed creaked and shook as he sat down on the end, and she sensed his hand hovering over her ankle where the ropes had rubbed sores into the tender skin.

"Oh no, we can't have this...have you been a bad girl?"

Sarah winced as he poked at the sore on her ankle. Tears leaked from her eyes again and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. The almost gentle ministrations on her ankle immediately ceased and the bed shook again as he stood. There was a crash as he threw the plate across the room.

"Why do you keep doing this?" his voice cracked, and she turned despite herself. His hands were in his hair, yanking violently. She watched as he started to slap himself in the face.

"Father won't like it, no he won't. There needs to be a punishment!"

Her captor paced the room and Sarah held her breath. She had tried not to move but every time she drifted off, she woke with a jerk and the sores on her ankles became deeper; they had begun to ooze several sleeps ago. He froze midway through one traverse of the room and turned towards her; eyes wild. She tried to shrink back across the bed but was powerless as he grabbed her by the bindings on her wrists and drew a knife from his belt.

"No... please..." she whispered, her voice harsh, and he approached, breathing heavily.

Leaning towards the foot of the bed, he used the knife to hack at the ropes around her ankles until they parted and yanked her to her feet. Sarah's knees softened as she found her footing, but there was no time to adjust as he pulled her with him. Out of the open door and to the right, along a darkened corridor. They passed several closed doors, arriving at an open one a few seconds later. He pushed her in. The room was tiled—once white, but now with fingers of black mould crawling along the grout—and she collided sharply with a metal sink. Gasping at the fierce pain, she curled over and stumbled. She heard him step in behind her and turned to face him, silhouetted in the doorway.

"Back" he barked, and she shrank away. She watched as he reached towards the metal sink. He took hold of something. She couldn't quite see in the darkness but realized what it was when a jet of ice-cold water struck her, forcing her back towards the wall. The freezing water pummeled her bruised skin and she crashed into the wall, slipping



on the tiled floor. She fell, landing painfully on one hip. Water pushed its fingers into her open mouth and up her nose. She spluttered on the icy jet, turning her head to catch her breath with little success.

"I didn't want to do this. You made me. You were a bad girl."

He was crying as he spoke, a pitiful sobbing sound.

He kept the spray trained on her as she crawled around the chamber, lit only by the dim light from the corridor. Soon, she began to shudder at the icy knives of cold that jabbed at her. Trying to avoid the cruel pain, her hands and knees slipped from beneath her, and she gave up, curling on the hard floor.

As suddenly as it had begun, the water stopped and there was a silence. Eyes squeezed tightly, she listened to her heartbeat throbbing in her head and to his footsteps as he approached. Her eyes sprang open when he gripped her shoulders and pulled her up onto feet which could barely gain purchase on the tiles.

"Do you understand now? Will you be good?" it was though he were speaking to an errant child in a classroom, reprimanding her.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Good. Good girl. Let's get you back to bed." Her skin crawled at his kindly tone, and his pawing caress on her bare, goose-pimpled arms.

Half dragging, half carrying, he led the way back along the corridor towards her room and she was almost grateful to see the stinking bed as he dropped her. She crawled up towards the bedstead and he snatched at her ankles, tying them again. Shivering hard, she closed her eyes and drifted off before he had finished securing her.

It was pitch black when she woke. For the first time since she had arrived, there was blessed relief from the bare, buzzing strip light. Wait, there was some light; a sliver shone under the door. She didn't have long to wonder about this new event when an unearthly howl echoed along the corridor. Pressing her hands to her mouth, she listened as the howl died and was followed by a thumping sound. Or was it drumming? The pulse built in volume, and she realized it was moving towards her door. She kept her eyes locked on the ribbon of light, watching as a flicker of shadows interrupted the beam. Were there people passing the doorway? For a moment, she considered calling out—perhaps they could help? She opened her mouth and took a breath when a scream rang out just outside the door and a familiar voice shouted.

"You need to be a good girl; Father won't like it if you're not a good girl. You promised!"

The screaming continued for a breath or two more, then cut off wetly.

On the bed, Sarah pressed her hands back to her mouth, swallowing her own scream. She wrapped her arms around her head and shoved fingers into her ears, desperate for the thumping to stop, concentrating again on the sound of her own breathing, her own pulse. After a long while, she realized that all she could hear was the throbbing of her own heart. As she slowly released the death grip she had on her own head, the lights sprang on again, dousing her in white, electric light, and she relaxed enough to drift off again into a fitful sleep.

She awoke several times in the next hours; her eyes springing open each time to check that the lights were still on, finding the stark brightness a comfort after the cold dark of the shower, and the smothering, scream-filled darkness of the previous night. When she woke to the violent rattle of the chains that held her door to find herself plunged in darkness again, she couldn't help the sob that escaped her.

The door flew open and there he stood, framed by the doorway and bathed in the glow of a lantern.

"It's time,"

He strode in, grabbing Sarah's hands and binding them quickly with plastic zip-ties. After he untied her feet, he pulled. At first, she resisted, and he gave her wrists a shake, twisting them within the ties. She gasped.

"Be a good girl now, you promised," He pulled again, and she slid off the bed, falling to her knees.

"Come on! Stop hurting yourself!" he wheedled, dragging her along the ground. She grappled for purchase and tried to push herself up onto weak legs. As they approached the door of the room, the thumping began, and beads of cold sweat broke out on her skin. In the corridor, there was no sign of the source of the sound. Just her, and the man. They turned left from the door this time. and hurtled along another corridor. Had she been brought in this way? She didn't remember. Again, they had passed several closed doorways and in the lantern light she could make out the chains that held them locked as well.

He turned suddenly, pulling her into a room almost as dark as the corridor they had just left; it was filled with that same, bestial scent that she had smelled on her jailer. There was a knee-high platform in the middle of the room, and the furniture around the walls held burning candles of various sizes, casting deep, flickering shadows. He pulled her forward, thrusting her away from him so that she fell, sprawling onto the platform. She looked back over her shoulder to see that he was leaving, the door swinging closed behind him.

“Wait” she croaked, as a key turned in the lock. She almost wanted him back, but her next words were stilled in her throat as a figure unfolded out of the shadows. The huge beast had yellow eyes and a jaw dripping with teeth and saliva. Curled horns burst from its scalp.

The creature growled as it approached.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to Father?”

#### About the Author:

Gwynne Weir is currently completing her studies for a Master's Degree in Creative Writing. Her published work includes short stories and flash fiction, largely in the genres of horror and science fiction, including the print anthology *Flashes of Hope*, published in January 2021.

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#### Sammie | *Will H. Blackwell, Jr.*

I recognized her when she appeared on my doorstep, with her delicate basket (for collecting Halloween ‘treats,’ I assumed). “I remember you from last Halloween; I remember asking your age—so mature for just nine—and now, of course, a very grownup ten!”

“I’m still nine, Sir,” she said surprisingly.

“But you are little ‘Sammie,’ from down the street—Samantha Hynes? As I recall, your parents immigrated here to Illinois from the West of Ireland.”

“Yes, I am ‘Sammie,’ and Irish indeed—of full Celtic ancestry! In fact, I was named for this, originally Celtic, occasion—‘Samhain’—or ‘The Festival of Death’ as we also know it.”

I responded, “Some call this night ‘All Hallows Eve.’ However, I know well the early name, ‘Samhain.’ In Celtic tradition, this time of observance—of the change from summer to winter, of light to darkness—is most significant—a time when souls of the living and dead are said to commune in celebration. But those tales of sacrifice—of animals, even humans—surely, those supposed rituals were untrue?”

“Oh, they were very real, Sir. Prosperity required it! After each harvest-season, sacrifice was vital to the success of the next-year’s crop. To receive earth’s bounty, it was necessary to give back to the land—even if it meant of our blood—even the life of a child.”

Her answer unsettling, I altered the subject. “Speaking of giving and receiving, Sammie, would you like to select some candy? We have chocolate-drops, gum-drops, candy-corn and other tasty treats to choose.”

She replied, “No, but thank you, Sir. I can no longer have candy, nor will this airy basket still hold such.”

“Forgive me for saying, child, but you appear frailer than I remember—a little pale—tired, perhaps. Have you been ill? Would you like to come in, and sit for a while? The Missus is steaming a kettle of tea; it could possibly do you some good.”

“Oh, thank you again, Sir, but no. I intake little fluid these days—little more than the dew-drops that form.”

“Not meaning to upset you—and maybe it’s an illusion of the gauzy ‘guising’ of your flowing costume—but you seem so thin, almost wispy, since I last saw you. Can’t we give you—something—to eat? Dinner is already prepared.”

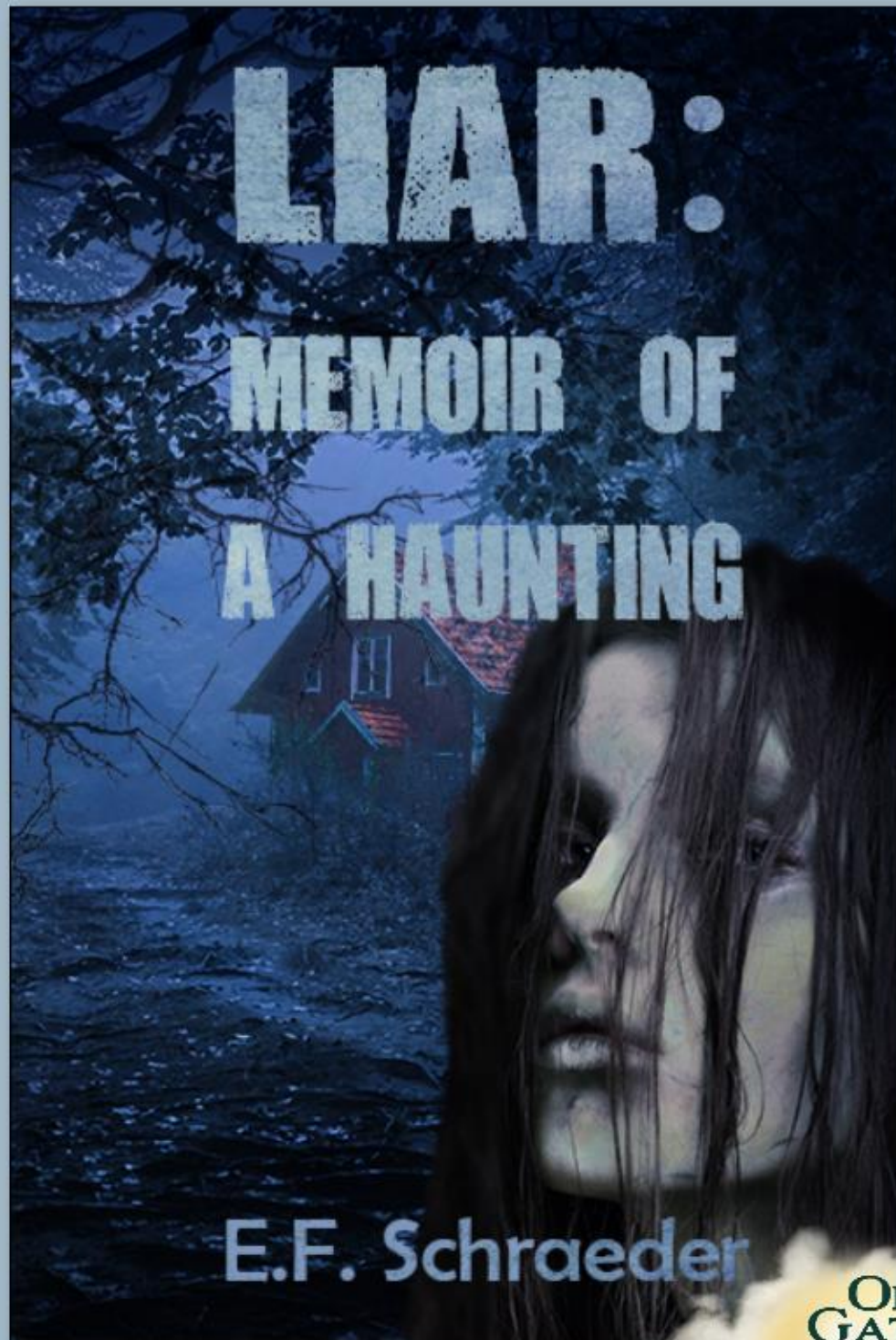
“My apologies, I can but decline. I ate my final meal last November, while still a living child. As the ghost of a child, I consume no food. Anyway, Sir, I believe you now behold my transparency—perhaps sensing my special sacrifice, so that others may eat. There is no trickery here. You were so kind last year, I simply wanted to see you once more. I must bid farewell now, but may the spirits, this night, bless you and your family. So, goodnight, dear Sir, and goodbye. Worry not about me, for I am content in my fate. And every ‘Samhain,’ I can come visit my family again.”

#### About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor (botany), living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where he continues research on microscopic fungi occurring in freshwater. His fiction has appeared in: *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *FrostFire Worlds*, *Outposts of Beyond*, *Shelter of Daylight*, *Trembling with Fear*, and *365 Tomorrows*.

“Liar is a disquieting slow burn tale, full of small town superstition and guardedness, and a startling study of isolation and otherness. Highly recommended.”

– Bram Stoker Award winner, Lee Murray



OMNIUM  
GATHERUM

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The ghostly wailing that plagued Paul Croft's dreams sounded much clearer as his eyes shot open and were greeted by the thick blanket of night that covered his bedroom. The haze of waking quickly evaporated as he became aware that there was an intruder in the apartment. Whoever they were, they either had a deranged sense of humour or were seriously sick in the head to be making such an ungodly noise. If they were trying to scare the pants off him, it was working.

Reaching over to the nightstand, Paul felt around for his cell phone only to realize that he had left it in the living room, where the harrowing wails were coming from. He could have kicked himself for being so absent-minded. Now he had no choice but to confront the trespasser and risk life and limb to get them to leave quietly or somehow subdue them so he could call the police to deal with the problem.

Paul got out of bed and entered the living room. He couldn't see the shape of any intruder, yet he could hear their wailing clearly only a few feet away from him toward the couch. The only explanation he could think of was that the weirdo was hiding behind the wide piece of furniture. His sweaty palms grasped a nearby lamp to use as a weapon if things were to turn ugly.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, Paul attempted to assert an intimidating tone, which only came out as a pitiful squeak. "Come out and show yourself."

The wailing ceased. The eerie silence from its absence chilled him even more than the noise had. He waited tensely for the intruder to rise up from behind the couch. With a breathless gasp, Paul dropped the lamp, sending it crashing to the floor. He was stunned by the unbelievable sight of a figure materializing out of thin air. It was sitting on the couch, staring directly at the blackness all around it with cold, expressionless eyes.

"It can't be," blurted Paul through trembling lips as he recognized the bright white face of the ghost. "Charlie? Is that really you?"

The ghost slowly turned his head and looked at his friend from the life he once knew. Opening his mouth, Charlie spoke in a heavy whisper. Air was not something he could easily use to form words. That was a luxury only for the living. "Paul... It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"It has," said Paul, trying to politely hide the discomfort he felt speaking to the ghost from his past. "One year ago today, as a matter of fact."

"I'm thirsty."

"No problem," replied Paul. "I'll get you something to drink. Wait right there."

The ghost waited, eerily still, as his friend hurried into the kitchen. Paul soon returned with a bottle of their favourite beer and handed the beverage to him. "Here."

"Thank you." Charlie slowly took the bottle from him. Holding the beer gently in his pasty hands, the ghost stared into the blackness again. He raised the bottle to his dry lips and tasted the bitterness of the beer. "Ah, that hit the spot."

Paul was uncertain if the beer really was hitting his spot as he sat next to Charlie for old times' sake.

"The sweet taste of beer," the ghost said with an emotionless smile. "How I've missed it." Taking another sip, Charlie was reminded of the nights he had often spent in his favourite bar back when he was bound to the needs of the flesh. One night in particular stood out in his memory. "Do you remember the last time I tasted beer?"

"I do," Paul said gravely. He did not want to talk about the night in question but felt as though he needed to get it off his chest, for his own sake more than for his ghostly visitor. "We went to our regular bar. All the drinks were on me."

"And what did you do?"

"I bought you one beer after another until you were completely drunk."

"And then what happened?" asked the ghost.

"I helped you into your car and drove it for you."

"But you didn't drive me home, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Where did you drive me instead?"

Paul let out a hard exhale. His eyes were watering. The dense blackness of the living room was smothering him. It was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe properly. The guilt of his actions was too much for him to hold inside any longer. For the last year, it had been eating away at his very soul. He had to let it out. "I drove you to a cliff and let the car roll off with you inside it."

"And why did you do such a thing to your friend?"



"For Brenda," Paul said with a croak as he fought to hold back the tears that threatened to fall.

"Ah, Brenda," the ghost said fondly. "My lover and then yours. Did it feel good to comfort her? Helping her to move on, and finally having her?"

"It did." Paul began to sob heavily.

"Where is Brenda now?"

It hurt Paul to say it. "She left me for another man."

"Why did she do that?"

"I was no good for her. She wanted someone better."

"How fickle a woman's heart is," said Charlie.

"Yeah," replied Paul mournfully.

"If I was still alive, she would have done the same thing to me sooner or later."

Wiping his eyes, Paul looked at the ghost from his past with deep remorse. "I'm so sorry. I should never have killed you. It wasn't worth it."

The ghost didn't respond. It took another sip from the bottle.

"You must hate me."

Slowly turning to face his friend, the ghost looked at him sympathetically. "No, I don't hate you. I pity you."

Paul was left silent by his words.

"You are like me, a tortured soul which will never find rest," said Charlie as he set the bottle on the floor. "See you in the next life."

As Paul watched, the ghost seemed to melt into the air. He was suddenly alone. Sitting eerily still, he looked straight into the blackness closing in on him with eyes that were as cold and expressionless as the ghost from his past.

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

P.M. Thomas is an author and screenwriter from Birmingham, United Kingdom. Living with his two dogs and a cat, he has always had a true love and a true passion for the art of cinema, the art of storytelling and art in general.

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**Twitter:** [@Philip\\_PMThomas](#)

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#### **A Tricky Situation | John H. Dromey**

All Hallows' Eve.

"What are you supposed to be? A chimneysweep?"

"For your edification, my distinctive headgear and my broom are the trappings of a wizard. You, a twenty-something princess with a stalker, should go home immediately."

"What makes you think I have a stalker?"

"I read your mind."

"I doubt that. It was just a lucky guess."

"Your stalker is disguised as the grim reaper and he intends to cut you into little pieces with his scythe."

"I wasn't thinking any of those things. You're a fake!"

"You're sorely mistaken. I finished reading *your* mind. Now, I'm reading *his*."

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

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter, Hybrid Fiction, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Thriller Magazine, several previous issues of Sirens Call Publications eZine, and elsewhere.

There are fewer things I can imagine would be crueller in life than launching yourself from a structure with the intent of death but only succeeding in a debilitating injury. As if one wasn't broken enough already.

You're eighty floors high, Frank. Stop the crap.

As I stand perched on the edge of the building, I can only just make out the streets below through the eerie coverage of morning mist. Blood pounds in my ears, and I feel nothing from the waist up. I've got to jump before I chicken out.

I close my eyes. This is it.

The wind wraps around me, and suddenly I'm falling, stomach tumbling and braced for an impact I can't imagine I'll feel.

"Gets windy up here."

Startled, I snap my head towards the voice. A burly man dressed in a fine three-piece suit boasts a smile that is almost disguised by his thick turned-down moustache. In contrast, there's not a hair on his head. I can imagine this man ushering lions into a cage.

"Name's John. It's a pleasure to meet you," he offers.

My stomach still lurches as I take a small step back on wobbly legs. There's a passing thought that this man has been sent to talk me down, but the suit implies he's dressed for a different type of negotiation.

"I didn't mean to alarm you, my friend. I've been there, though, standing on that same edge. I know what you are going through."

"What are you doing up here?" I ask.

"Again, apologies for catching you at a bad time," he replies with a wink. "I often come here—to think, clear my head. I've seen you here before, too."

"I don't mean to be rude, but will you please fuck off." I'm taken aback by my abruptness.

"Divorce? Ex-wife and kids want nothing to do with you? Retrenched? Money problems?"

"I didn't come here to make friends," I assert.

"Me neither. But we're here now. What's your name?"

I think about lying, but there seems little point. "Frank."

"You drink, Frank?"

"Yeah, but not before 8 a.m."

He laughs. "I wasn't inviting you. Double malt Scottish whisky—ah, I can taste it now. I went there once, The Highlands—beautiful, so full of history and culture, not like this Godforsaken place."

This is insane, and I'm not going to be dissuaded. I edge across, so my shoes are once again poking over the edge.

The occasional honk of a car punctures the monotonous thrum of traffic below, and the faint sound of music adds to the haunting effect of the now-thinning mist. Tires squeal on tarmac, and from somewhere not too far away, sirens ring out. These city notes will be a fitting soundtrack for my death.

"What was she like? Your wife, I mean—when you first met."

We danced and howled with laughter. By the end of the night, her mascara left a stream of black that ran down to her chin. She was stunning, still is. We were so bloody free back then, ready for anything. We made a deal that we would always be open and honest, cleaning wounds before allowing them to heal. How did we let ourselves get so shackled, buried alive in the concrete jungle? I was going to be a writer. Amy had dreams of opening her own interior design business.

"How many kids? One? Two? Three?"

We had a boy and a girl together. Tom and Jenna. They're adults now, of course. Both hate me. We were such a close family, sticklers for traditions—game night, movie night, even the bake-off and God-awful talent nights that Jenna used to organize. Christ. I'm thinking about the house now, the one we swore we'd never leave. Full of happiness and warmth in the earlier years, but a battleground of disappointment and resentment as our dreams were eroded by the inevitable wave of conformity. Sadness washes over me as I grieve for those lost days.

Fuck! Come on, Frank. Get a grip.

"What are your favourite smells?"

Forests. The smell of pine, petrichor, and adventure. We used to go with the kids—had a favourite spot off the trail where we often would hide, spying on people as they walked by, making loud farting noises that Tom thought was hysterical. The smells of Sunday afternoon baking, too, that filled every room of the house with wholesomeness. You could smell it for days afterwards. Tears form, but I refuse to let them roll.

Come on, Frank!

“Three,” I say out loud.

“Favourite food?”

Steak with mushroom sauce. “Two.”

“Can you remember the first time you made love?”

Vanessa Adams. Her parents were out of town for the weekend. “One.”

“What will you miss most, Frank?” he asks.

I can’t do it. I don’t want to die.

As I take a step back and double over, a million thoughts and memories invade my head. Filling me with hope this time rather than emptiness, I sit down on the ground and contemplate the future.

“I mean aside from your estranged family. Will it be the smells? The feel of the wind? The taste of bourbon?”

I’ll make changes. I’ll make it work.

The last wisps of mist float across, but I can no longer feel the breeze that escorts them. There’s a small crowd of ant-sized people gathering around red flashing lights.

I turn back to the circus master, and he offers the same smile as before.

“It’s a strange feeling for sure,” he says nonchalantly. “A kind of disconnect.”

“Did I—jump?”

“It wasn’t much of a jump. Two out of ten from me.”

“No, that can’t be! Please, I—”

“Tad late for regrets, my new friend.”

I feel dizzy, light-headed. “So, I’m—”

“Part of the gang now, Frank.”

I turn my attention back to the streets below where life carries on, and its music still plays. There’s an overwhelming urge to hug my children.

“There are six of us sorry souls, and you’ll meet them all soon. We spend a lot of time here with our thoughts, chewing the fat, talking through old memories.”

### About the Author:

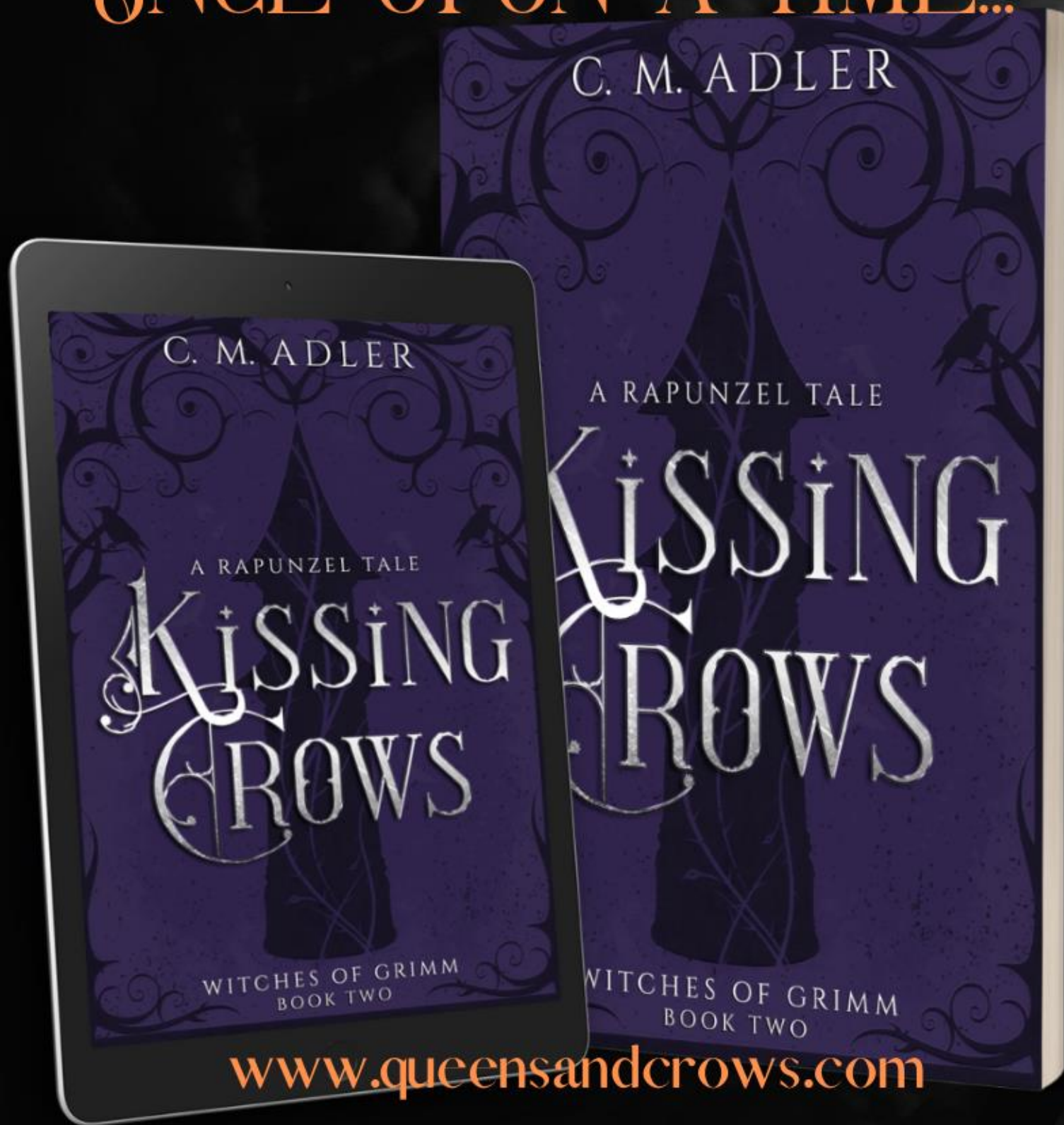
Mark Towse would sell his soul to the devil or anyone buying if it meant he could write full-time. Alas, he left it very late to begin this journey, penning his first story since primary school at the ripe old age of 45. Since then, he's been published in the likes of Flash Fiction Magazine, The Dread Machine, Cosmic Horror, Suspense Magazine, ParABnormal.

**Blog:** [Mark Towse Dark Fiction](#)

**Instagram:** [@TowseyWrites](#)



# ONCE UPON A TIME...



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Douglas felt apathetic about his tree house, yet he visited it every day. A stone's throw from his bedroom window, it was just far away enough, hidden, from the prying eyes of his folks. He wiled away many an hour there with friends.

But it wasn't really a tree house, it was more a patch of leaves and mossy sticks and old animal bones arranged into an oval on the ground. He'd meet there regularly with his group of buddies, his chums, who had all sworn allegiance to each other and had formed an unshakeable gang. They'd all promised to have each other's backs through thick and thin, but, despite this pact of loyalty, Douglas still felt somewhat blasé about the arrangement.

They weren't so much as a gang anyhow—or even really friends—but more a collection of soft toys which he'd had since he was tiny. Some felt gloppy, others smelt funny, of rot and age, and some had worn patches on their bottoms.

Douglas loved to run and skip and jump, except he didn't. He preferred to sit in the same spot in his tree house, rocking back and forth in time with the breeze that blew the snow.

And the snow was a polymer of sorts, made from time glued to tears.

Douglas hugged his teddies whilst he sat in his tree house because he figured that was what young boys were supposed to do, but he didn't feel much love for his toys. Love was far too strong a word, as they weren't really teddies at all, but sticks and leaves and animal bones which he'd fashioned into rough shapes to represent living things. Or what he'd imagined living things would be shaped like.

The largest one was shaped like a woman.

Douglas had been raised by his mother, a beautiful lady—kind, warm, and caring. He looked up to her with dilated pupils filled with adoration and oxytocin, but he didn't really look at her in any way at all, as his eyes had worn away to dents, and his mother was not his mother, but an old hag of a witch who had snatched him from his birth parents when he was five days old, whilst his real mother slept beside him as he babbled by and with the river.

And it hadn't been an actual river, or even a stream, it had been a strip of silver-foiled paper that meandered in stationary two-dimension from one side of his estate to the other, in front of his glass castle which he adored living in...which wasn't a glass castle at all; there were no crystal turrets, there was not even a single transparent, ice-like drawbridge, and it wasn't much of an estate, and he didn't really like existing there either, as it was in fact a snow globe sat upon the top shelf of a child's bookcase, in which the boy was trapped inside, in which the old hag who spoke in cobwebs had exiled him to on discovering he was one for telling porkies.

Dusty and untouched for time, the domed paperweight piece remained shelved, in a room kitted out for a baby who had gone missing, whose parents had never had the heart to empty out.

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

SJ Townend has been writing creatively for 23 months—not non-stop, there have been breaks for food and sleep. SJ won the Secret Attic short story contest (Spring 2020), has had fiction published with Sledgehammer Lit Mag, Hash Journal, Horla Horror, Ellipsis Zine, and was long listed for the Women on Writing non-fiction contest in 2020. SJ also has work published with Ghost Orchid Press.

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



Norbert looked at his pocket watch and saw that he had fifteen minutes before he needed to leave for work. He poured himself a shot of sloe gin and lit a Domino cigarette, as he sat at the little table in his rented room.

He put the wooden match into the ash tray, and thought about the new Zippo lighter that he had seen at the drug store. Zippo had just come out on the market and he was going to buy one as soon as he had a little extra money.

It was a short walk from Little Tokyo to the Martz Hotel, but he always left the room ten minutes early so he could change clothes at work, rather than wear the red uniform that the Marts provided.

As he walked up Main Street, he passed an organ grinder with a little monkey wearing the same style hat that Norbert wore with his uniform. As a matter of fact, he thought the monkey's uniform looked like the one he wore at work.

Norbert stopped by the front desk. After saying hello to the desk clerk, he went to the hotel giftshop and asked for a pack of Domino cigarettes. He placed fifteen cents on the counter, before heading to the abandoned storage room that he used as his private dressing room.

He had worked at the hotel since high school, and had changed the lock on the storage room. He was sure that after thirteen years, the management had forgotten about the storage room. There were over seven hundred guest rooms at the hotel and most of the staff had not been there as long as he had, so they would not have any reason to know that this room existed.

It didn't take long to get into the red trousers and jacket and to adjust the little simian cap on his head. He laced up his high-top wing tip shoes, gave them a quick brushing and he was ready to go to the elevator.

He exchanged greetings with Butch, the day shift operator as Butch stepped out of the car. Norbert checked his pocket watch and pulled the lever when he heard the bell ring. Up and down, opening the door, greeting hotel guests and residents and taking shit from loud mouth drunks leaving the bar was his usual day.

He had been on duty six hours and it was starting to slow down by ten P.M., when a red faced drunk with a bad attitude stepped into the elevator.

"Floor please," Norbert said. The man looked at his name tag and said, "Norbert, that sounds like a sissy's name, you piss ant."

"You don't need to insult me sir, I just asked which floor you wanted to get off on."

"I think I might just kick your ass before I leave this elevator," the man informed him.

"You might try to kick my ass you piece of shit, but you won't get too far," Norbert told him as he pulled a dagger with five-inch blade from the back of his trousers. He then pulled the lever and stopped the car.

"Hey, hey buddy, I was just having fun with you," the man said as the color drained from his face.

"Yeah, and now I'm going to have some fun with you," Norbert said as he rushed the man, slamming his left arm into the man's throat and following that up with five inches of dagger blade into his liver.

He stopped the elevator on the maintenance floor, opened the door and checked to make sure the janitor was not around. He shut the door behind him and rushed over to his private dressing room.

He came out of his room with a hand truck, opened the elevator door and loaded the dead man onto it. He checked the halls again before taking the body to his room. Norbert did a cursory check of his uniform before heading back into his elevator.

The light for the eighteenth floor was lit, and the man in the derby hat and two-tone saddle shoes looked annoyed as the door opened.

"It's about time Norbert. We've been waiting almost five minutes." The woman in the shiny green dress with platinum blonde hair told him.

"I'm sorry Dottie, the car was stuck on another floor, but I was able to get it moving again."

"Is it safe, or should we take the stairs," the man asked.

"I ain't walking no eighteen flights of stairs in these high heel shoes," the woman informed him.

"Everything will be okay," Norbert stated as he pulled the lever and the car began its descent.

As they exited the elevator, Dottie touched Norbert on the arm and said goodnight. The man in the derby hat didn't say anything as he walked away.

Norbert liked Dottie and wished he could afford to spend the night with her, but hookers were out of reach at his salary. He wanted to catch the pimp without one of his girls one night, so he could take him to his private dressing room.

The old midnight operator relieved Norbert, and he went to his room to change out of his uniform. He locked the door behind him, took off the monkey hat and uniform and put on an old pair of dungarees and rubber boots. He left his shirt off and put a heavy rubber apron over his sleeveless undershirt.

Norbert opened an old suitcase and pulled out two large butcher knives and a bone saw, after he put the dead body on a metal table that he had stolen from the maintenance shop. He put on a pair of rubber gloves that came to his elbows, and worked on the body for almost two hours. The clean-up work took him another forty-five minutes.

He was lucky to find this room. There was a drain built into the floor and a large sewer clean out pipe in the floor. He had purchased an old meat grinder at a junk store, and was able to grind up a lot of the body parts and stuff them down the sewer cut out. He was always careful not to overload it.

There were always gallons of drain cleaner available at the plumbing shop for him to steal. The bones were not that hard to dispose of, there was an industrial size trash compactor on the same floor as his secret room, and the maintenance staff worked the day shift.

He was able to sneak bone parts into the compactor. He would store the head in an empty five-gallon paint can until he found a place to dispose of it.

He washed up, lit a Domino and carved another notch into the handle of his bone saw. Norbert changed into his street clothes, locked his private room and went to the freight elevator on the other side of the maintenance room. The elevator door opened onto 7<sup>th</sup> street and from there he walked back to his rented room.

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

Leroy B. Vaughn's stories and essays, fiction and nonfiction have been published in print, anthologies, ezines and podcasts. He is retired and lives in Arizona where he has worked with at risk children, as well as other volunteer activities. When needed by neighbors, he catches and releases rattlesnakes that have wandered into his neighborhood.

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#### **The Last Line of Lace | *Kelly-Ann Porter***

Mary hummed as she sewed, her quick fingers stitching the intricate lace back together. Of course she had been blamed for it being torn in the first place, though it was her mistress's own fault for taking too much notice of her husband's wondering eye, and not enough of the carriage door.

She had changed out of the dress and thrown it at Mary.

"Fix it at once, and stay away from my husband's gaze while you're about it. I hired you as a maid not as a whore." She'd ordered.

She should keep her husband away from Mary, who then wouldn't feel so afraid that she had to block her bedroom door each night. His advances towards Mary left her sick to her stomach, but that was not a problem anymore, nor was her mistress's cutting words.

She had always been good at lace work; she sang louder enjoying the unusual silence, the calm before the storm. Someone would no doubt find the bloodstained bodies soon, then her peace would be shattered. At least let her finish the last line of lace.

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

Kelly-Ann Porter hails from Liverpool, England, where she enjoys nothing more than spending time with her Pomeranian Syaoran (little wolf). She is an accomplished crafter and maker, creating costumes, jewelry and props. Her active imagination manifests itself in the many short stories she has written.



Hugo Palacios Méndez  
06/03/2013





B'ville is open all the time, serving late-night drunks and crack-of-dawn truckers' coffee from the same stained pot. The locals jabber on and on, sounding each other out on politics and the high price of genetically altered corn seed. Clichés bounce off the walls—strangers get noticed. It's the familiar that keeps everything safe. People just being people.

In the booth near the window, a boy with a speech impediment mumbled sounds that were supposed to be words. "Hon nee boon na," he said. No one within earshot could fathom what he struggled to say. He contorted his face with the grimace of a shrunken head as he tried to point out that the busboy was making faces at him.

The busboy, pushing sixty, wore a filthy baseball cap with the initials BD embroidered in yellowed white. He pulled the stained bill of the cap down near his eyes to conceal his intentions. His face, a mask of withered skin—swallowed by deep creases. Under his hat, gray porcupine hair poked out of his head. His mouth was sunken—toothless as a grandfather's. When he smiled, his tar-stained teeth were rimmed by prickly stubble.

He kept eyeballing the kid, sticking his tongue out with the stiff movement of a wooden-headed ventriloquist's dummy. With silent words mouthed so only the kid could see, the busboy continued to whisper: "Dummy, dummy, dummy."

The kid yelled, "Maan min na na!"

Everyone turned toward the boy. A full-blown stuttering attack pinched his face into a spongy stuffed doll. The boy was into a Tourette's-like spasm, a hair-trigger away from a seizure. The old busboy feigned calm, showed no expression. The boy's mother looked up from her book. She noticed the busboy standing with his hands behind his back, rocking back and forth, heel to toe. Softly, she touched her son's hand. She went back to her book.

The old coot went in and out of the kitchen, causing the saloon-style doors to rattle on their hinges. Moving like a crazed figurine in some weird cuckoo clock, he would appear, then disappear, all the while winking at the boy, crossing his eyes, and screwing up the shape of his mouth. The sound of dishes being stacked and re-stacked synchronized perfectly with his entrances and exits.

"Dummy, dummy, dummy," he whispered.

A shrill sound tore through the heart of the diner, freezing everyone in mid-sentence. The scream, bloodcurdling, sounded like metal on metal. The old busboy's arm had been pulled into a meat grinder he'd been cleaning. The machine had pulverized his hand up to his wrist. The splattered blood freckled his face. His cloudy blue eyes were wide with shock. The end of his wrist resembled a cartoon bone on a bottle of poison. On the table in front of the grinder, the glistening remains of his hand made a neat little mound.

The boy said, "Hon neea boon na dee berish?" Smiling, his mother said, "Everything is all right now, honey—mommy helped the man learn to sing." She closed her book of incantations, sipped the last of her tea, and picked up the check.

#### About the Author:

Lou Rera writes horror, supernatural crime and subjects that delve into the darker side of humanity. He is the author of *AWAKE: Tales of Terror* (2020), a collection of thirteen stories, and *SIGN*, a supernatural thriller of deception and murder (2014). He is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Lou also is a musician and will play bass in the musical, *Hair*, in October.

Instagram: [@lrera](#)

Twitter: [@lou\\_rera](#)



She was standing in her usual spot, just outside the pub in the East end. He'd passed her twice, a sure sign he was interested. He was a gent; that was clear from his clothes and his manner. Gentlemen only came to this part of London for one thing. Girls like her. As he walked past a third time, she put her arms on her hips and leant forward.

"See anything you like, dearie?"

Her accent was first thing men noticed, her red hair was the second. It worked like a charm. He stopped. His eyes stared at her, glittering, from under the brim of a top hat. His face was lost in darkness, all she could see were his eyes, sparkling. She felt a brief moment of disquiet, quickly dismissed. Risk was part of this business and she had rent to pay.

"You look very lovely tonight, my dear."

"Thank you, kind sir. Would you like to spend some time with me, dearie? We could pop down the alley, it'd only take five minutes."

"I'd enjoy a liaison with you, but I don't feel that an alleyway is the appropriate location. I would be willing to pay over the odds for a private rendezvous. Perhaps tomorrow evening?"

"That sounds perfect, dearie. Shall I come to your house?"

She already knew the answer, even if he wasn't married, he'd be worried about his servants gossiping.

"No, I fear my home is out of the question."

"You could visit me at my room, if you like. Thirteen Miller's Court, off Dorset Street. Spitalfields."

He nodded and made a note of the address in a small notebook.

"Very well, I will call on you tomorrow evening. Shall we say eight o'clock?"

"Yes."

He tipped his hat and walked down the street, towards the City.

\*\*\*

She had very little luck for the rest of the night. The murders had brought out more coppers and the Johns were scared away. Jack, with all his nonsense, was hurting her earnings. It didn't help that it was also raining, typical November weather for London. She was soaked, her hair wet against her head. Around midnight, she headed home, back to her squalid single room. She undressed, hanging her clothes near the fire to dry.

\*\*\*

The next morning, she woke late, her head thumping. Her neighbors had been shouting all night, their argument echoing through the walls. She coughed hard, painfully. The room was damp; the fire had gone out. She relit it and boiled some water for tea.

She spent the day getting ready for her liaison that evening. She washed at the public pump, dipping her hair under the cold water. As the afternoon passed, she curled up in bed, trying to sleep as the sounds of the city echoed around her. She woke in the early evening, the nearby church clock sounding six o'clock. Darkness enveloped the city. She put on her dress and applied some rouge to her pale face.

There was a knock at her door. She knew it was too early for the gentleman. It was her friend, Maria.

"Thought I'd come round and see how you are, love. Haven't seen you for a few weeks. How's Joe?"

"He's gone. Didn't like me selling myself, but since he lost 'is job there weren't no other way to pay the rent."

"That's a shame, he was good for you."

"Not that good. Got all high and mighty with me. Kept telling me I was sinning, but it didn't stop him taking the money I earned."

"Where's he gone?"

"Rooming house somewhere."

"Well, here's a little something, my dear. Cheer you up and warm you through on this cold, damp night."

Maria produced a bottle of gin. Mary grabbed two chipped mugs while Maria opened it. They sat by the fire, chatting and gossiping.

The church bell chimed half past seven. The door opened and Joe entered the room he and Mary used to share.

"So, his lordship has returned, has he?" asked Maria.

"Thought I heard your voice," he replied with a sour tone.

"I'm just here to see Mary."

"So am I."

Maria sniffed.

"How are you keeping Mary?" asked Joe.

"Well as can be expected. I'm a little poorly, touch of a cold."

"Comes from her having to stand around in the cold and damp all night," said Maria.

"It's not my fault, Maria. I lost my job!" replied Joe, defensively.

"You oughtn't to have left her Joe. You should have stuck around, supported her."

"I couldn't stand the thought of what she was doing."

"Let's not have that argument again," said Mary. "It's water under the bridge. Let's finish up this gin. I happen to have an arrangement with a proper gentleman for later on this evening, so you two can make yourself scarce."

Joe looked miserable at the news. Maria kept her own counsel. Needs must, she thought. Needs must.

\*\*\*

After they'd gone, Mary sat on the bed, her fingers running through her hair. She decided to wear it up. He'd prefer it that way. She smoothed her dress, it was her best, but she could see the repairs, the faded color. She hoped it wouldn't matter to him. She hoped he'd ignore the clothes, be more interested in what was underneath, not that her body was any less faded, worn and stained.

She heard the nearby church bells chime eight o'clock, then quarter past and eventually nine. Her gentleman was late, perhaps he wouldn't turn up. By the time ten o'clock rolled round she was bored. She decided her gentleman wasn't going to arrive. No point wasting time waiting, she had rent to pay. She headed out to her usual spot, her head spinning from the gin. The streets were busy, the pubs had a couple of hours left before closing time. The rain had let up. There were a few girls out, but not so many that there'd be too much competition. She strolled up and down her territory, making eye contact with any man who wandered into view. It took about an hour to get her first customer. He was a redhead, he reminded her of home.

"Buy me a couple of gins, dearie. Let's make a night of it."

After a few rounds, she suggested that they went back to her room. He agreed. As they entered, she saw Mary-Ann, her neighbor. They exchanged smiles.

Her business with the redhead was over quickly. Mary felt the effects of too much gin, all she wanted to do was sleep. After he left, she slumped onto the bed and blacked out.

She woke to the sound of the bell chiming two o'clock in the morning. Feeling slightly nauseous, she stumbled from her room, almost bumping into a dark figure. She felt a moment of fear then realized it was only George, another one of her neighbors.

"Lend us a sixpence George. I need to buy some beer to clear my head."

He dug into his pocket and handed her a coin.

"There you go, Mary, but it looks as if you've already had enough."

"Never enough George, my dear. Never enough."

She headed back out the alley, towards the pub, when another dark figure stepped out of the shadows. It was her gentleman.

"I'm so sorry, my dear. I am ridiculously late. I do hope we can still have our rendezvous."

"It'll cost you double now, dearie."

"It would be my pleasure. Shall we retire to your domicile?"

She took his arm and led him back to her room, all thoughts of beer gone. He hung up his cape and hat on the coat stand. He was handsome, younger than she'd expected. His eyes held her in a long stare. She sat on the bed and bumped the mattress with her hand to indicate he should join her. He sat beside her and took her hand.

"I want to talk to you, Mary Kelly."

He knew her name, but that didn't bother her. She was well known round these parts. He'd only have to ask anyone in the area what she was called.

"What about?"

"I want to ask you a question. I want an honest answer."

"I'll do my best."

"Are you happy, here...living this life? Selling yourself?"

She felt the urge to be honest with him.

"No."

"Then why?"

"I need the money. This is the easiest way of getting it."

"I've seen your future, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"I know what will happen to you. How your life will turn out if you continue down this road."

That was all she needed, a bloody evangelical, trying to convert her.

"I don't need a sermon. I know what's in my future."

"I don't mean that. I literally know what will happen to you. Let me tell you the highlights. You will continue on this path for a few years. Joe will return to you, then leave again. You will get work in the market. You will have children, three by

two different men. Your children will all die in France in 1915, slaughtered by the machines of the Germans. You will die soon after that, in squalor and disease, unloved, un-mourned and heartbroken."

She believed him, every word.

"Do you come from the future? From the time when my children die."

"No, I come from Hell. I am Jack. I am here to offer you an alternative."

"You're the killer? The one that kills us girls?"

"Yes. I am the one."

She felt fear like never before. Sure, the job was dangerous, but sitting beside her was the most wanted, the most dangerous man in London.

"What can you offer me, other than what you gave those other girls?"

"I offered them the same as I'm about to offer you. They accepted my terms."

"But you killed them."

"I did, but they accepted my knife willingly, as you will."

"What did you offer them to make them accept such a fate?"

"I offered them immortality."

"How?"

"By offering them the chance to be my victim. Don't forget, I have seen your future. Without me, you are nothing, a forgotten drab. By becoming my victim, I will make you immortal, your name will echo down the ages. And Mary, you will be the most special of my girls."

"How?"

"You will be the most famous because you will be the last. Because of that, you will be the most remembered."

She understood. Even if he'd been lying to her, her future was probably going to be as he described. Selling herself, dead-end jobs. Perhaps she would have children, but what was the point. Maybe this stranger was telling the truth. Perhaps her children would be destroyed in the white heat of war. There was no point dying in squalor and filth, unloved and unremembered. He was Jack, all his victims were famous. She decided, she would rather leave now and attain immortality.

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing, I will do all the work that is required."

She felt an infinite sadness.

"On this day, on the ninth of November in the year of our lord, 1888, you, Mary Kelly, will achieve in death what so many others strive vainly to do. You will become immortal."

"Promise me something before I go."

"Anything for you, Mary."

"I know you're not like us. You will..."

She struggled to find the right word. He smiled.

"I will...persist and not just in memory."

She nodded.

"Yes, that's exactly the right word. You will persist. So, swear to me."

"Anything."

"Lay flowers on my grave. Every year on this day."

"I will."

She lay back on the bed, her mind calm. He removed the knife from inside his coat.

\*\*\*

In the decades that followed, the various caretakers of Leytonstone Cemetery noted every year, on the ninth of November, fresh flowers appeared on her grave, the most famous grave in the cemetery. They never asked themselves who came back every year to mark the date of her death. Perhaps they should have.

#### About the Author:

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Tell Tale Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in Sirens Call Publications eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plague* was published by Demain Press.


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### **Flesh-O'-Lantern | *Radar DeBoard***

Jackie finished the final cut with her knife. She took a step back and glanced over her creation with a critical eye. Even measured against her absurdly high standards, Jackie's latest work was pretty darn near flawless.

She couldn't help but get a little giddy as she picked up her newest project and carried it outside. Jackie was quite eager to make all her neighbors jealous of her unique, Halloween decoration. After all, every soccer mom on the block could carve a jack-o'-lantern with a pumpkin, but Jackie was the only person with the talent to craft one from human flesh.

### **Another One | *Radar DeBoard***

Lethilite grunted as she heaved the sack over her shoulder with her haul night's haul. "It's getting pretty late," she said to Mezthrop, "We should probably start heading back."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Mezthrop replied to his partner, "Most of the trick or treating has wrapped up for the night."

"I still see a few," Lethilite observed, "How do you feel about getting another one?"

Mezthrop slammed his sack against the ground to stop the child from wriggling around inside. He then carefully opened the sack and did a quick count. "Yeah," he nodded, "I can go for another."

### **Only Take One | *Radar DeBoard***

Tristian completely ignored the sign and shoved his hand into the candy bowl. He brought his greedy fingers back while they held five or six chocolate bars in their grasp. Tristian turned and raced down the front porch steps before bolting across the lawn. Before he could reach the sidewalk, a hand shot out of the ground and grabbed onto his left ankle.

A low voice growled from somewhere underneath the dirt, "You should have only taken one kid."

With a sharp tug, the hand pulled Tristian out of sight, leaving nothing behind but a full sack of Halloween candy.

### **One Night Drain | *Radar DeBoard***

Michael wasn't a guy who normally celebrated Halloween. He never really got into any aspect of the holiday...except for the costumes. Nothing was hotter than a one night stand with a total stranger in a crazy getup, which was exactly what he was about to do as he stumbled into his hotel room with someone in tow.

Michael fumbled to get his pants off as the stranger slowly took off her vampire costume in the most elegant way possible.

"Wow," Michael thought to himself, "*Those fangs almost look real.*"

A moment later, she would show him how real they were.

### **About the Author:**

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing. He is also a regular contributor to HorrorTree and Siren's Call Publications.

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It had been a cold, windy October and the trees shed their leaves a few weeks earlier than usual. But today the wind was still and the crisp bite in the air tasted like Halloween. It promised to be the perfect evening for trick-or-treaters. The sun would set by late afternoon and as it grew darker I imagined the clouds would skitter across the crescent moon, casting eerie shadows causing the costumed youngsters to both shiver in terror and giggle with false bravado.

As I sat at my desk and looked out the window, I wished I were a kid again so I too could travel door to door, with my identity hidden and my greedy lust for sweets worn proudly like a badge. But I am an adult, almost 30 years old, so the most I can do is open my door to those junior ghouls brave enough to ring my bell and then share in their fun vicariously.

About three thirty I had the urge to leave work, I decided I wanted to go to the store for Halloween candy, just in case some kids showed up before my date. I know I romanticize trick or treating and Halloween, but I live alone in the gray duplex at the end of Downy Street, the last house right next to the woods so I almost never get anyone to ever come to my door. I don't blame them, not a lot of kids will brave a spooky street for some cheap candy, so while I was out I stopped by the party supply store to get some Halloween decorations too. I thought maybe plastic pumpkins lit with eerie colored glow sticks would attract more trick-or-treaters.

I was heading for the pumpkins and light up displays when the wall of silly cardboard decorations caught my eye. I don't know why, but I just had to look through them. *This is dumb*, I thought as I sorted through the jointed door hangings and then he caught my eye. He was a paper vampire, not one of those silly caricatures of The Count, but a photographic image. I stared at him, folded in thirds, hanging in a plastic bag on the pegboard wall display, and I swear he looked alive. His deep black eyes stared back with an intensity that seemed to be just for me. I could feel myself blushing. He was so damned handsome. I had to have him.

I'd always been an honest person. When my friends tried shoplifting in middle school, I never did. So I'm not sure why, but I not only took him off the wall, I stole him. I walked right out of the store with him under my coat. Call it a compulsion, but something seemed to whisper to me that I was doing the right thing. A shadowy voice in my head told me he didn't belong there at all, he was just waiting for me!

I guess luck was on my side because nobody noticed me. It was as if I was invisible. I smiled as I cleared the doorway, amazed at my bold, daring feat. I knew my fiancé, Jake, would never understand. He would be not only shocked by my new criminal bent, he'd be insulted that I could actually get caught up in an infatuated fantasy with a paper vampire. I could almost hear him snap, *Oh seriously, Brenda! This is ridiculous!*

The whole way home I kept one hand on the steering wheel, and the other on the cutout. I imagined what it would be like if my count were real. I pictured myself running my fingers through his graying temples so dramatically offset by his deep black widow's peak. Shivering, I swear I could feel his response. When I pulled into my driveway, I looked at him in the fading daylight, and realized I'd never be able to hang him outside on my front door where the elements could hurt him.

He belonged inside with me, in my bedroom. Feeling a little silly and yet incredibly aroused, I took him out of my car, out of the plastic bag and unfolded him to his full length. He was life size, about six feet from head to black shiny shoes. There was still no wind so standing in my driveway, I held him up at his shoulders and smiled at my new acquisition. Living alone does have its advantages, you never have to worry about looking silly.

"Hi, my name is Brenda, what's yours? You new around here? Well this is my rental, wanna come inside for a drink, take the chill off?"

I laughed, how positively ridiculous. The real me would never approach a man and invite him in. The real me, the one that didn't steal or lust after fictional decorations, would never talk to a handsome stranger at all. I took him in hung him on my bedroom closet door.

As I stepped away to study my cutout count, his grin seemed wider, more inviting. I sat on my bed and felt myself getting warm, hot, as we watched each other. I tingled all over, my flesh craving to be touched by his long, delicate fingers. I lay back, my head on my pillow, and closed my eyes. I could hear him moving, coming to me, promising fulfillment. I wanted to stay there with him all night, or maybe even forever. I could feel him slowly coming closer and I ached for the moment to arrive. I needed him, I was going to explode if he didn't hurry. He reached the bed, the mattress sank under his weight, and I held out my arms wishing I could open my eyes to see my love. But I couldn't, my eyes were sealed by a will greater than my own. His voice a rumbling whisper, echoed in my head, "Brenda, my love."

Suddenly the doorbell rang. I jerked to a sitting position and opened my eyes. Talk about bad timing. The cutout was still on the closet and I felt foolish. I must have fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing. The doorbell rang again and I suddenly remembered my date with Jake. I jumped up and as I left the room, I rubbed my hand across the vampire's dark suited chest in a lingering caress. "It's all right Count," I whispered. "I promise I'll be back soon."

I opened the door for Jake and somehow I felt uncomfortable looking him in the eye. "I'll be ready in a flash." I said and turned away from him to go back to my bedroom.

He laughed and said, "Take your time, Honey, but remember I'm a starving man."

Usually I'd say, *starving for what* and he'd answer, *for you of course*. But tonight I wasn't a playful mood, at least not for Jake. He suddenly seemed dull and one dimensional, almost lifeless compared to my paper cutout.

Confused by my new feelings, I ran to my room to throw on my dress. Without looking, I knew those flat cardboard eyes were watching me as I peeled off my jeans and sweat shirt and I knew they were filled with approval. I got so flustered by the very idea that I caught the zipper of my new dress while pulling it up. I needed help and I imagined the Count sliding off the door hook and freeing those material-clogged teeth. My knees got weak and shaky as I almost felt his cold hands on my shoulders and his warm, warm breath on my neck.

"Jake!" I yelled, squeezing my eyes shut. "Jake come here a minute and give me a hand." I spun around and looked at my cutout. He was still on the door, it had only been my imagination again. Yet, his eyes were twinkling, laughing at me. I felt somehow disappointed and at the same time relieved. I couldn't help but wonder if bringing him into my home had been such a good idea. Then that whispery voice told me it was and I stopped worrying.

Jake came in, finished zipping me, then noticed we weren't alone. He took a step backwards and barked in a rough voice, "What's that?"

"It's the Count," I answered in my sweetest tone. "Isn't he just great, I picked him up for Halloween."

"Ugh, he's grotesque!" Jack said with a shudder. "I've never seen anything so evil looking in my life."

"Ah Jake, what's the matter? Scared of a paper man?" I said getting annoyed at his over the top reaction.

Jake glared at the cutout and I swear the Count sneered back at him. "Throw him out!" he commanded me.

"No!" I was now past annoyed and well into anger.

"That thing is an abomination to humanity. I'm telling you to throw him out!"

"NO!" I shouted. "He's mine! If you don't like him, go home. He can't hurt you from two blocks away."

"I'm getting rid of that thing, then!" He yelled. Before I could react Jack tore my cardboard fantasy from the door and ripped my paper Count to shreds. Quickly, he carried the tattered remains outside and dumped them into the trashcan at the end of the walk.

As he came back up the sidewalk, I blocked the doorway. "Go home!" I sobbed, heartbroken over the loss of a cardboard cutout and frightened by my own irrational behavior. "I hate you!"

A wounded expression distorted Jake's boyish face. "All right, Honey," he sighed sadly. "Call me when you've realized that I've done the right thing. I'll be home waiting."

He left, the dark night swallowing him as he crossed the street.

I sat outside on the steps, crying in the still, chilled, October evening until the cold overcame my grief. I went over to the trashcan reached inside and found it... empty. My Count was gone! I wanted to blame it on the wind, but there was none. He was just gone.

My feelings of loss were replaced with a dawning horror. *The Count had gone where?* But I was sure I already knew. I had to warn Jake! I ran for my cell and hit automatic dial. I waited for him to pick up the phone but the droning tone just rang on and on. Jake didn't answer. Instinctively, I knew he couldn't answer, would never answer.

Really frightened, I stood in the middle of my living room and wept. Tears slid down my cheeks and I didn't even bother to wipe them. I understood everything and I was crying for both of us, Jake and myself.

A part of me was horrified that my fiancé was gone, dead. But what made me cry harder was the little voice whispering to me again, telling me it was good luck that I had found him in that store, telling me I didn't need a mere man anymore. Scared as I was, I nodded to the phantom voice, acknowledging that what was waiting for me was unspeakable and yet somehow worth it... that I was a lucky, lucky woman. But deep down inside I knew it wasn't good luck at all, hadn't been good from the moment I decided to go shopping for Halloween.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a shadow pass by the window, the one with the broken lock. I remembered that I had playfully invited him into my house, had made a vampire welcome to come inside.

Shuddering, I listened to the tap-tapping at the glass, like the sound bare branches make scrapping the outside walls. *Too bad for me it's a still night*, I thought as I went to change into something a little sexier.

#### About the Author:

Diane Arrelle, has more than 350 stories and two fiction collections, *Just A Drop In The Cup* and *Seasons On The Dark Side*, published.

Website: [Arrelle Writes](#)

FaceBook: [Diane Arrelle](#)



Jessica wiped the sweat from her brow as she pulled up a vine. The pumpkin patch was hopping, even though it was only late summer. Families had driven in from all over town to visit her farm, one that sat barren in all the months that didn't have pumpkins and apples to sell.

Jessica wasn't bitter, though. She didn't have time for that. She licked her lips and tasted sweat as she heaved a rotted pumpkin into her wheelbarrow. Pumpkin rot was better for the soil, but the visitors didn't realize that, city-dwellers that they were. They just saw mold and flies, too sickened to buy anything as they left the patch in disgust. As if nature were Jessica's fault.

She wheeled the waste down the row and looked at this year's pumpkins. They were all sorts of colors and shapes: the classic orange ones for jack-o-lanterns, of course; but also pale white pumpkins and fairy tale pumpkins that were a powder blue that almost looked like dry mold. Funny how mold was an acceptable color for a decorative pumpkin that would rot on some rich suburbanite's porch, but not in the pumpkins that died and melted into the earth where they belonged.

Jessica stopped at the end of the row and took a sip of water. A cluster of flies flew towards her sweaty face. She swatted them away and closed her water bottle. She glanced at the corpse tucked under a cluster of dead squash blossoms. The skin was bloated and bloody, but she could still see the face of the woman with the ankle boots—the wrong shoe for the pumpkin patch, the dumb bitch—berating her for only having white and blue pumpkins. "They're just not natural," she'd insisted. "They're supposed to be orange."

The woman's blood had turned the surrounding pumpkins red. Jessica wondered what she'd think of that. Jessica chuckled to herself as she covered the corpse with the vines, dirt, and moldy pumpkins from her wheelbarrow. It was time to return to the farm. The guests were arriving.

**About the Author:**

Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *Little Paranoias: Stories*, *Without Condition*, and *Seeing Things*. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cemetery Gates Media, Tales to Terrify, and Camden Park Press. When she's not writing, she loves to cook. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.

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**Hooves Operate the Bakesale Cashbox | Dan Greene**

The Goat Man counts the cash while the children serve the wrapped blondies and spiced cider to the customers who have waited so patiently. The children are good workers and conscientious; some of the baked goods are made with amaranth flour. They are excited to save up so our church can purchase more guns. The Goat Man is nearly seven feet tall. I like that he helps us offer nourishment.

**About the Author:**

Dan Greene is an artist based in Los Angeles. His work is primarily visual (though he often incorporates language through asemic motifs) and concerns itself with matters of dignity and failure. Reflecting on a world blighted by misapprehension and the strange forms of overcompensation it provokes.

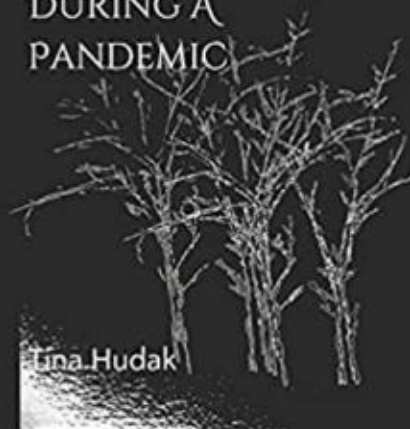
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FRIDAY  
AFTERNOONS

BRIEF WRITINGS  
DURING A  
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*Available in Print & eBook*

Lilac buds started to make their way into the morning light, their scent overwhelmed by that of fresh cut grass. Apart from the occasional hum of bees all was quiet and in perfect geometrical and evenly cut order. However, once you strayed from the main path and climbed up the small hill, the neat parcels vanished like ships into a great storm. Savage weeds had taken charge on all fronts, ivy had covered most of the faces and thick thorns kept guard fearlessly. A skinny tabby was climbing an old haggard tree. The very few branches that remained kept her shelter. Melancholy had made a nest here. The marble statue of a damsel peeked through the leaves.

Her face looked peculiar, serene, and dignified, like she was carrying on with a sacred duty. The visitor reached out with his hand to touch it, but hesitated, as if doing something dishonourable. He looked down at his old, wrinkled hands and frowned, as if they were dirty with sin. He picked up the withered roses, displeased with their state.

He could have done better, hadn't the old florist charged so much for fresh ones. She said that she was not handing out flowers to beggars, turned around and went on with the sweet-talk, as the wealthy customers queued up her door stand. Stupid hag. He could wipe out her crooked counterfeit smile at any time. Maybe he would, eventually.

It took some time to arrive at this precise spot. He made several stops, but flowers were only required for her. All the others did not matter, they were just passing clouds in a murky sky, while she was a comet, brief but poignant. Even their grave markers were pathetic, rotten wood that bear no names and he was unable to recall all their names. He remembered well their faces, but it didn't matter, *they* never mattered. He did because it was a soothing habit, to keep track of one's accomplishments.

He had loved *her* since they could walk, but he always knew that she had not been destined for this world. Her beauty brought her fortunes with men and spite with women. She was fierce and cunning, and her demeanour could easily rub people the wrong way. She never saw him, though for twenty years he had been lurking in her kitchens, stables, gardens, and courtyard, but she never laid eyes on him. A scrawny boy, born of obedient servants, is barely noticed by lords and ladies. By the time he left the manor, she had eyes only for her Duke.

Years went by and he was doing well. Work was constant, he did not necessarily enjoy it, but he believed in its utility. The law was to be abided, people needed rules, and if the rules were broken, they needed to see the consequences. Another day, another face, but the same gratifying feeling of carrying on with one's duty.

One day, they summoned him and told him that his face was different. It was a face that carried weight, it carried generations of privilege, it carried unattainable wealth and beauty. It would cause shock and uproar, but it had to be done. The law was to be abided, that of men and most importantly that of God.

While her Duke was away on a hunt, the mistress had been involved in unholy practices. Several servants witnessed her conversing in strange tongues with an unknown presence. The Duke's father had presented her with the authorities to take the matter into their hands. The trial was brief and the sentence definitive.

He took great pride in his axe. It shone in the sun with glory, its sharp strokes were precise and effective. Not once did it fail him. He cleaned it meticulously after each display.

The night before, on All Hollow's Eve, he dreamed about her. He could touch her porcelain skin, wrap his thick fingers around her neck, feel her pulse quicken under his battered skin. He woke up and opened a window. It was a chilly quiet night. All felt in proper place. She had been like a bright jewel on display for such a long time, that the gaze of others had worn her off. What would the dirty hands of a miner do with such a precious stone? Had he been a Duke would she have eyes only for him? That wouldn't have mattered though. He would still have had to share her with the world and such a life would not have made him content. He went back to sleep and has a placid rest until the first ray of dawn.

It was a warm day, a peculiar earthy scent lingered in the air. He drew a breath in and exhaled a few seconds later, that felt too long. Blood burst from the fresh cut and splashed all over his shirt and onto his face. People were cheering, he wasn't sad, but he felt it was a shame. He had really liked her neck.

#### About the Author:

Cristina Mirzoi works at HP. Inc Romania. Has a Bachelor Degree in Communication and a MA in Religious Studies, with a specialization in Roman Divination. Speaks English, French, Spanish and a bit of Koine Greek. She grew up reading Sherlock Holmes, her favorite author is Ray Bradbury and is obsessed with Terry Pratchett's Discworld. Wes Anderson binge watcher. Animal lover. Currently writing a young adult fantasy novel.

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

"It's weird Sandra."

"What's weird, Jeffery?" His sister asked while cleaning her camera lens.

Jeff finished zipping up his black Calvin jacket, "We spent sixteen months zooming between New York, London, and Warsaw. It feels like we never left."

Sandra shrugged, tucking the clean lens into its case, "It does feel as we're coming off vacation. You packed the candles?"

"Yes," Jeff looked over the bedroom, a legacy of their grandparents, left in the care of the new owners. He gathered up his Coach Messenger bag, "Well, maybe someday we can return to settle down here?"

"Not me, I'm a forever freelancer." She swung the camera over the right shoulder followed by a spot check of her auburn bob cut in an ornate mirror outside of the many rooms, "Let's get this day started. Happy Halloween."

He trailed after her, walking the hallway where they played as kids. Their Great-Grandfather had built the Victorian manor in the waning years of the nineteenth century. It remained the center of their dwindling family until Grandma died. The siblings walked down the curved staircase into the main foyer where guests lingered.

"Happy Halloween morning!" Becky greeted the siblings decked out in a bright orange and black chunky sweater.

"Morning Becky." Sandra smiled, "The house looks amazing."

"Thank you. You did right by selling to us." She said, "Come on, breakfast is waiting."

Glancing at Sandra, Jeff protested, "We have a full day ahead."

Placing her hands on their shoulders to shuffle them forward, as Becky retorted, "I promised your Grandparents I'd take care of you. Now that you are back jet-setting, you need a proper Pittsburgh breakfast."

The conservatory made an excellent sunny dining area. Hanging mums and fall floral arrangements joined with vintage Halloween decorations. The siblings sat in a pair of chairs with a clear view of the continental breakfast. Becky sailed in with two plates in hand, slipping the breakfast in front of Jeff.

Jeff enjoyed the arrangement of the poached eggs and bacon into skull and bones. Sandra left him alone, leaving him to watch the people outside. As he waited, he wrote in his tan leather journal short back stories of people he saw. Notes for future writings. The pencil lead broke forcing him to stop and look up at the woman by the continental table.

Dressed all out in black, save for a collar of gray mesh on the shirt, the woman studied the table with intense care. Her pale skin contrasted with her chestnut pixie cut.

"It's rude to stare." The woman's direct tone surprised him.

Suddenly Jeff felt warm, "Sorry. I've never seen anyone fully scrutinize breakfast before."

"So many pastries," She made a quarter turn towards him, "Perhaps you can make a recommendation?"

Drawn to her, Jeff stepped up to the table, selecting a small package of cereal, "Can't go wrong with the basics."

"Thanks." She spoke with a familiar, yet sharp accent. "May I sit with you?"

With a friendly nod, they sat at the table, chatting until Sandra returned, "Hello?"

"Sandra, this is... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Lina. This is your sister." She said, adding, "I love the picture of you both in the parlor. I adore your house."

"We sold this to Becky and Paul last year, they renovated it into a B and B." Sandra corrected. "Certainty a lot better than what those developers wanted."

"Did you stay the night?" Jeff asked.

Lina thoroughly devoured the cereal, "Yes, in the Lavender room."

Nearly jumping out of her chair, Sandra said, "My old room."

"I found it homey." The woman's smile brightened her gray-green eyes.

"Your accent, is it Polish?" Sandra asked, adding in Polish, "Are you a student?"

It was a bit forward of his sister to ask, but Lina smiled, "Yes, I am."

Their Grandparents insisted they learn the language, "Where from Poland are you?"

"My family is from Osieck, just south of Warsaw." She paused to taste her orange juice. Jeff noticed her odd reaction, it seemed to be off.

"Really, our mother's family is from the same region. We visited them over the summer. I remember taking a day trip through Osieck." Jeff's interest peaked.

"I knew I recognized you." Lina gave them a wide grin, "So are you two a photographer and a writer?"

Sandra perked up, "We're freelancers, working for magazines and such. Right now, we're working on our own project. Halloween celebrated in Western PA."

"Sounds like a serious project." The way Lina presented herself was familiar. He couldn't place it. "Honestly, I don't get it at all."



Jeff chuckled silently, "You sound like our Polish cousins. They loved the idea of dressing up and partying, all the rest not as much. Too pagan, too occult for their sensibilities."

"Now, Dad's family, our Irish cousins, it's a celebration." Sandra sipped her coffee and smile.

Lina shifted on the seat, looked at a barren brown tree decorated with jack-o-lanterns and owls. "This is interesting."

Sandra leaned forward, "It's a Halloween Tree, from one of our favorite books. Each pumpkin is a relative or friend we lost. The top two are our grandparents, followed by Mom and Dad, and our sister."

"I'm sorry." She gently tapped the last pumpkin.

"It's okay. Are you alone?" Jeff asked the woman.

Sandra gave him a perked glance, as Lina answered, "Yes. I'm here for the weekend. Why?"

"If you aren't doing anything, we could show you Halloween in the city."

"I don't want to impose..." Lina answered softly.

"It's not," Sandra interjected, "You'll love it."

Lina looked at them, was she wondering why strangers were inviting her out? They could feel the same way towards her. Yet there was an easiness between them that didn't feel strange.

"Sure, I'll get my coat." Lina said standing.

The siblings waited at the bottom of the stairs for Lina. She walked down stairs sporting a denim jacket, while looking at the pictures on the wall. Stepping on the landing, she said, "Beautiful family."

"Thanks." Sandra said, "I love your jacket, I had one like it in high school."

Lina smiled, "Yes. I'm ready to explore the October Country."

"Sounds perfect," Jeff said after cleaning his glasses, his pale green eyes now stared back clearly.

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"How do people enjoy that?" Lina asked panting on the street. Minutes before they broke out of the haunted house in combination of laughter and screams.

A flash from Sandra's camera caught the moment as Jeff spoke, "We love it. It is just fun being scared."

Lina turned around to look up at the art-deco building, "It's a perfect setting for scares."

"It's one of the oldest haunted houses in the country, we have been going here... twenty years." Jeff noticed his sister studying her camera, again. "The building began as a bank, an office space, a theatre, and now a premiere haunted attraction."

Checking her phone, Sandra said, "Hey, Jeff, we need to head over now."

Looking at his watch, "Yeah. Lina, if you don't mind there is something we need to do."

Lina became stoic, "Of course."

As they returned to the parking lot, Jeff asked his sister, "Is there something wrong with your cameras? You have been funny with them all day."

"I don't know. The autofocus is giving me trouble." She answered, "Anytime Lina is in the shot the camera can't focus on her. I have to go manual or focus on a point near her. It works great when you are in the shot."

As Sandra scrolled through the pictures, their familiarity touched him, "She's beautiful."

"She is a great subject. Jeff, I like her."

He looked back, Lina was several steps behind. "She is great. I have to admit she is really easy to know."

"Hey, where are we going?" Lina asked.

The siblings nodded once, Sandra answered, "To do a family tradition."

Perhaps one of the understated facts of Pittsburgh it retains rural character with an urban setting. The forested hills and valleys blended with concrete and steel. Jeff parked the car in the cemetery's gate house lot. Gathering what they needed, the trio left the car, and began walking the curved trails of the hills.

"Most of our family is buried here." Sandra explained, "It's one of the oldest graveyards in the region."

"The most rugged, they built it to avoid floods from the three rivers." Jeff said, "I won't drive it at night."

They walked the trail upwards, passing the grave of Andrew Simons, surrounded with jars filled with coins and action features. Sandra dropped a few coins into one, "He liked collecting coins."

Lina paused for a second, looking over the grave, nodded once and continued forward. "A lot of these are decorated. People still remember, like you."

Several graves had Halloween decorations with carefully placed skeletons, jack-o-lanterns, lights, and other elements one could mistake this for an attraction. "Yeah. People change these up over the year."

"It's sad coming during Christmas." Sandra spoke softly like walking through a church.

A huge grim pumpkin stared at them, Lina spoke up, "The stories say that these are meant to keep away the bad spirits, but instead you remember them."

"Our parents are buried up around the hill, in a little nook on the side, with our grandparents and sister." Jeff wasn't sure which one of them spoke. His mind was thinking of someone else.

"You two mentioned your sister only a few times all day." Walking slightly faster, Lina had moved ahead, "Was there something wrong with ... her?"

The question stunned them. It was deeply personal, but that didn't seem wrong that Lina asked. Sandra began, "Her name was Paulina. I was four when she was born with damaged lungs and a bad heart. She barely lived for a day. October thirteenth, twenty-one years ago."

Lina stopped. "I'm sorry."

Jeff continued as memories surfaced. "Nothing could have been done for her."

"Do you remember anything about her?" Lina asked with a strange sense of feeling to her tone.

Jeff sighed. "Goodness, I remember how frail she was. I told her that I would always protect her."

"For me, all I remember is that I wanted a baby sister." Sandra's cracked. "I never cried so hard. Even after the accident that killed Mom and Dad."

Jeff reached into the travel pack, removed an artificial candle, "it's a family tradition to place candles on the graves at this time."

"I know," Lina turned towards them, "It's a Polish tradition on the First of November, All Saints Day. Followed by drinking and eating."

Sandra brightened, "Yeah. Our Irish side would start on October thirtieth with wild drinking and eating to celebrate the dead."

"They like that." Lina smiled. "Often spirits visit the living to see how they are doing. Some may try to cause harm while others just want to say goodbye."

The hills and valleys funneled the wind, blowing a hard cold along the trails. As they approached the final turn, Jeff realized they were following Lina.

"Even though she died, I always invited Paulina to my tea parties. She sat at the end of this little tea table, between Snugs the Seal and Flappy the Owl. I would sing silly songs to them." Sandra's voice cracked. "There were times I could visualize her singing with me."

"They weren't silly." Lina continued towards their family's section. Light shone from lampposts of a century past, casting a sepia tone over the monuments and temples, broken mausoleums and fallen statues. Her voice carried on the wind.

"Fly little Owl, fly with your breakie feathers, silent and proud, high and far..."

"That song..." Sandra froze in place, "How did you know?"

Lina turned around, approached the siblings getting close to Jeff. In the muted light, he saw the shadow of their mother. He did nothing as she removed a candle from the bag, stepped away and began the final walk up the stone stairs into the Harrison's lot.

Surrounded by the graves of departed cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents with several generations of great, Lina went straight for their parents' graves.

Two moderate stones of polished marble glowed a translucent blue under the light. Beside them was their sister's marker, a simple headstone with a pair of doves etched into it.

Lina knelt in front, began pulling away dead dry leaves and weeds as Sandra and Jeff came up behind her. He had a revelation of Polish nicknames. They never had a chance to give Paulina one.

In shock, Sandra dropped beside the woman. It can't be true. Yet, they spent the day with her. Took pictures with her. They ate pizza and funnel-cakes together. She was here with them. "Why?"

Removing the last bit of clutter from in front of her name, Paulina turned on the light, resting it on the top of the stone. She looked at her sister and then at him.

"I came back to say hello."

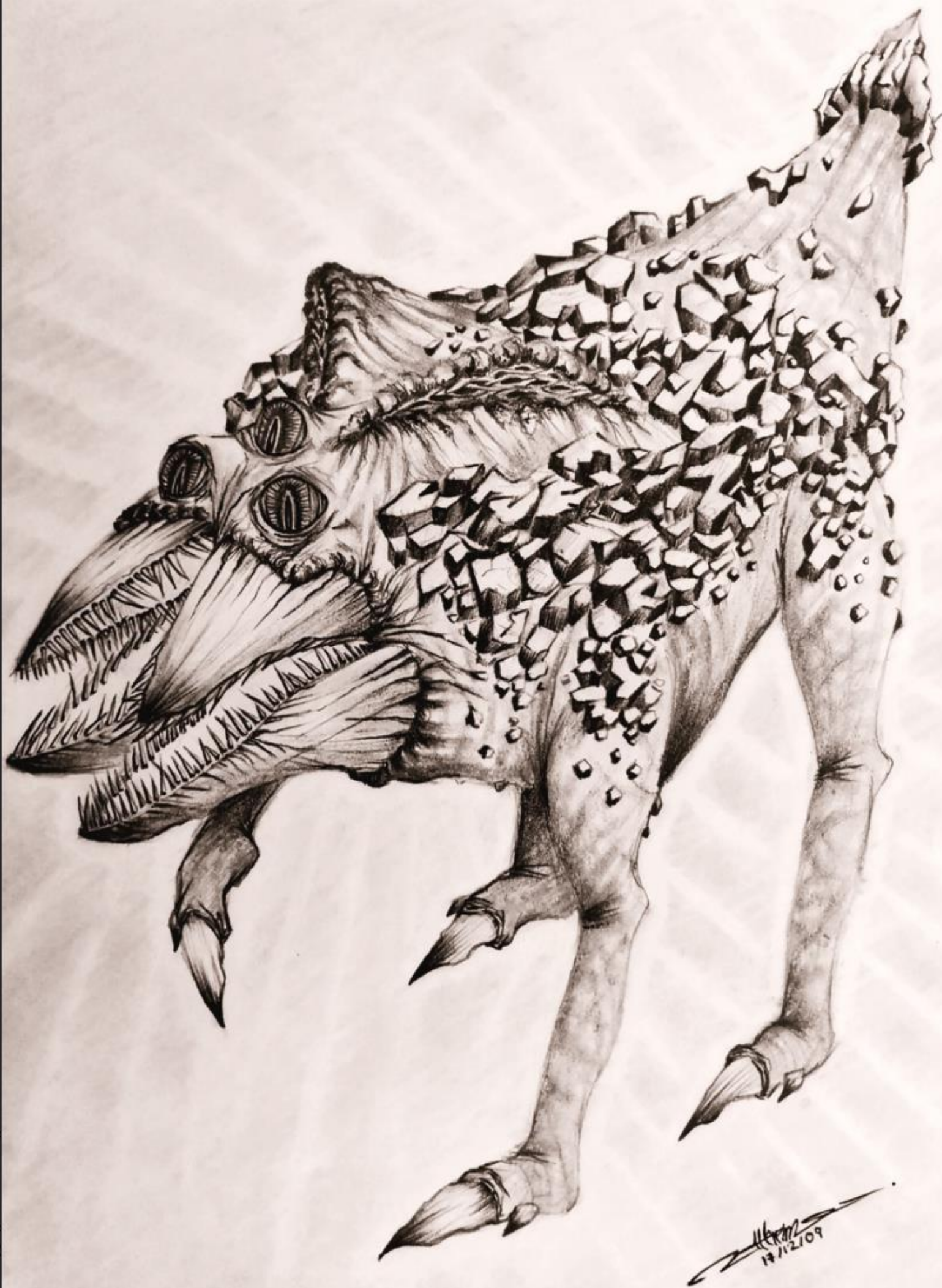
#### **About the Author:**

Gregory L. Steighner is a passionate writer and photographer drawing inspiration from the world and people of Western PA for stories. He resides with his wife Nikki, mother-in-law, and three energetic cats.

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I had never wanted nor, for that matter, ever needed, a lot from life, only to live forever. That was all I ever asked. Of course that was the one thing others either couldn't, or wouldn't tolerate. The Bradshaw's however were different. They may not have understood, but at least they had offered me a home and along with it, a certain degree of safety, almost immunity you might say, from the hostile feelings and malicious intent of others. I knew it was something of a symbiotic relationship, there was give and take on both sides of our alliance, but better that than what could have been. A life of fear, mistrust and forever looking over my shoulder, knowing I had no choice but to be constantly on the move. This though was different, provided I helped them, they offered me shelter and a permanent home, time to reflect, to read, to learn more of the world, and perhaps more importantly sustenance. I on the other hand only had to do what I would have done regardless.

It had been the same old wager, mid-day till mid-day. The Bradshaw's had employed the tactic to their advantage for three generations, wiping out debts, gambling vast amounts of money and winning, knowing the outcome was a certainty. In the town, and indeed throughout the length and breadth of the county, rumour had it, if any credence could be given to it, that the Bradshaw's had, on more than one occasion employed the practice of issuing the challenge to eliminate both business and political opponents alike.

The old house, situated as it was in the middle of Claystone moor, had stood empty for as long as any living soul could recall, and stories were rife about what curse had befallen it. All that was truly understood with any measure of conviction was that no one who was foolhardy enough to accept the test had survived. The rules of the contest were simple enough, merely to endure a day, mid-day till mid-day in the old house, and emerge alive. No one who had accepted the wager had ever survived. With the mid-day sun at its equinox the doors of the house unlocked, the corpse of the poor soul who had accepted the gauntlet would be found eyes wide, mouth gapping open, a look of sheer terror etched deep into his features. Upon examination however there were never any signs of injury or foul play, no wounds, scars or any other indication of physical attack. Neither could there be found any evidence to support a theory of poisoning of any kind. On each and every occasion the absence of life was apportioned to shock, dying of fright if you will.

The Bradshaw's and I were the only living beings who were privy to the truth, and neither they nor I were about to reveal that particular secret. It had been kept strictly within the family for more than ninety years, passed only from father to son when the time was right. For my part it was a question of survival, for the Bradshaw's it was a means to power and wealth.

Happen-stance would have it that we first encountered each other. I had been desperate, living almost feral on the streets of that miserable city, when the current lord Bradshaw's grandfather occasioned upon me. I was at my lowest, weak and decrepit. The poor soul who obviously thought I would be easy prey for his drunken debauchery, was laying on top of me, half naked, devoid of life, when Abe Bradshaw came, as he thought, to my aid. He pulled the wretch who had sought to have his way with me. off me, and stood stunned into motionlessness peering through the dim light as my exposed and wasted body resumed its rejuvenated form. I could feel the life force of that unfortunate, the dishevelled body of who lay at the feet of my would-be saviour, surging through my bloodstream. Instead of running, shouting for help, the reaction I had come to expect, Abe assisted me to my feet offering me his coat to cover my nakedness before hurrying me away from the scene.

I was never quite sure whether he was the bravest or most reckless of men I'd ever encountered. He displayed no dread of me, nor anxiety in my presence, and he never made any direct enquiry regarding the needs of a succubus. He did however, on that very first night, make me an offer. If I could aid him in making his fortune he in return would protect me. His disastrous gambling habit soon became a winning streak that would last throughout the rest of his life, a winning streak that would span the generations. He soon acquired the manor house and the house on the moor and so a legend was born.

Those who entered the house, those who were about to forfeit their lives to ensure my continued existence, were of no concern to me. They were merely the food on my plate and the Bradshaw's my farmers. Nevertheless I did derive a small pleasure from preparing my feast. From noon till night fall I would watch as they searched the old house for any sign of what might transpire. Then, a little before midnight I would show myself. Always dressed elegantly, but with a generous amount of bosom and certainly a glimpse of thigh to keep their attention. I would engage them in conversation, entice them with my young firm body, flirting, the promise of what was so obviously being offered.

It was always on the stroke of midnight when I would strike, often in the throes of passion, always satisfying my appetite.



**About the Author:**

Alan Porter-Barnes has, for the past twelve years, been involved with and is generally regarded as the leader/organiser of 'Scottie Rd Writers' (SRW), which is a Liverpool (England) based community writing group. Alan has had a number of short stories published and has read and performed as a storyteller at various locations in and around Liverpool, including the Everyman & Playhouse theatres, the National Wild-flower Centre, Fort Perch-Rock, Liverpool Central Library, Bluecoat Chambers, and BBC Radio Merseyside amongst others.

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**Gifted | Kelly-Ann Porter**

Ada Mills small body convulsed as the electricity ran through it. Her head ached and felt fuzzy, but she had to remember so she focused on the flickering lights above her and tried to drown out the memories of her parents abandoning her to this torture. He said he was a doctor with a new treatment that would cure the girl, but he was just another failed scientist or quack like the others. None of them would listen to the truth that Ada could see and converse with spirits as easily as she could with other humans. They didn't understand that everyone was born with the gift of sight, but choose to dismiss or ignore it the older they became for fear of ridicule. They called her mad and submitted her to all forms of painful and cruel treatments, but this was the worst she had to endure. The child held in her scream, it would all be over soon, she would be free to leave this place, the spirits had told her so.

The doctor sat the girl up so he could look at her, her smile unnerved him, how was she still cheerful after what she had just been subjected to?

"Put up the charge and let's go again." He told the nurse.

Clearly the treatment hadn't worked if she was still smiling like that. If he would have taken notice and followed her gaze, he would have seen that it was not him that the child was looking at but the dark robed figure over his shoulder. *Poor souls who had lost their gift*, thought Ada, *they couldn't even see when death was coming for them*.

**About the Author:**

Kelly-Ann Porter hails from Liverpool, England, where she enjoys nothing more than spending time with her Pomeranian Syaoran (little wolf). She is an accomplished crafter and maker, creating costumes, jewellery and props. Her active imagination manifests itself in the many short stories she has written.

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**The Son Clone | Christopher T. Dabrowski**

We cloned our son. Posthumously, of course.

Alan was five when he was hit by a landing taxplane.

We could not accept the loss of a child.

We wanted him back. At all costs.

When we received the clone, we believed that our son had returned—after all, we saw the same body, although....

But this new Alan was different.

The first was a polite, loving child.

The second is the devil—he destroys everything. He beats and bites us whenever we come near.

Someone finally told us the unpleasant truth—the body is the same, the soul is not.

**About the Author:**

Christopher T. Dąbrowski is a writer and screenwriter from Poland. Author of several books published in countries such as Poland, USA, Germany and Spain.

*Seven stones in the Spring for the maidens fair.*

The children chanted as they led the Halloween procession between the standing stones. There were over a hundred monoliths, precisely arranged in concentric circles. No one knew their origin, but at each seasonal equinox the villagers gathered to honour the monument that had stood sentinel over the valley for thousands of years.

Nancy laughed as the children shrieked and chased each other around the clearing at the center of the stones. It was seven years since she'd danced with the girls and boys. In modern times the 'maidens' in the seasonal chant had encompassed all the innocent young of the village.

The long shadows cast by their candle-lit jack o'lanterns made the stones seem alive. *Maybe that's why they're called The Dancers* Nancy mused. Though legends about the stones were as noisy and abundant as the river that had formed the valley and brought life to the village. Nancy's favourite was the tale of how the stones would rise en pointe at the turn of the seasons and rotate in a stately glissade like shadows on a sundial. There were darker legends, of course, hinted at but never spoken by the elders.

*Twenty stones in the Summer for a mother's care.*

The village mothers, many with babes in arms, wove their way into the next circle of stones. The proud fathers followed, carrying fantastically carved pumpkins which they lay on the ground, facing outwards in a ring, as if to protect their families.

The villagers all wore home-made Halloween masks, demons and angels, the grotesque and the beautiful. Nancy did not enter the inner circles - she was no longer a maiden, but neither was she a mother, yet. Instead she joined her parents and the older members of the population, striding around the outer circle.

*Forty-three stones for All Hallow's Eve, sinners beware.*

So the chant progressed. Nancy frowned. She hadn't been home for five years, but the last time she'd taken part in the ritual, there had only been forty-one stones in the rhyme. She surreptitiously counted the third circle. Forty-three, evenly spaced. She stopped briefly and peered at the ground. There was no sign of any disturbance but fitting in two new stones would have meant moving all of the rest.

What had her mom said yesterday? Nancy had just arrived from the city, lugging her big suitcase up the lane to her childhood home. She'd sat in the kitchen, half-asleep, lulled by fatigue and the warm smell of pumpkin pie from the oven. She'd barely followed her mom's chattering.

'UNESCO turned down our application to be a world heritage site. Again! They said our stones were fake! They said that historic photographic evidence showed that extra stones have been added at intervals over the years, that's it's just a folly not a bona fide ancient monument.'

Nancy shook her head and followed the procession. It looked as if the committee were right, stones had been added, but Nancy couldn't see how.

*Fifty-four stones for the day of Christ's birth, that the blessed may rise again there.*

The villagers chanted as they walked around the outer circle of stones.

*Fifty-two, thought Nancy, it's fifty-two stones.*

Nancy shivered. Her mother had hinted the stones had earth magic, which was neither wicked nor benign. Those qualities were carried by the people who walked around the monument.

The chanting procession was soporific, even in the chill of an October evening. Nancy found her mind drifting back to yesterday when she'd arrived home.

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"Mom?" Nancy called. She stepped into her childhood home's oak-lined hallway. No one ever locked their doors around here. Her city sensibilities quailed at the lack of security, but the open house favoured her surprise visit.

"Nancy? Is that you? Bob, she's home for the holiday!" her mom's voice flowed down the corridor along with the welcoming aroma of pumpkin pie spice.

"Nancy?" her dad's bass voice boomed as he clomped down the wooden staircase to enfold his daughter in a bear hug. Her mother joined in soon after.

"Honey! I wish you'd told us you were coming.

"I wanted to surprise you. I hope that's ok - can I stay for the holiday?"

"Don't be silly, this is your home, you can stay anytime." her mother said. "Come on in, honey. Bob, take her coat, carry that suitcase upstairs. We kept your bedroom just as it was - you'll always be welcome here."

Nancy sighed with relief as she popped the buttons that strained a little across her belly. She shrugged the heavy wool coat from her shoulders, tilting her body slightly to hide her changing waistline. She wanted to break the news herself when the time was right.

"Come on into the kitchen, put your feet up and I'll make you a mug of cocoa. You look tired and see how thin your arms are, you need to take better care of yourself now that you're expecting."

Nancy's cheeks reddened. "I should have known you'd see it," she laughed ruefully. "Mom, you're right, I am pregnant, the doctor says I'm about 14 weeks and, Mom, it's a little girl."

"And the father?"

"Oh he had to work, but I'm sure you'll meet him soon." Nancy curled her hand around her barely perceptible belly.

"I'm sad that you didn't invite us to your wedding. You are wed, aren't you? I don't see a ring."

"He swept me off my feet. We went to a small ceremony in City Hall. My ring's at the jeweler's, it slipped right off my finger, but his is still firmly attached." Nancy's laugh was forced.

"Maybe you could have a blessing in the church. Folk around here would love to see you doing well."

"Maybe a christening? Next year?"

"If you're properly wed, you can come to the stones tonight. They'll bless you and the new life you carry."

"Oh Mom, that's so old-fashioned. Would they curse me if I wasn't properly wed?" Nancy teased. Her mother scowled.

"You have nothing to worry about." Nancy lied, "He made sure the marriage papers were in order."

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A gentle hand on her elbow broke her reverie. The procession had stopped, and the remaining villagers had lain their jack-o-lanterns on the ground, facing inwards. Darker legends had hinted that the lanterns laid in the inner circle faced outwards to protect the families, while the inward facing lanterns kept evil from escaping into the village. In the leering light, the space between them looked as inviting and deadly as a cliff edge.

"Honey, you've never done this part of the dance before." Nancy barely recognized her mom, her face was obscured by a red leather devil's mask, but her mom's voice was soft. "Next year, you can join the mothers, but this year will you join us between the sinners and the blessed?"

Nancy nodded as best she could without dislodging her angel mask. Her daddy had made it for her when she was a little girl, using swan feathers he'd collected from the riverbank. She'd been part of the village once, before she left for university and a career in the city. Life had been sweet, very sweet for a while until Brad had betrayed her. She looked at the third circle, the Sinners' stones. It wasn't her fault; her only sin was naivety, in believing that Brad would leave his wife. She hadn't lied, his wedding ring was firmly glued to his finger, his marriage paperwork, especially the pre-nup. in his wife's favour, was perfectly in order. But he wasn't married to Nancy. She was the victim here. She just needed to get through the holiday then tomorrow maybe, she'd tell her parents the truth -- that she'd left everything behind in the city and planned to move home for good.

She saw her father reach out and take her mother's hand; his other hand engulfed Nancy's and he led them into the flickering light between the sinners and the blessed.

*Dance for the maidens, dance for the mothers, dance for sinners, dance for the blessed* they chanted, over and over as their steps wove between the sinners's stones and the blessed. Her mother led, pulling her father along behind her. Holding on tight to her father's hand, Nancy trailed behind. In the dim light, Nancy thought they looked like young lovers, dancing in the meadow, their love deep and eternal. She was caught up in their joy, feeling a peace that she'd not known since before she'd met Brad. She was barely aware of the other villagers following behind. She sensed the outer stones accepting and blessing her parents' while the sinners' stones seemed to shrink away from them. There were a hundred stones to traverse, but even so, Nancy worried that the ritual would end too soon, before she was sated with delight.

"Ouch!" Nancy cried as a sharp pain stabbed her heel.

She looked around, assuming that she had lagged a little and that one of the villagers behind had accidentally kicked her heel. A fine mist, no dust, was rising from the base of the stones, blurring the figures dancing behind her. There was no one close.

She stopped for a moment to rub her foot with her free hand. She winced, her heel was too painful to touch, and her hand came up wet. She stared at her palm, in the dim light, her blood looked black.

"Daddy, stop a minute, I need some help." she called, distractedly trying to tug him back to her. The rising dust was thicker now, and she could only see his heavy shadow in front of her. The peace she'd felt a moment ago vanished.

Her teeth chattered as a chilled breeze howled between the stone circles. As she felt her hand slip from her father's grasp, she started shaking in earnest, gripped by fear.

She looked around again. The flickering light from the jack o'lanterns winked in and out. The dust rose higher, and shadows gathered beneath the stones as they rose from the earth and crowded around her. She looked down at her injured foot. Her heel had been crushed inwards, as if it had been thumped by a heavy mallet. Her gaze seemed to release the pain. She screamed and fell forward, one hand outstretched, the other cradling her belly.

A stone seemed to reach out to halt her fall. But the impact jarred her wrist, breaking the delicate bones and forcing them through the skin. She clutched her bruised arm and limped forward, trying to find a gap between the stones, to escape.

"Mommy? Daddy? Help me!" she screamed; her throat raw with desperation.

From far away she heard her mom's voice, "Honey, honey, where are you?"

Her father boomed, "Where are you honey? I can hear you, but I can't see you." His voice sounded frantic.

Nancy screamed again, "Daddy, I'm just here." She glimpsed his shadowy form, but the dust rising from the dancing stones was a thick veil between them.

A monolith crashed into her hip, bringing her to her knees. Her eyes filled with tears, the pain was unbearable, but she knew, deep down, that she mustn't lie down, mustn't lose consciousness.

"Mommy? Daddy? Help me!" she cried, as a monolith leaned onto her back. She heard the crack of breaking ribs. It was too painful to breathe but she had to keep going. She leaned forward, trying to protect her belly.

"Mom, for your granddaughter. Help me." her voice was just a whisper as she tasted the salty tang of blood on her lips. She fell to the ground, her breathing whistling through punctured lungs.

From far away she heard the villagers chanting, *Dance for the sinners, their souls for to damn*

She could hear her mom sobbing and her dad bellowing with frustration. It sounded as if the other men were holding him back. She heard the priest shouting urgently, "Your daughter is among the sinners, you cannot help her."

"My daughter is innocent." her father roared.

Nancy heard her mother say, "Unless she lied. I warned her! I warned her." Nancy heard her mother's voice trail away.

Desperation allowed Nancy to crawl towards the outer circle. Maybe if she could reach the blessed stones, she could ask for forgiveness. But the Sinners' stones crowded together, blocking her way and snuffing the last of the lantern light.

Nancy looked up. The stones were rising as one and circling above her body. She whimpered and curled up small. Having an affair was no sin these days; mistakes were not a sin. Around her, the harsh voices of the Sinners' stones thundered, "SIN IS SIN!"

"My baby is innocent!" Nancy cried, "Can you not save her?"

The stones halted for a moment, as if in thought. "The innocent cannot lie with the sinners." Nancy felt a flare of hope and dared to raise her head to face her accusers.

"But our judgement is given." the stones proclaimed.

Nancy felt a cramp deep in her belly. Horrified, she glanced down. A dark stain was seeping through her Halloween robe. She whimpered. *It was too soon, too soon.* Another contraction forced her to the ground. She lay on her back, unable to stop the torrent of blood and her baby's life streaming from her body.

Nancy looked up; one by one the stones descended, the dreadful pressure crushing her bones one by one, reforming them, like diamonds, as her blood and flesh seeped into the ground.

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The day dawned late on November the first. The villagers wandered down to the stones to remove the litter left by the Halloween ritual. Nancy's mom and dad walked slowly around the ancient stones. They were perfectly spaced; there was no way of telling new from ancient.

*Eight stones for the maidens fair,*

"They allowed our granddaughter to stand with the innocent." Nancy's mom observed.

*Twenty-one stones for a mother's care,*

*Forty-four stones - Sinners' beware,*

"But our Nancy stands in sin, forever. Was it really so bad, what she did?" Nancy's dad said.

*Fifty-four stones that the blessed may rise there.*

"We could have guessed, should have guessed, that she was lying about the father." Nancy's mom reflected.



Tears flowed from their eyes, but as they walked through the outer circle of stones they smiled. The blessing of the dancers flowed over them, washing away their pain, their memories.

"It's a shame Nancy didn't come home for Halloween." her father said.

"Maybe next year." her mother said. "The stones might have UNESCO World Heritage status by then - they're very special."

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

Alex Grehy's sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate. Yet her vivid prose, thought-provoking poetry and original view of the world have led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted! Her work has been published worldwide and she is a regular contributor to the Ladies of Horror Flash Project.

**Author Blog:** [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

**Twitter:** [@indigodreamers](#)

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#### **Plenty of Blame | B. T. Petro**

The early demise of my creature, my first creature, was my fault—and Mother's. Her written version of the transformation spell was atrocious. Still, I helped her dozens of times and had I paid attention, it would have been faster and stronger.

Releasing my pet to feed near the village of Jakubany was also a mistake. With decades of visits from my Mother's handiwork, the elders were prepared with silver swords and nets of iron. I should have chosen a more isolated hamlet.

Letting my creature feast on Mother may have been an error, but one that won't happen again.

#### **Not Native Soil | B. T. Petro**

After translating her late grandmother's journal from Slovak, Darina was surprised that her Babka Yunchak and their ancestors were respected hedge witches in the Tatra Mountains.

Instructions for healing potions filled most journal pages, but it was the entry for the bugbear that intrigued Darina. With the right spell, the mischievous creature could be quite useful.

She ordered some peony for the summoning and absinthium for the binding and then cast the spell.

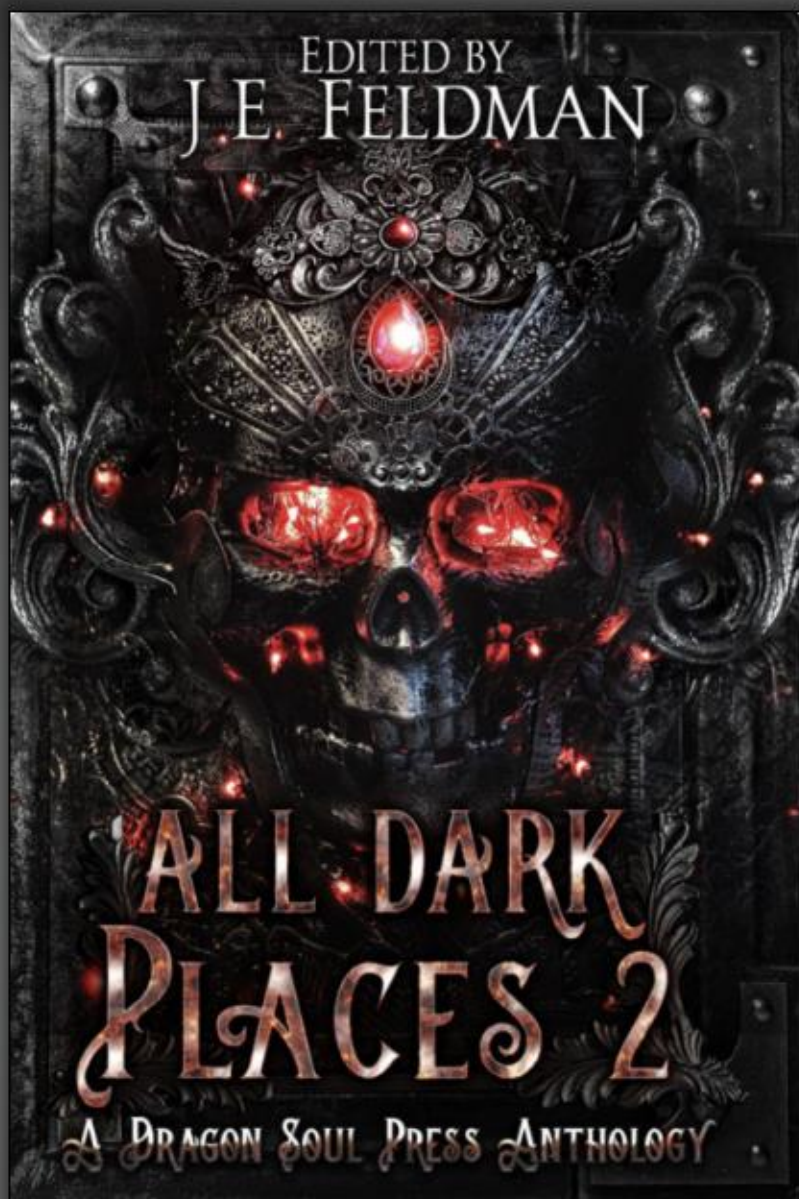
When a hobgoblin appeared, it explained that absinthium was not native to North America, and had no power to command.

That ended the line of Tatra witches.

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

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.





*Mike Lera's  
novelette INK  
featured in  
'All Dark  
Places 2'*

Some tattoos never let  
you forget they're there!

# INK

A novelette by  
Mike Lera



Available in paperback and eBook on Amazon!

"Go ahead. Grab a handful." Stephanie's friend urged, nodding toward the bowl of candy on the small table, set on the neighbor's porch next to the front door. A bright orange cloth emblazoned with black spiders was draped over the table. A pair of rubber severed hands rested on either side of the bowl. Fake blood had been splattered all around.

"I don't know, Nance," Stephanie murmured. "The sign says 'Happy Halloween Kids! Take One.' Not, 'Take as Much as You Like, Grown Up Pigs'. It's an honor-system thing."

"Who's gonna know?" Nance pushed Stephanie closer to the bowl.

Stephanie scoffed. "Besides, this is for the neighborhood kids, the trick-or-treaters." She backed away from the bowl. "We're too old for this, anyway."

"But it's Halloween, and there's so much candy to be had!" Nance reached over to grab a handful of sweets, which she then stuffed into her over-sized purse. "Everybody gets to be a little bad on Halloween." Nance unwrapped a bite-sized candy bar, and shoved it in her mouth. "It's expected," she mumbled through chocolate nougat.

Stephanie looked side-ways at her friend, and shook her head. "I don't know about *that*." She stepped away from the table and reached for the brass knocker on the front door. Shaped like a fist, the knocker banged like a small thunder clap under Stephanie's hand.

The door creaked open. A pale green face, wreathed in frizzy blue hair, gawked at the two women. "Velcome, mine beauties," a dry voice cackled in a bad German accent.

"Happy Halloween, Gertie!" Stephanie chirped. The green witch flung the door wide open.

"Incoming!" Gertie hollered back over her shoulder to the costumed crowd in the den. Gertie wore a store-bought nylon black robe with a matching necklace of plastic bones; her sleeves were so long her hands disappeared. She waved one arm to welcome the young women inside.

"Thanks for the invite," Stephanie giggled as she moved into the house. "Wow, have you outdone yourself with all these decorations!" Thick artificial spider web hung from every lamp and doorway, a dozen pointy witch hats were suspended from the ceiling, plastic chains draped across the stair railing like a Christmas garland, jack-o-lantern themed candle holders adorned shelves and end tables. A CD of Halloween Hits played on a boombox nestled inside the cold fireplace.

"Ta," was all Nance could muster; she didn't want Gertie to see she had a mouthful of contraband candy. She slid in behind Stephanie.

"Putrid punch is in the skull bowl on the sideboard," Gertie directed. "Along with a variety of stomach-turning snacks. Enjoy! Or don't!" she snickered theatrically.

As the two women began to walk towards the refreshments, Gertie stopped them. "No costume this year, my dears?" she asked forlornly. "You're no fun."

"I thought we were too old for that," Stephanie stuttered. She was embarrassed to see she and Nance were the only party-goers not in disguise. If anyone asked about her costume, she'd say something ironic like, "I'm the Average American Consumer." That should get a laugh. Maybe.

"Oh, honey, you're never too old to be someone—or something—else on Halloween." Gertie grinned, exposing her stained yellow teeth. *She really did go all in on her outfit*, Stephanie mused. The green witch continued, "It's the one night we can be our true selves."

"Well, then I wanna be rich, famous, and well-connected," Nance offered. Gertie threw her head back and laughed, making a sound like glass cracking. A sound that danced across Nance's scalp like frigid bony fingers. Nance and Stephanie moved away to mix in with the other party-goers.

"What the hell was that all about?" Nance whispered to Stephanie as they refilled their little plastic skull cups with the spiked, blood-red punch from the skull bowl. Even the ladle was a plastic skull, on the end of a long plastic bone. The punch was sickly sweet, with a bitter after-taste. Too much artificial sweetener, maybe? The girls willfully ignored the unappetizing after-taste, as the punch packed quite the alcoholic wallop.

"Gertie just really gets into the swing of Halloween, that's all," Stephanie replied, grimacing at the array of ghoulish snacks laid out before them. Finger sandwiches which *did* look like severed fingers between two narrow, rectangular slices of white bread. Smearred with ketchup, of course. A bowl of peeled white grapes—*supposed to be*

*eyeballs*, Stephanie suspected. A plate with cow tongue sliced thin, ready to adorn a saltine cracker. And some sort of dark red pudding dolloped into plastic shot glasses.

Nance picked up one of the pudding glasses, and sniffed. “Gads, this is vile,” she gagged, setting the untasted pudding back down on the table. “No wonder nobody’s eating it.” She fanned her hand in front of her face. “I think I’ll stick to punch.” She slipped her hand into her purse, and surreptitiously retrieved another candy bar. “And you said I shouldn’t take all that candy from the kids’ bowl.”

“Candy from the kids’ bowl?” Gertie appeared, suddenly, behind them. “Did you say you took ‘all that candy from the kids’ bowl’?” Peeking out from beneath a fringe of frizzy blue hair, Gertie’s eyes were sad.

“Did you not read the sign? I was very careful about the wording.” Gertie shook her head. Stephanie rolled her eyes. Why did Nance never think the rules applied to her? Now they’d probably be asked to leave Gertie’s party. And not invited back, next year. Even worse, since Stephanie lived next door, this would make all future neighborhood encounters extremely awkward.

Gertie looked at Stephanie, then Nance. “Walk with me,” she said sternly. They accompanied her outside to the front porch. Gertie turned to shut the door firmly, quietly behind them. Under the distorting shadows cast by the single porch light, Gertie leaned in close to their faces. Nance pulled away; Gertie’s breath reeked of that foul pudding.

“I put so much of myself into this holiday,” she hissed. “You have no idea!” Gertie raised her arms up, allowing her long black sleeves to fall away—revealing the bloody, cauterized stumps where her hands should have been.

Stephanie looked down at the small table, realizing the two severed hands on either side of the candy bowl weren’t rubber props, they were—

Nance’s eyes bulged. She frantically dug through her purse, dumping what was left of the purloined candy back into the bowl. “Sorry, sorry, so sorry,” she whined softly.

“Not. Good. Enough.” Gertie stage-whispered, closing in on Nance. Stephanie backed away, and in doing so, lost her footing on the porch steps and tumbled down onto the evening-cool grass. She wanted to get up and run away, run as fast as she could, but one glaring look from Gertie froze her. Before her eyes, Gertie’s stumps grew green translucent claws.

“Sure,” Gertie croaked, “What was it you said, Nance? *Everybody gets to be a little bad on Halloween.*” The wrinkles in Gertie’s face deepened into crevasses.

“And that’s true,” the green witch continued. “But there’s bad, and then there’s BAD.” Gertie lunged for Nance, grabbing the frightened thief by the throat with her unreal claw-hands.

“Sweets are for the *children!*” the green witch hissed. “And you *don’t* steal from the children—not on Halloween!” She leaned in close to Nance’s now pallid face. “In my circles, adults crave a different kind of treat—” Now with an unnaturally long, thick purple tongue, Gertie licked her cracked lips. “We require something a bit more salty, more coppery-tinged—more *meaty!*”

Gertie sniffed Nance’s horrified face, and snorted once before biting a chunk out of the thief’s cheek; deliriously, she rolled her eyes as she rolled the meat around in her mouth. Nance thrashed, and cried out, but to no avail. Stephanie watched, helplessly paralyzed in the yard, as the green witch dragged Nance back into her house, where the Halloween party now raged with a furious intensity. Techno goth blared with a bass line thumping like a migraine headache from the boombox. Quickly, the front door slammed with deafening finality amid the cheers of the revelers.

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

With an MA in English Literature from SMU, Hillary Lyon founded and for 20 years served as senior editor for the independent poetry publisher, Subsynchrous Press. Her speculative, horror, and sci-fi stories have appeared in numerous print and online publications. She’s also an illustrator for horror/sci-fi, and pulp fiction sites. And she loves to hand-paint furniture and accessories.

**Website:** [Hillary Lyon](http://HillaryLyon.com)



Adam, Jason, and Caleb stood on the small, seemingly deserted street.

"Go in, go up to the attic, take a selfie up there that proves you had been in the attic, then come back," Jason said, turning to Caleb. "Simple."

"Why do I have to take a selfie? You two are coming with me, right?"

"We aren't going up," Jason said. "Both of us have already gone to the attic. You're the only one who hasn't."

Caleb looked across the unkempt lawn at the large white house set back from the road. The early 1800s two-story house with a wrap-around porch had seen better days. There was a bay in the central portion that took up one-third of the frontage of the house. The old house had been grand at one point, but now it looked utterly neglected, with the paint peeling off in large swaths. The wind caused a For Sale sign that looked as if it might be as old as the house itself, to swing giving off a metallic squeak.

"Seriously?" Caleb asked. "In there?"

"You're the one who wants to be initiated into our group," Adam said.

Caleb gave a dejected sigh. He was new to Glen Allen, Virginia, and Adam and Jason were the cool kids. He knew if he messed it up, the rest of his time in high school would suck.

There was a house like the one that stood in front of Caleb in the small New England town where Caleb grew up. It had been empty for as long as anyone could remember, but curtains still hung in the windows. There were all sorts of local legends about the house being haunted, along with kids who had sworn that they had seen supernatural entities. However, no one ever had proof of such entities or that they had ever entered the house at all, just anecdotal tales.

One year the house burned down; teenagers partying were blamed, and no poltergeists sought any revenge. No spirit storms occurred, no weird text messages causing the recipient to die three days later, nothing. A year later, the remains of the house had been bulldozed, and now several condos are where the house used to be. To the best of Caleb's knowledge, not a single one of the occupants had experienced even the slightest paranormal experience.

"You're kidding that neither of you is going in with me, right?" Caleb asked.

"What?" Adam asked. "Are you scared?"

"No, that house looks huge, and there is no way in hell I'm gonna get lost in there."

"Whatever," Jason said. "I'll go. Let's go, pussy."

Caleb stepped up onto the wrap-around porch using the steps at the front of the bay. Caleb saw that the middle of the house numbers had lost the upper tack, causing the house number to change from 696 to 666.

*How appropriate for tonight,* Caleb thought.

He heard the old wood creak as he walked across the porch to the solid wood front door, which was on the side of the bay. Somehow in the still of the night, each groan of the wood sounded like a tree crashing to Caleb. Jason was a noticeable distance behind Caleb.

The door had a deadbolt and an ornate bronze doorknob, the kind you don't see these days.

"There's a deadbolt; it's gonna be locked," Caleb said.

"Naw, it won't be."

Caleb turned the knob and pushed, and nothing happened.

"Told ya."

"Push harder."

Caleb turned the knob again and slammed hard into the door. Finally, the swelled wood gave way, and the door swung open. A musty smell came rushing out. Caleb turned his phone flashlight on and scanned the interior. It was a large room that spanned the bay of the house. It was filled with furniture and decorations as if people still lived in the house.

"Are you sure no one lives here?"

"Not in over 60 years."

"The house is still furnished."

"The owner just disappeared one day. I guess there was no one to claim his stuff."

"This is just weird."

"Just go in."

Caleb stepped into the room. To his left, a staircase next to an enormous fireplace went up to a quarter landing. Next to the stairs was a doorway that Caleb assumed led to the rest of the house. The sides of the room each had a door as well. Based on the furnishings, the room appeared to be a sitting and entertaining space. The dark-colored wallpaper gave the room an ominous feel. Above the fireplace was a painting of a scowling man looking down at the room. Caleb didn't feel that it would have felt any more inviting in the daytime.

"How do we get up to the attic?" Caleb asked.

"How should I know?"

"You and Adam have gone up before."

"Oh, ya, that. We've never actually been in this house."

"What?"

"We just thought it would be a fun goof to get you to go up to the attic."

"Dicks!"

"Come on, let's go."

"So, we are done with this stupid shit?"

"No, we're going up. Let's check this old house out! It's the perfect night for it."

"How do you think we can get up to the attic?"

"I think we should start with the staircase, Sherlock."

Caleb and Jason went to the staircase. When they got there, Jason pointed his hands, palms up, to indicate to Caleb that he should go up first. The staircase had wainscoting up to about hip level, and the wainscot cap was designed to double as a railing. The rest of the wall had the same dark wallpaper as the sitting room. There were sconces on the walls. Caleb started up the staircase. When he was about halfway up to the first quarter landing, the door to the house slammed shut.

"What was that?" Caleb screamed.

"The house door shut."

"The fuck?"

"It must have been a draft. These old houses are full of drafts."

"That was a solid wood door. No draft is going to slam it shut."

"Just keep going so we can finish and get out of here. I don't want Adam calling us both pussies."

Caleb and Jason continued up the staircase to the quarter landing. The landing turned 90 degrees, and the stairs continued behind the fireplace to the other quarter landing. As Jason was exiting the disorienting staircase onto the second floor, the stairs suddenly lit up, and the house shook with a bang. Caleb felt his heart jump.

"Fuck!" Caleb screamed.

"Dude, thunder and lightning."

"This floor didn't light up at all."

"No shit, Sherlock. We are in a hallway with closed doors. Where would we see the lightning?"

Caleb looked at the hallway; there were two doors to his left, a fireplace with a door next to it, doorways in front of and behind him, and sconces. Jason was right.

*I gotta get myself together, Caleb thought. Jason and Adam will mock me for the rest of my life if I keep acting this way.*

Over the fireplace was another painting of a different old man, also scowling.

"Was no one in this house happy?" Caleb asked.

"And what is with all of the dark-colored wallpaper? This house is downright depressing."

"Where do you think the access to the attic would be?"

"I was hoping to find a staircase right where that solid-looking wall is between the door and the fireplace. I think we need to go deeper into the house."

"Just what I wanted to hear."

Jason opened the door next to the fireplace, revealing a hallway that went deeper into the maze-like house.

"Let's go," Jason said.

Jason and Caleb started down the hallway. Another boom of thunder shook the house.

"I bet you Adam wishes he was here with us right now," Jason said.

"I'm not sure about that."

Using the flashlights on their phones, Jason and Caleb looked ahead. The paintings on the wall seemed to extrude a darkness that Caleb couldn't quite express with words. The wallpaper was peeling off the walls. No windows could be seen. Then, they hit a split, where the hallway continued forward, and another hallway went off at a 90-degree angle.

"The one that branches off is short and only has two doors at the end," Jason said. "I say we try it first."

"Sure, whatever."

Jason and Caleb started down the new hallway. The sound of children screaming could be heard, seemingly from somewhere inside the house.

"What the fuck is that?" Caleb asked.

"Dude, it's Halloween. Some kids probably found out all they got was a bag of raisins and Necco wafers."

"What kids? This street barely has any houses on it, let alone ones that were giving out candy."

"Caleb, there aren't kids in this house, trust me. Look how much you're bugging. Kids would be a wreck."

"I hear them screaming. They're bugging."

"From somewhere, not here. Hold it together, and let's get the pictures in the attic. You know Adam will never let you live it down if I'm the only one with a selfie up there."

"Ya, I know."

"If you cut this crap out, I won't tell him how much of a little bitch you were in the house."

They continued down the hallway toward the two doors at the end. A child's cry pierced the air. Jason came to a sudden halt. Caleb was about to open his mouth when Jason spoke.

"I don't want to fucking hear it."

Caleb swallowed his words and continued walking down the hall with Jason. At the end of the hallway, Jason opened the door on the left and found a room there. The room appeared to be a library or study. The walls were lined with dark stained bookcases filled with leather-bound books. A desk was in front of the only window in the room. A door exited the room to the main hallway. There was writing paper strewn around the floor, and some books were on the floor in disarray.

He shut the door and opened the doorway on the right, finding a crudely made wooden stairway going up that didn't match the old-style opulence of the rest of the house. The brick chimney was to the right of the staircase, and unfinished wood showing the beams, joists, and sheathing was left.

"I found it," Jason said. "I think."

Jason started up the staircase, with each stair making a loud squeaking noise as he stepped on it. Caleb looked down the hallway and saw a short figure run by the opening. He shined his phone flashlight in that direction.

"Hello?"

"I'm on the stairs, you nimrod."

"Not you. I saw someone run down the hallway."

"You probably saw shadows made from lights outside."

"From what windows?"

"Maybe Adam came in from the back of the house and is fucking with us."

"No, it was short, like a child."

"We aren't going back to the children again. Get up here so we can get this over with."

Caleb shook his head and reluctantly started up the stairs. Jason was already at the top.

"Dude, you have to get up here and see this!"

Caleb glanced down at the bottom of the staircase and then quickly rushed up the rest of the steps.

The attic was open, with no walls partitioning off sections. Some of the walls were angled due to the peaks of the roof. Like the stairs, the walls were unfinished, and each side had an oxeye window that allowed the flashes of lightning to illuminate the entire space. Straight ahead in the front alcove was a sizeable upside-down cross carved from a black stone that seemed to shimmer. Caleb assumed the shimmering was due to how the lightning was lighting up the attic. Weird symbols had been burned into the wood of the sheathing, the joints, and the studs in the alcove.

"Dude, this is the selfie spot," Jason exclaimed. "Adam is going to freak."

"That's legit creepy!"

"This makes this adventure all worth it!"

Jason crouched down by the stone cross, flashed a V-sign, and took a selfie. His face suddenly turned white. Then, he stood up, dropped his phone, and bolted for the stairs without saying a word to Caleb.

"Jason?"

Caleb heard Jason hit the stairs, followed by the sound of him tumbling down the stairs.

Caleb rushed over to the area with the stone and picked up Jason's phone. The selfie he had taken was still on the screen. Jason was in the frame giving a V-sign in front of the upside-down cross. Then Caleb noticed what had caused Jason to bolt. There were what looked like children's white, sunken skin faces in the background. Caleb looked at the back of the alcove and saw nothing that would have caused the anomaly in the photo. He turned and tore after Jason.

Caleb headed down the stairs from the attic, moving so fast he missed several steps. When he reached the bottom, he tripped over Jason, who was lying at the bottom of the stairs, his neck at an unnatural angle and blood running from his mouth. Tripping over Jason caused Caleb to lose his balance and slam into the door across the hallway. The door opened, and Caleb fell to the floor. He looked up as lightning lit up the room. Children with pale white sunken faces surrounded him. They looked dead to Caleb. He scrambled back to his feet and ran out of the room back to the original hallway. He bolted down the stairs and across the sitting room. Caleb grabbed the door and wrenched it open so hard he felt his shoulder twinge. He burst out of the house through the front door. Adam was standing casually on the street, looking at his shoes.

"Run!" Caleb screamed.

"What?"

"Get the fuck out of here. I'll explain later."

"Where is Jason?"

"Just fucking run!"

Caleb rushed off the porch, hearing the door slam shut behind him. Suddenly the anguishing scream of children filled the air. Caleb saw Adam's eyes widen, and then Adam turned and started running down the street. As Caleb ran across the unkempt front lawn toward the road, he tripped over an old wooden post lying hidden in the grass. Attached to the top of the post was an old rusty metal mailbox with the name Jenkins painted on it.

### **About the Author:**

K.A. Johnson has a BA in English/Journalism with a minor in Classics from The University of New Hampshire. He covered the news in the small New Hampshire college town of Durham for The New Hampshire before ditching the snow and moving south to Richmond, Virginia, where he lives with his wife Jennifer and his two furry writing partners Sparta Jesus Vernal-Johnson and Kolby Catmatix Domitian Johnson.

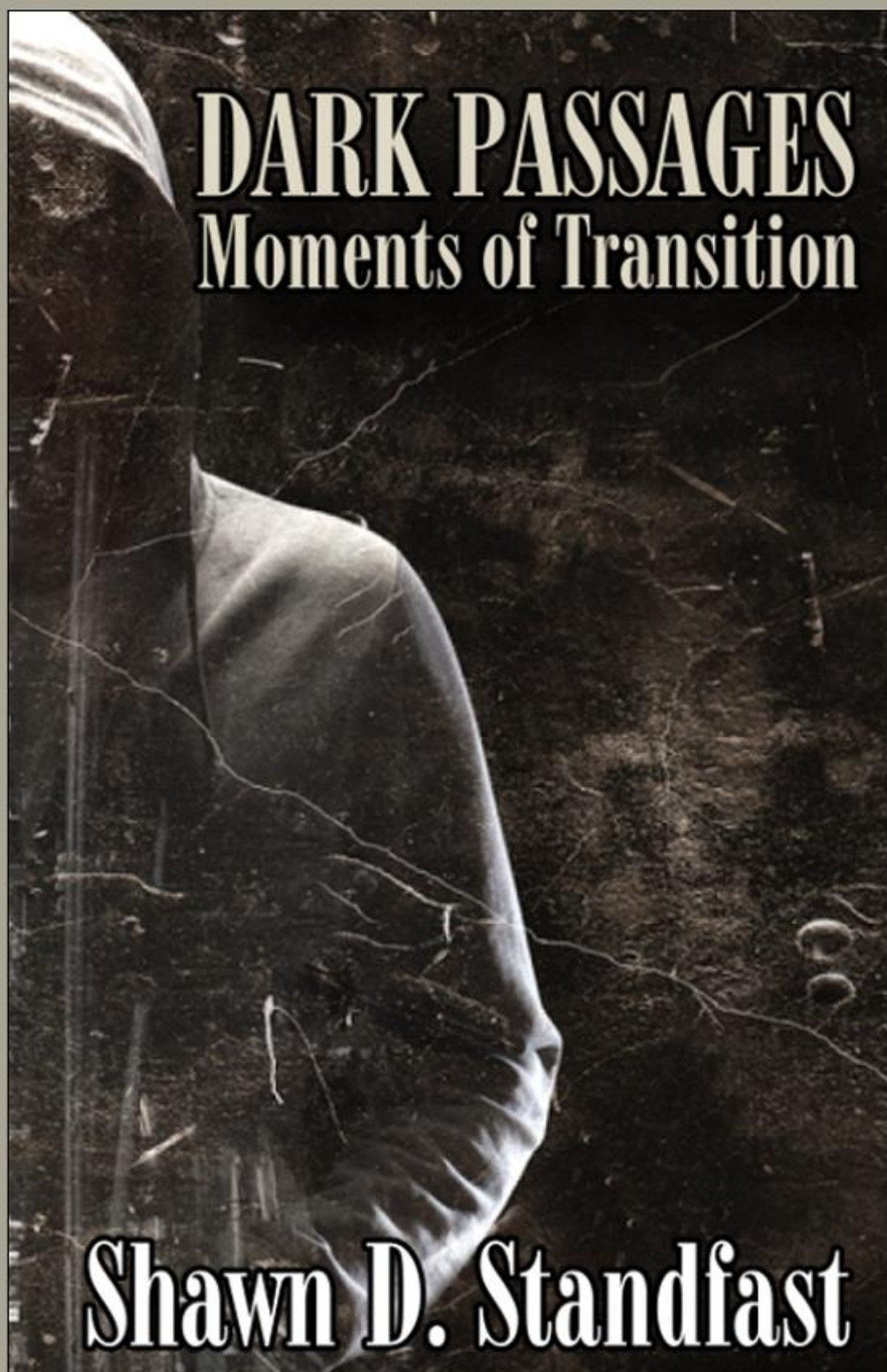
**Blog:** [K.A. Johnson](#)

**Twitter:** [@kenjohnsontnh](#)





A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants  
of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

I got a great deal on my house. I'd been a renter for years and houses had been out of my reach until I saw a listing for this place. The price was \$50,000 under comparables because of its checkered history. All of the prior owners hadn't stayed more than two years, and some had lasted less than two months. On top of all that, the last owner had drowned by accident in his tub and the mortgage banker wanted a quick sale. It came furnished, because that was easier for the bank than selling off his property. Because of the turnover, it hadn't been well maintained, but I like projects like this.

A week later I was relaxing on the sofa after I had painted the interior. The chair seemed lumpy. Checking revealed the journal of the previous owner, Duke Hanley, under the cushion. I felt a little guilty about reading the words of the late homeowner, but I was curious about how a seemingly pleasant, happy person had, according to my neighbors, become completely mental before his death.

After the first page, I read sporadically, ignoring the quotidian, and concentrating on the bizarre.

June 13, 20XX – I really like my new home. It suits my needs completely and is easy to maintain. The landscaping is natural, no need for fertilizers or continuing pruning. The yard is small enough to mow in ten minutes with a reel mower. I may want to paint, but not right away. Before winter, I might invest in better windows.

June 20, 20XX – There is a little leak in the shower. I'll get a repair kit from Jergens Hardware.

June 21, 20XX – Proud of the fix I did. Got it done in ten minutes, and even remembered to turn off the water before I started. Haha.

June 30, 20XX – Leaking again. May be a bad repair kit.

July 1, 20XX – Repaired again.

July 3, 20XX – Dammit, leaking again. I'll call a plumber.

July 6, 20XX – SOB plumber says it'll cost thousands and he'll have to remove drywall to get at the problem. Screw that. I can live with a little leak. It won't affect my water bill much.

July 8, 20XX – The dripping at night is keeping me awake. That's OK; I put down a wash cloth over the drain. That will quiet the sound.

July 11, 20XX – Now I'm hearing what sounds like whispers and cries from the shower room when I try to sleep. When I go to check, all is quiet. I've developed a tic in my left eye, and I can't seem to concentrate at work or at home whatever I'm doing. My best friends are avoiding me and strangers are giving me looks.

July 18, 20XX – Just when I thought that I had experienced the worst, I woke up this morning with the memory of luminescent, multicolored things growing in my bathroom when I got up to urinate last night. This morning, nothing.

July 20, 20XX – Enough of this. I'm removing the shower head and capping the pipe. No more drips, no more sounds. I'll just take baths. No shower is going to beat me.

That was the last entry. The late Mr. Hanley apparently had gone crazy for some reason. I replaced the shower head the first day that I moved in, and I've had no problem at all with the shower.

There have been electrical problems. Lights flickering, microwave starting by itself. This is just the project I'm looking for. I'll upgrade the wiring while I'm at it. After all, I'm an electrician. Piece of cake.

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

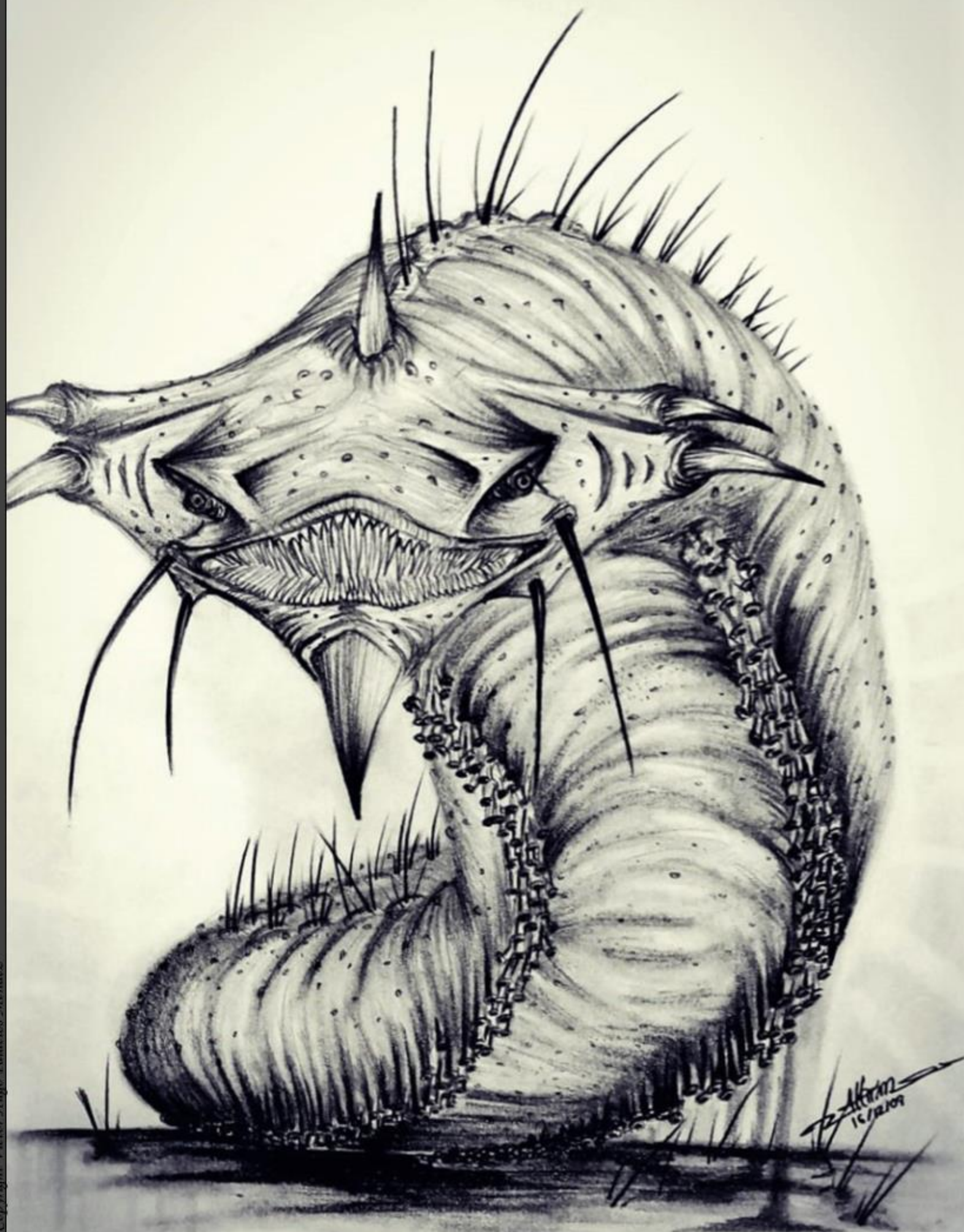
The author is a little old man who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber. In 2014 inspired by joints threatening mobility and local author's *Wild* he began writing. His hundreds of attempts now appear in about eight countries in most genres, including non-Hallmark romance. Outside of writing he enjoys volunteering, collecting music, snow shoeing, hiking, whining, and peanut butter.

**Website:** [Aberrant Word](#)

**Blog:** [Doug Hawley](#)







Victor Hugo Palacios Méndez  
15/12/2009

Delicious chills trailed down Ambrosine's spine as the enchanted forest whispered to her. The magic didn't speak in words as much as it spoke in the language of the soul.

She had killed the Draemer and eaten its flesh. She was the magic's mistress now.

Her cloak brushed the moonlit snow as she wandered through the trees. She was not sure how far she had gone when she reached a place where the magic shifted and stopped. Something about the energy was darker here, deeper. She stood in a clearing, a familiar golden glow casting a twilight over the trees beyond.

This was the same glow that she had seen in the Draemer's clearing, the light that spoke of another world, another existence. That world was where her sister Rosaline had gone. The Draemer had tricked Rosaline into crossing over, tempting her with desire, and Ambrosine had sacrificed her own hope to feed her vengeance and destroy the creature.

Memories of Rosaline twisted Ambrosine's heart with grief. She had loved only one thing more than her sister, more than her soul. She had once had hope, and that hope had died the moment she had buried her hatchet in the Draemer's skull.

A muffled feeling echoed in her mind. It was an impression more than a thought, a sense that something or someone needed her.

"Rosaline?" She searched the glow of the clearing for any sign of her sister's golden curls and blue eyes. She thought she caught a glimpse of a white nightgown, but when she turned to look more closely, the white turned into a swirl of black that settled into a drifting pool of darkness beneath the golden glow.

Ambrosine pulled the hood of her cloak back from her face, her fingers brushing over her cheek. The touch stung the ragged flesh left behind by the Draemer's claws, reminding her that while she had changed, she was still made of meat and bone.

The impression of need pulled at her consciousness again, and she searched the clearing for what was calling to her.

"Rosaline?" she tried again, still hoping to see the blonde curls. She did not see her sister, but the contrast between the golden Draemer's glow and the dark pool deepened. One appeared as if it led to Heaven and the other to Hell.

Ambrosine stepped closer to the pool this time, feeling with her mind for what was calling to her.

It was there, a thought like a whimper.

Ambrosine reached for the hatchet that hung from her belt. She gripped the handle and took a tentative step into the edge of the pool. She still stood on solid ground, but the darkness licked at her boots, swirling around the leather that covered her shins. She approached the center slowly, a black so deep that it seemed to suck in the light. She peered into it, trying to make out the shape or form of what had called her there.

As she watched, the blackness condensed into a snout and a pair of eyes. It looked as if a wolf pup had wandered into the pool and had been caught in it.

Sliding the hatchet back into her belt, Ambrosine settled one knee on the ground for leverage, the darkness now brushing the bottom of her ribcage, and she reached for the creature. The whimper that connected straight to her mind grew louder, more urgent. She felt the panic of the wolf or whatever it was. The further she immersed herself into the black pool, the greater the weight of her grief over Rosaline became, as if the pool was made of tangible sadness, of loss that worked its way inside her and pierced her with the thorns of pure and utter devastation.

Ambrosine sensed the weight of the darkness, its effort to draw the last of the light from her soul, but she had already lost her hope. Nothing about this darkness truly frightened her. Her soul had already bled out. It was a void inside her now, a void that this creature's essence promised to fill.

She sifted through the darkness until she found something she could grasp. She pulled it out and fell back. Cradling the form of the creature in her lap, the two of them sat in the shallow end of the shadow pool, the golden glow above them thinning in the rising light of the silver moon.

The creature was not fully formed. There was something of the head that she had made out, a snout and eyes like a wolf that weighed little more than a pile of dry leaves, but the rest of the body shifted as if it were made of the same substance as the pool—a black, intangible dust.



"What do you want to be?" Ambrosine asked the thing sitting in her lap as if it could answer.

A thought was fed into her mind, something that looked like a wolf the size of a horse, with eyes the color of flames and ridges of scales instead of fur.

"I recognize you," Ambrosine whispered. It was the form of her darkest dreams, a part of her that had broken off like a shard when she had killed the Draemer and become a witch. "You are mine."

The creature communicated a sense of comfort, but beneath that there was a pain and a panic where the creature fought to exist in two planes at once.

Ambrosine had to give it a form to bring it across the Valley of Death so that it may join her in the world of the living.

*"Moonlight mist and Draemer's glow..."* She gathered the energy of the forest around her, the life force of the trees and the beings that lived in them. She directed it, twisted it around the essence of the creature in her lap.

*"...form flesh from hope and bone of sorrow..."*

The head finished forming, the eyes a blood red rather than the deep orange of the fire that had licked at the magical stones the Draemer had once given her. Scales layered over the snout and the head in delicate, obsidian ripples.

*"...give this beast of the realms between..."*

Ambrosine cradled her familiar as the scaled head extended down a thick neck, then over a pair of broad shoulders and front legs with paws that looked more like human hands than wolf paws. Long, sharp claws stretched from the tips of the fingers.

*"...a heart of despair..."*

The body formed, half-wolf and half-human like the paws, narrowing to a torso and a pair of legs that could easily stretch upright. The creature was too large for her lap now, sliding off into the drifting black shadows of the pool.

*"...and shadow dreams."* Ambrosine scrambled to her feet as her familiar stretched upright and howled. It was neither wolf nor man, a creature of neither world and both at the same time.

It settled on its paws beside her, its head reaching mid-chest when it was on all fours. It huffed, its body shifting between obsidian scales and drifting shadows.

It was a beast made to feed on the fractured pieces of souls, a beast made to live out fears and birth dark dreams.

Her familiar. Her nightmare beast.

Ambrosine settled her hand on its head, feeling the creature's joy at being alive, the way it relished its flesh.

And its gnawing, insatiable hunger.

### About the Author:

CM Adler is the thriller and dark fantasy name for award-winning author Christine Nielson. Nestled in the mountains of northern Utah, Christine spends her days with her three human children and her additional four-legged, furry brood. In a former life, Christine taught English and karate and developed a love of spinning fire.

Blog: [Queens and Crows](#)  
Instagram: [@christinenielson\\_cmadler](#)



I'm an only child. With my parents working a lot, I spent a lot of time with my cousins, especially over school holidays. They were all older than me, and seemed so cool and worldly, wearing makeup and listening to music which caused my parents to pale when I started singing the lyrics at dinner. They talked about boys and 'big school' as I called it, with friendship dramas and annoying teachers. They'd feed me junk food and even shared their stash of sweets bought with babysitting money. Then there was the time they gave me a makeover—lots of makeup and my hair back combed so high it took my mum an hour to brush it out at bedtime.

However, for the most part, my cousins were pretty cool with having the geeky little kid hang out with them. The summer holidays were spent running through the woods, building forts and following animal tracks. When the sun went down, we'd camp out and toast marshmallows over the camp fire. This was my favourite time. That quiet space after a day spent having fun, when you start to wind down before night sets in. It was then, as the firelight cast long shadows across their faces, when they'd start to tell me scary stories.

By the time I was ten, I'd heard all the classics: the couple who heard a noise outside their car so the boy goes to investigate then the girl heard a noise on top of the car which turns out to be the shoes of her hanging boyfriend; the Bloody Mary story meant I didn't dare look in a mirror for a month; the wild black dog that roamed the woods, attacking campers (I didn't sleep at all that night! Especially after my cousins convinced me the usual nighttime noises were the hound sniffing its latest victim); the story of how the scarecrows at the McGuffin farm were actually hitchhikers who they'd killed and stuffed; they even told me the Slender Man stories for the hot minute he was famous. Yeah, they told me them all.

Towards the end of summer, I think my cousins realized I was getting a little jaded with their stories. I'd heard about lots of ghosts, assorted serial killers and various mystical creatures that were going to kill me. I'd heard them all. They'd all started to blur and lose their scary factor.

So on our last night one of my cousins told me the story she'd heard from one of her friends. Her friend was in the supermarket with her mum when they saw a man, dressed in black with a wide-brimmed black hat which covered much of his face. Their friend (I can't remember her name, I'm gonna call her Sheila) started screaming. She was totally going crazy, crying and screaming and not able to stand. Her mum couldn't calm her down so they left. Once they were back in their car, she calmed down a bit and Sheila started telling her mum that she recognized the man. Going on and on about him. 'The man in the hat', she kept saying. Her mum was confused as she had never seen him before (in small communities like ours, it's easy to spot any newcomers) and Sheila's reaction had been so extreme and out of character. Then Sheila said something which caused her mother's blood to run cold. In a voice that wasn't her own, Sheila said the man in the hat had kept Sheila in a box for a really long time, like a really long time. She was in the dark for so long she couldn't remember what the light looked like. In fact, she was in the dark for so long she decided she wanted to live with a new mum and she chose her mum because she had a nice smile. When my cousin finished telling us the story, I shivered, despite sitting so close to the fire it was causing the hairs on my arm to sizzle. There was a moments silence then my other cousins started making jokes, more marshmallows were passed around and soon we fell asleep, thoughts of the man in the hat banished by plans of adventures yet to come. Anyway, summer ended and the next time I would see my cousins would be the holidays around Halloween.

But the story of Sheila really spooked me. I don't know why but I kept thinking about what she'd said to her mum. All of the other stories my cousins told me were too fantastical to be really scary. but there was something about the man in the hat keeping Sheila in the dark which made it more personal. The weeks of summer were feeling like a distant memory and I was really excited to see my cousins for Halloween, but before that I saw the man in the hat. He wasn't in the supermarket like when Sheila saw him. No, I saw him at the park. My friends had already gone home and I was loitering, so I didn't have to go home and start my homework when I saw him by the entrance. Dressed all in black with his hat pulled down. Sheila never mentioned his eyes, but I saw them, just for a moment. As dark as his clothes and even from across the park those eyes were filled with anger.

I've been in the dark for a long time now. My stomach was sore because I was hungry, but that has passed now and I just feel really tired.

I think I might fall asleep soon.

I really hope my new mum has a nice smile.

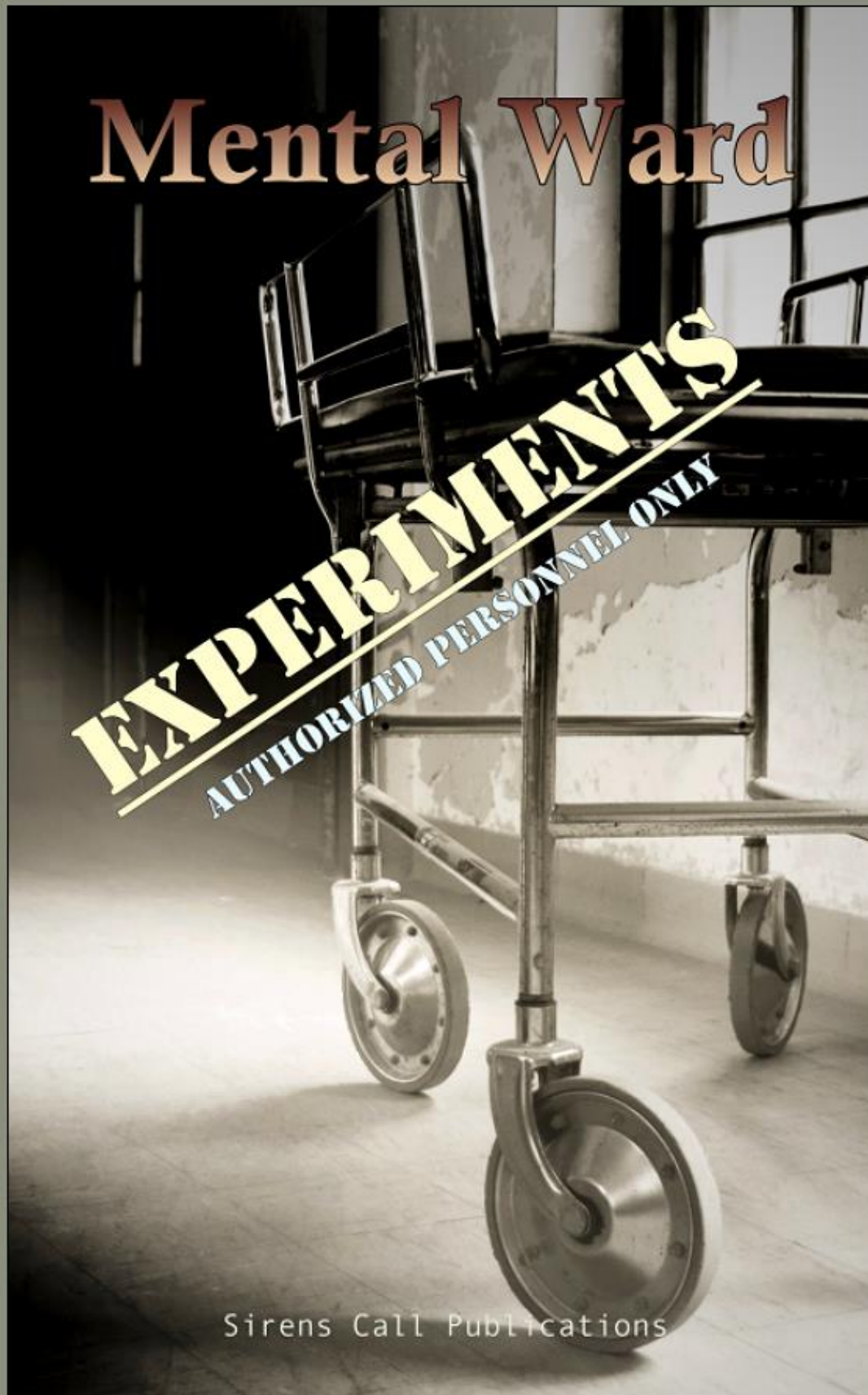
#### **About the Author:**

G Clark Hellery lives in the South West of the UK. By day she makes fun craft kits for children and by night she writes tales of horror, science fiction and fantasy. You can find out more about her world on her blog or instagram.

**Blog:** [G Clark Hellery](https://gclarkhellery.com)

**Instagram:** [@g.clark\\_hellery](https://www.instagram.com/g.clark_hellery)

Step into a world where sanity is left behind,  
and horror is what the doctor ordered!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The door to number 14, Pine Tree Avenue, Dublin had opened before the exorcist Delton Waynes was even pulled to a complete halt.

"It's nice to be expected," he said aloud to the car's empty interior.

It had been an oddly mild Irish October, nowhere near as cold or wet as expected, and the dark-early evenings were crisp and fresh. Tonight however, a sudden fog had descended on the city, leaving everything drenched in a damp gloom that was very fitting for the time of year. Delton wiped a hand across the windscreen, smearing the moisture, then reached into the footwell of the passenger seat, took a hold of his leather satchel and stepped out of the car.

Number 14 was a grand house, established and well settled in a row of them, who stood alongside each other like old friends on the wide street in Dublin's affluent, opulent, tree-lined Southside.

The porch light was off. Whoever was waiting for him in the entranceway clearly wanted to remain in the shadows, although they didn't seem to realise they were backlit by the glow escaping from the hall.

"Good evening sir," Delton called in greeting as he approached up the walkway, his voice booming, "I'm the exorcist..."

The person in the doorway leaned forward suddenly, caught Delton's extended arm with two strong hands, like someone hanging from a cliff reaching for rescue, and, despite Delton's immense girth, pulled him into the house with ease.

"Yes, yes, yes. Quiet please," the man rasped. "Come in, come in."

Before closing the front-door he glanced shiftily from left to right a few times, clearly checking for twitching curtains. A take-away delivery-lady on a bicycle sped by, her head low, massive earphones holding dreadlocks in place while the insulated box on her back leaked steam. Otherwise the road was quiet.

The man, his face less manic than expected, but with two fresh gashes down the right cheek, turned to Delton who looked back at him with an eyebrow raised.

"Sorry about that."

"You must be Mr. Langton," Delton said.

"Conrad, please," the man replied.

His eyebrows were as big, white and bushy as two wild kittens, but the body Delton could see through the slowly coming apart dressing gown, although fluffed with similar grey-white hair, was muscular and slim. This was in stark contrast to the exorcist, whose herringbone tweed waistcoat appeared about fit to burst, thanks to the immense stomach that shoved against it from inside.

"I believe you have a situation."

There was a thump and thud from upstairs and both men looked first at the landing, then left along the ceiling as the noise moved across the floor above them. It was accompanied by a low moan.

Delton caught Conrad's eye and waved his fingers in a tell-me-more kind of way.

"It's rather embarrassing."

"You'd be surprised by what I've seen."

"It's my wife, Daphne," Conrad said and suddenly seemed very interested in the umbrella stand by the front door, a copper ringed cast of an elephant's foot. Delton nodded encouragingly. "Well, you see, I kind of got us some sexy masks. I was hoping we could..."

He was interrupted by another bang from upstairs and the sound of something being dragged.

Delton shook his head sympathetically. "Fifty Shades really does have a lot to answer for. Best just show me what we're dealing with."

Conrad led them upstairs.

"This is it here."

"Knock, knock, hello," Delton opened the bedroom door and stepped inside.

She was stood at the opposite side of the bed, by the window, with her back to them.

Carefully Delton moved further into the room so he could get a clear look.

The thin strap of her silk nightdress hung loose at the left shoulder, drooping down to her elbow. There was blood on the fingertips of her right hand, no doubt from where she'd scratched her husband. She was suspended above the ground, her bare toes pointed at the floor.

"Daphne, Ms. Langton? Can you hear me?" Delton approached like a farmer might come towards an animal tangled in a fence, trying not to spook her.



The floating woman gave no indication that she'd heard, other than she began to shudder. It increased in violence as spasms ran through her at strange angles and, as she twisted, bones jutted wrongly through stretched too thin skin.

It stopped as quickly as it began and then she started to turn around.

Her head was angled downwards, chestnut brown hair hung over the mask. It looked like her eyes might have been closed, but it was hard to tell with her face covered.

Her nightdress began to slip further, revealing more soft flesh, but Delton kept his attention on the mask.

"Daphne, Ms. Langton?" he repeated. "Can you hear me?"

The mouth dropped open and a tongue inched out over the wooden lips, like someone shoving raw meat through a small hole. It poured out like an obscenity, far too long and wide.

Behind him Delton could hear Conrad choke back a sob.

Then, somehow, she spoke.

It was as if hearing in stereo, with two voices overlapping. One, clearly female, small and faint, was hidden below whatever had taken possession of her. That voice was harsh as gravel being churned around in an old food blender.

Delton listened intently.

"What's she saying?" Conrad asked.

Delton held up a finger for silence and tilted his head. A frown creased his brow.

"The other mask, where is it?"

Conrad paled visibly and pointed towards the foot of the bed.

On the floor, mostly hidden beneath the thrown aside duvet something glittered. From his waistcoat Delton removed a handkerchief and carefully, his eyes never leaving the floating woman. He leaned forward and picked up the discarded mask.

It was wood and bone and metal and shone in the low, intimate lamplight of the bedroom. A spark rippled across the surface.

"Where did you get these?" Delton asked.

"Internet," Conrad looked away.

"You don't get this quality of stuff from Amazon. Not even on Prime. So, the truth, please."

The haunted creature that had overtaken Daphne lurched and leered and the mask she wore seemed to squirm and pulse. Conrad took a deep breath and looked at what had become of his wife. Silently he mouthed, 'I'm sorry love', then he turned to the paranormal investigator.

"They're from work. From the museum."

Delton Wayne raised an eyebrow.

"There's a masquerade ball on tomorrow that we're going to... meant to be going to. I thought it would be a bit of thrill to use these, rather than the kind you can get in town, with all the feathers and everything. We said we'd give them a try tonight first..." he trailed off. "It's our anniversary."

Delton rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "Tell me, were they together when you found them? The masks?"

"No, we've had that one in storage for a few years. The other one it only came in the other day as part of a trade we're doing with a museum in Berlin," Conrad paused and when he continued his face was a picture of sorrow. "I don't know what came over me. I just felt like I had to bring them home. Please, tell me that Daphne's going to be okay."

"I think that's rather going to be down to you," Delton said cryptically. "Let's step out onto the landing."

Once outside Delton placed the mask down on a small table that would once have probably housed a landline telephone and tapped the face of it with a large, sausage-like finger.

"It's quite simple really. The masks have been bound with the spirits of a pair of star-cursed lovers and it would seem they've been separated for who knows how long."

Conrad picked up the mask and turned it over in his hands. The inside seemed to swirl in an enticing pool that reached out, encouraging him to dive in. He stared down at it, then back up at Delton with pleading eyes.

"But what can I do?"

"Complete the act," Delton said. "The ritual that will allow them to be together again."

Conrad froze, then he took a deep breath and stood up straight, bracing himself. He opened the bedroom door and stepped back inside.

"For Daphne, anything."

On the far side of the room his wife's face was slowly revealed as the covering peeled back just enough for him to see that she was unafraid. Conrad saw her nod and smile, before she disappeared again.

"Okay so," Conrad closed his eyes and put the mask on. There was a crackle and a smell like bacon cooking, singed hair and burnt ozone.

The thing possessing Daphne gave a hiss that was all lust and violence, then her body dropped spiderlike onto the bed, all jagged, angled limbs, bent elbows and pointed knees.

Delton closed the door quietly and snuck downstairs.

From above there came a furious round of thumping and banging.

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It was much later when Conrad and Daphne came into the living room, hand-in-hand.

Delton Waynes was tucked up, all nice and comfortable, in a large armchair, eating dark chocolate cherry liquors from out of a box that was balanced on his stomach.

"Ah, you must be Daphne. Pleased to make your acquaintance," the exorcist left the box aside and with many creaks and groans extricated himself from the confines of his seat. "All went well I gather."

This was met with a shy look and a mumbled affirmation.

"Thank you," Conrad said and handed over the masks.

"I hope you don't mind but I helped myself to a few sweets while I was waiting," Delton said as he placed the masks into his satchel. "They were delicious by the way. I suggest maybe next year you just stick to the traditional bunch of flowers. It might not be the most original of ideas, but at least it's a safe bet."

#### About the Author:

Ken McGrath lives in Dublin, Ireland. His fiction has recently appeared in Cirsova Magazine, K Zine, Sirens Call Publications eZine, The Society Of Misfit Stories Presents..., Liquid Imagination Magazine, Daily Science Fiction and the anthologies, 'The Devil's Hour' (HellBound Publications) and 'Transcendent' (Transmundane Press) among others.

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#### Angel, Broken | Kelly Matsuura

"Don't touch me!" Lailah waved Reuben away.

*Shame.* Her emotions crackled and boiled, fighting for dominance.

Reuben, always patient, held out a wet towel. "Let me wash your wounds, Love."

Her back was bleeding afresh. Thick warm blood meeting numb skin—soaking the sheets. She no longer felt external pain.

*Loss.* She had fallen from Heaven to be with him. Kind, passionate Reuben. But it wasn't enough.

*Regret.* She didn't belong here, and she could never go back.

*Anger.* She clutched her dagger under the blanket. How had a mortal possessed her heart?

*One sharp slice.*

Now they both bled.

#### Where's Margaret? | Kelly Matsuura

When Wizard Qarmel took to his death bed, I didn't want him to die alone.

"What's Margaret's address? I'll send a letter," I offered. The wizard's wife had left years earlier, but no one knew her current whereabouts.

"No need." Qarmel smiled. "She's with me, always."

"She's gone. Remember?"

"Margaret is here," he insisted.

He opened his robe. In place of skin, his entire chest had become a window of frosted glass. Light from nearby candles danced on the surface.  
As did Margaret's face.  
Her ghostly image rippled and weaved; a prisoner, forever trapped under ice.  
"See? She never left."

#### About the Author:

Kelly Matsuura writes horror, fantasy and literary fiction. She is the owner of Insigniastories.com (Asian speculative fiction) and has had stories published with The Lorelei Signal, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Sirens Call Publications, and many more.

Website: [Black Wings and White Paper](#)

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#### Coronet | K.A. Schultz

I loved him so much.  
No, I *love* him so much.  
I love him still. Forever.

I thank the dark angels who offered me this, where for 10,000 eyes I become the main attraction, where, when the Jeweler is finished with me, I will have perhaps earned elevation to the lesser circle of The Place in which I must reside for whatever it is that counts as an eternity. Less of what remains the question, but I don't care. I earned my entrée to this realm, dammit, and so here I am.

Forget the pithy pouch Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton strung about her neck, which held some scrap of a love poem Alexander wrote to her. Forget the poet's silk-wrapped heart Mary Shelley kept until the end of her days. And all Victoria could think to do was wear black? Shit. Forget dances with corpses, ash-filled vessels, carved stone tablets and satin-lined boxes. Forget statues, flowers, lighted candles and those weird, little halogen lanterns left at gravesites.

Those are nothing. They are ordinary, customary, and don't begin to reflect what's inside The Losing, what lies at the foundation of the penance I seek, long to, to pay. Sorry, or sorrow, what funny, companion ills of the soul! Mine – both of them – are positively afloat in the blackest of ash-muddled depths. I positively drown where I am put, and I am glad for it.

Let the show begin. I seat myself on the stool; I am ready to entertain.

He was with me twenty short years. Fates and Furies willing, he will be with me twice that times twenty, and more, going forward. His memory is a halo over me; I hold it aloft like the false suppliant that I am. But soon, he will be seen with me, in me, a true participant in profile and countenance, a framework for this sinner's devotion, a crowning tribute to whom was my best friend, my partner in crime, my lover, my other.

Fourteen performances, it was determined. Fourteen sessions for the process and the imprinting of a fresh pain that would serve *to begin* to encompass what I felt, feel, possess and hold dear, intend to keep fresh, alive, upfront and have oh, so fucking well earned.

No, the artistry will never be dulled, even if my screams bounce off the deaf, damp walls that surround us all: The fabricator, his model and our audience, in fellowship, consigned to everlasting u-call-it. Every lamentation ripped from my lungs as scalpel and drill do their work will speak in tribute to the songs of carved and peeling cherubs, imprisoned upon their pedestals and altar bases, like the worst of prisoners. Wayward echoes will be absorbed like fine drink for those who observe, enrapt, who thirst (as we all thirst), parched, from their perches, seated on those rock-hard, bird shit slathered bleachers. They encircle the ring in which I am to remain for the entirety of the crafting, ready to cheer us on with chants so ancient, it makes the 'virtuous' gals from Salem sound like 7<sup>th</sup> grade cheerleaders.

Worm tossed soil and deeper strewn rubble of the earth hold fast the cellars which dot the netherworlds in which we subsist in our legacies of infernal compliance; 'tis a fine web we weave, in this three-ring circus spectacle of pain and dismemberment.

And as for me? There will be no compassionate human to receive my cries, no rescuing me from the train tracks to which I willingly bind myself in a gesture as pure and profound as what landed me here. There will be no help when the

unbearableness descends to the extreme, as is my wish. This is the penultimate, perfect inversion of joy. And the season pass holders? They will eat it up.

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Let the Corporis Artem, Season M<sup>2</sup>MMMDDCCXXXVIII commence!

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The Jeweler forged on as I sat for him, stone still, obedient, meditative, from a place of displaced calm only the dead can attain.

The Jeweler would glance over and again at his sketch as he worked, a treasure map entrusted only to him, drawn by hands guided by deepest grief, from which he outlined like a blueprint upon me, a trail of finest ink to mark the stations where he would cut and pull, set, pin and sew and entertain.

The Jeweler was the scribe, and we who seek our shreds of latently blessed benevolence serve as his illuminated prayerbooks. What, I dare not ask, is in it for him? The initials and images my love and I in life designed, recorded the best of nights, the best of fights, passionate post-battle reunions, dates and moments still there, legible across the terrain that was once I and Me. I held subcutaneous runes and pictures of the west on my body; my love bore the corresponding eastern halves in reverse. When we stood, or lay, together, we became the pages of an open book. In life, we were complete. In life, I sought to make that even more replete. My love surrendered, and was then rendered, completely and utterly in two. His soul, foolish I, I thought I could inhale, like a well-poured pull of fresh air. But I saw it drift off, a scrap in the winds, and then, when I saw the mouth of the Earth open wide, and the crusted flights of the stairs descending, all of them, I knew my path and took it.

As a sign of mourning, we cut our hair. Elevated to the level of biblical iconographical program, we render ourselves depleted of Samson's wellspring, Godiva's garb, Beauty's tresses, Rapunzel's ropes, so to attire ourselves in hurt. We empower with debilitations, with tragic embrasure. As it were, the requirements of my creation mandated there would be a pre-show of a preparatory killing-off of all the follicles on my head. Conventions of loveliness, in tribute, were to be deliberately set aside. Beauty to this beholder was to be fully re-interpreted.

Moreover, one must provide a clean canvas to the portraitist.

Fourteen sessions with the Jeweler, fourteen performances, it was posted, at the entrance to his tent.

*Come One, Come All! Come Hear Her Scream, See Her Bleed!*

*There is no cost for this series – You did, after all, pay in the Before.*

Numbing potions or medicines were not of this place. If I passed out from the pain, then that would become a part of the experience, the show. Might I, from within a torture-induced unconsciousness, see shades of him? Come, dear; haunt me.

Two to be featured per show. It would remain as such, two each time. Starting with two molars at the center back.

The bleeding was profuse. It was a symphony of red. The oohs and aahs were genuine; and oh yes; indeed, the pain was profound. It was a journey to a special corner in Hell from which my return was, by design, never to be complete. The echo effect of each performance was on my mind 24/7, as they would say in life, distracting my interminable non-days and disrupting what little attempts at rest I might ever be permitted. Sleep, what a laughable, chimeric pastime in which the aggrieved indulge! My incessant wakefulness would at least be of some purpose, for the enhancement of a burning tenderness to prohibit even the ability to place bone-weary head into the depths of some molded pillow, was rendered fully futile. May it then require I pay even further penance, when forced to sit upright, wedged between filthy bolsters, denied even that simplest posture of repose. How better to dredge the tribute to what I lost, and in whose name I intended to pay dearly, so that I might be permitted to cross into a lesser tier of damnation?

Two at the second show. Two molars, next to the first. I counted down the intervals between performances: Seven days, six, five, four, oh, please come sooner, three, two, I can't wait. One, go.

Two more molars at session three, two more at session four. More and more, each three-hour dirge, during which I was the song, the words, the melody, produced two more steps in the circular path that was being ever so delicately built upon, within, the top of my naked scalp.

First, came the molars, then the pre-molars. Two of them were gold-crowned, no less, shining like Viking's buttons, freshly unearthed from ancient burial mounds. Buried once more, this time, the artifacts were entombed with the blessing of the bearer, their precious make would surely serve to warm my thoughts.

Real teeth, the Jeweler had told me, were not customarily done. Real teeth, he warned, could turn around and bite their way straight through my brains. Real teeth, he said, could work their way up through my skin and erupt like popcorn out of my head, should my body not accept the teeth and spontaneously seek to expel them. The Jeweler, so accustomed to the bio-aesthetics as he was, whistled idly while he worked, his non-descript ditties and nursery tune fragments wafting in and around the random, anguished outbursts which escaped my lungs, interspersed only with the sporadic, awestruck gasps and silent spells of the audience members.

To serve as a muse and to amuse, what a fine line I crossed time and again as the shows accrued and our following grew to standing room only attendance. The work-in-progress was indeed elegantly, repugnantly graphic. But, what else



should one expect in our Garden of Miseries? And the Jeweler himself? For my beloved's remains to be implanted into my corporeal depths, for them to become a part of me and walk with me for the rest of my un-days, required this craftsman to be and feel in highest, most ego-fed, arrogant form. As such, I willingly played along with him, for him. It was, after all, the only way my Luciferian tithes could be paid.

The Jeweler was no mere body modification artist; he was my Fabergé.

Performances seven and then eight; pre-molars; nine, canines, and at last came the incisors. Arrayed in careful, ascending order, their pinning required some drilling into the skull plates to make for a more solid implantation. Their ensured verticality was an especially delicate placement. The Jeweler's smithing of my coronet was quickly becoming the stuff of legend in Hell. Why, it almost breathed life into my Beloved's posthumously scattered traces.

Black stitches formed their own fretwork. Earlier work was progressively removed as the performances took place and the circlet was built. Subsequent stitches were sewn, embroidery to encase every new tine of my crown, the whole, minute scaffolding creeping forward, towards my brow, with each show, each implantation. The stitches appeared like spiders that, having crawled onto my head, dutifully remained outstretched in pursuit of their goal, which was to hold my freshly pulled, grey skin smooth and taut over each tooth. The scars, when the threads were removed, became a lace surround, scarlet dots and lines which outlined the handiwork, like a signature on my scalp. The spidery threads, once extracted, were good-byes written in their very own silk.

The thirteenth, then, almost sadly, the fourteenth shows took place. That I never grew accustomed to the pain of the incisions, the pinning, the insertions or the stitching, was part of the subversion of my world. I took comfort in the pain, for it had a purpose.

The Jeweler announced to his audience at that last performance: Was it not all about the transforming of our given and puny repetitiveness into something of expression and experience? Of living, or dying, mementos manifested as tangible physicality?

How they applauded, how they nodded in unison at his words! How they cheered when the Jeweler took his final bow!

But would he please, I begged, next insert the splinters of the board I used to split my beloved's skull into a sunburst array at the base of my crown? If he were to refuse, I suppose I could try doing it myself...

The next level of Hell to which I aspire, where the punishment is not quite as unrelenting as to what I was relegated for the deed I did, might be a place where one's extra effort is appreciated. No pain, no gain, they used to say, in sheer, blissful ignorance of what pain really was. What it is. In this place, it is the litanies themselves, of cries wrought by the smithing of skull-capping coronets, which open the damn doors, and wide.

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My love for him, and my love himself, were the two best things that ever happened to me. He once called me his little Queen. He had told me, as a motif, it was next up, a new piece was to be inked over his sternum, which I was to write on his chest, in my own hand. I practiced my capital Q's until they rolled forth in intertwined, scrolling perfection.

We never got around to scheduling that session, but I at least have this for now: I wear a crown, bear a crown, made with the teeth of my love. I hope it will serve me well, as novice performance artist in this Circus of the Damned.

Love and twenty years' devotion, so fucking awesome; even his smashed face and his last, wet gasp cannot be separators, for *He. Is. Now. Inside. My. Head.*

So, when you peer into your mirror at midnight, I dare you to gaze past the reflection of your own face and over your shoulder, to where I and this jagged coronet of mine just might be standing there, smiling at you, from the very darkest of corners of your room – and your mind.

#### About the Author:

Leather-bound, string-tied diaries, a baby blue Smith Corona and numerous laptops with strike-faded vowel keys have all been markers of a fabulous spiral into the depths of dark literary endeavor, an affliction from which K.A. Schultz never wishes to recover. To learn more about the author, their articles and literary or illustrative works, please visit THEIR websites OR instagram accounts, one for lit, one for illustration @butterflybroth and @k.a.\_schultz.

Website: [Butterflybroth](#)

Website: [Jacob Marley Story](#)







## Horror Writers: Architects of Hope

Finally, a little appreciation and validation from science as to the positive impact of horror! A recent study shared from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) determined that fans of horror, particularly the morbidly curious, exhibited much higher resilience during the pandemic. So while copy/pasting NCBI's long, important sounding name made me feel smarter, for long-time horror people this is old news. How much did that study cost, NCBI?

In their own words: "We also found that morbid curiosity, a personality trait that has been previously associated with interest in horror (Scrivner, in press), was associated with greater positive resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, these effects were significant even when controlling for age, sex, income, and general factors of personality. In sum, the current study provides evidence that individual differences in both media preferences and personality are associated with resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic." (full study [posted here](#))

So what I read from that is first, Wednesday Addams is a good role model after all. My elementary school teachers were wrong. And second, horror writers are the architects of hope. Not in so many words, but it's obvious that's what NCBI meant. Horror teaches us to roleplay our worst fears, face them and eventually defeat them. I won't say I'm as expert as the NCBI, but I guarantee I could have come to the same conclusion for probably 1% of their costs. Maybe even less because I bring my own coffee.

What are my credentials? Horror saved my life, I am a horror writer and most of my favorite people are horror writers or fans of horror. Horror has saved some of their lives. Here's a few things the NCBI doesn't know about us yet. Give them a few million dollars more...

They are right when they said "these effects were significant even when controlling for age, sex, income, and general factors of personality." There's no real horror person stereotype. We come in all shapes, sizes, race, gender, education, belief system and economic levels. We are a *truly* diverse group in every sense of the word but there is one thing we all seem to have in common: trauma.

Before I get started on this I think it's important to bring up an important point---trauma is in the experience of the traumatized. One person's horror is not universal, and we each have our personal demons. There is no way to adequately put judgement on how traumatic an experience, trigger or event is for someone else. It's personal. As an example, I'm excited to visit The Sallie House in Atchison, Kansas and meet a documented demon if I'm lucky, but if you toss a wet band-aid at me I will run screaming. Don't judge my terror of wet band-aids, and I won't laugh at you if you don't want to get scratched (documented!) by a demon at the Sallie House with me.

The common ground we share universally as people, horror and... the other kind... is that we all have *some* sort of trauma. From our childhood or events that happened to us as adults. Sometimes it didn't happen to us but someone we knew. Sometimes it happened to an animal we knew better than any people. Sometimes it happens to a fictional person or animal, but the effect is real. Trauma that takes root in the psyche and changes you is the building block of horror.

Whatever the flavor, trauma happens to most people at some point in their life---just look at current events---and responses are all over the place. Some people pretend nothing happened and look away. Some people go on the offensive and lash out preemptively at everyone near. And then there are *my* people, the horror writers and readers, aficionados of the dark. Horror writers process trauma for breakfast. We bleed ourselves onto paper. If you ever need to put together a zombie apocalypse team your first stop needs to be a bookstore. Recruit from anywhere in the speculative aisles, but the horror readers are your A-Team.

Why? Because horror people are proactive. We choose to face terror, analyze it and look for the weak spots to defeat it... or we learn to live with it. Sometimes the monster can't be defeated, but we know it doesn't help to give up and cry. That's a sure way to get picked off early. We know things, and the rest of the world needs to know our things.



For example, ask a Normie why so many horror people wear black? Because we all know white T-shirts are stab magnets... duh.

Another great thing about horror people is we consider the problem from all angles. We understand that a monster may be a misunderstanding like Frankenstein---sometimes like ourselves. We also know that sometimes fear is a way to hide what needs to be seen and faced. While technically not horror, George Orwell's *1984* is a beautiful example of this. Shining light on fear is power. Horror people know this.

I think Franklin D. Roosevelt must have been one of us when he said "that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts..." He certainly had fear---triskaidekaphobia, the fear of the number 13 was one. He went to some great lengths to avoid the number, including passing away on Thursday, April 12, 1945. He never liked to start a trip on Friday the 13th.

An amazing trait of horror writers is the ability to turn near crippling empathy into a superpower. Contrary to what some might believe, horror writers do actually have feelings---usually deep, vivid feelings. Every terrible, off-color joke is our attempt to build a protective wall around those feelings. Sometimes our bruises are still fresh so we need our Normie friends to keep their distance. We can be empathetic to the point of near dysfunction. We can see things from multiple points of view in the same blink: the monster was really, really hungry and the guy was wearing a white T-shirt... but it does suck to be eaten. We can bounce between POVs.

Another valuable trait of horror people is our open mindedness. One reason I have so many horror inclined friends is because they are an open and accepting community. We recognize that the world is populated by freaks, fiends and friends... and they can all be the same person. We tend not to shun (unless we're formatting) because we know what being shunned feels like. We stand by each other because we all know what happens when you wander off by yourself.

So here we are in uncertain times, one of the scariest Halloweens many of us can remember (except for maybe last year). If you are reading this, you probably aren't the head in the sand type and I hope you aren't the reactionary torch and pitchfork type. Witches are always best enjoyed *by* the fire as opposed to *in* the fire.

I imagine, if you made it to the end of this, you are like most of my dark minded friends---well-versed in pain, empathetic, open minded, loving and proactive. I don't even have to know your name, but because you are here I know I like you. We are the same. Resilient, perfect (apocalypse) team players---bring your own hockey mask.

What I understand from the NCBI study is that horror writers are mankind's greatest hope for the future. We are the architects of hope, building perfect monsters for crushing fear. Like therapeutic Rumpelstiltskins, we process trauma and let it pile up around us as treasure. We are the alchemists that have found the secret of turning lead into gold, and dread into bold.

So this is my message to the rest of the world this Halloween: Listen to science, and seriously, come to the dark side. We have field rations.

*(forever...and ever...and ever... and ever... and eve.....r.....)*

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

Angela Yuriko Smith is a third generation Uchinanchu and an award-winning American poet, author, and publisher with over 20 years of experience in newspaper journalism. Publisher of Space & Time magazine (est. 1966), a Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist and HWA Mentor of the Year for 2020. To find out more visit [angelayurikosmith.com](http://angelayurikosmith.com).

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RECREATIONAL  
SUICIDE  
IN PROGRESS



# Bitter Suites

ANGELA YURIKO SMITH

## Chapter Six: Mochi and Umeboshi

A well dressed man and his wife came into the lobby and stopped inside the door. They didn't seem to belong there. They looked conservative, unlike the usual death devotees that populated the Bitter Suites. The woman, navy blue pencil skirt and tailored jacket, pointed to Azrael, waiting behind the lobby desk, and spoke in a murmur. The man followed her gesture, gave a curt nod, and stepped forward.

"We have an appointment for our two girls," he said. "Mochi and Umeboshi." Azrael looked up at the clock on the wall and then down at her appointment book. The woman had walked up behind him. She looked nervous and uncomfortable. She glanced around the lobby in discrete peeks before turning her attention to the girl behind the desk.

"We call them Mochi and Ume," said the woman. "Sweet Rice and Sour Plum." Her husband pursed his lips and went on as if she hadn't spoken.

"We have an appointment for them." Azrael studied the couple for a moment, trying to assess their intentions. "I see the girls are both legal as of today. Is this a surprise for them?" The woman nodded and smiled.

"It is to bond them," said the man. "They were born together. They should be close. This is their last chance to connect as sisters before adulthood."

"This is why we call them Mochi and Ume," said the woman. "Mochi is full of love and laughter. Ume is sour. Just a small bit of her bitterness goes a long way." She flashed a quick smile and then it vanished just as fast. Azrael could see where the girls had gotten their opposing personalities.

"So, they have an appointment?" The father was brisk and efficient. "They will be here any minute unless I tell the driver otherwise." He pulled his phone from a breast pocket and tapped in his unlock code.

"Yes, said Azrael. "Their appointment is confirmed." She found the correct keycard and slid them across the counter. The man returned the phone to his pocket and picked up the keycard. "They may go directly to the room when they arrive."

"Good," he said. He turned his back on Azrael and walked to the center of the lobby to stand in front of the entrance. His wife gave an apologetic smile before following him. They both stood still, waiting.

The next five minutes crawled by with Azrael trying not to look at the living mannequins that had taken residence in her lobby. The woman had moved closer to take his arm and then they both became motionless until a car pulled up outside. The woman made a small coo of relief as a driver opened the door.

A pretty girl exited the car, grinning with excitement. She thanked the driver before turning back to gesture dramatically. She turned to look up at the building, eyes casting their way past the Bitter Suites' lighted marquee to the 13th floor above and then she clapped her hands like a little girl before bursting into the lobby.

"The Bitter Suites! Are you going to let us die?" she asked. She rushed to her parents and squeezed them both, oblivious to any response. The mother brushed her daughter's hair back and kissed her cheek. Even the father grinned down at her. "This is going to be so amazing!"

Another girl exited the car. She ignored the driver's offered hand. Azrael watched her through the glass as she too scanned the hotel's facade. Her neck craned backwards, seeking the top floor. Calmly, she looked back down, through the glass doors where she could see her parents and Mochi hugging. She watched, expressionless, and then her lips peeled back to reveal perfect teeth.

There was no joy or humor in this expression. The grin was crooked and twisted, more snarl than smile. Her eyes lit up with a fevered shine, glinting in the fading light. A shadow slipped over Ume's face as she watched her family hugging, and then whatever emotion she had let play across her face was shuttered. She pushed through the door.

"Ume! I wondered where you were!" The mother disengaged herself from Mochi's embrace. "Do you like your birthday surprise?" She dropped her arms to her side and fiddled with the seams of her skirt. Mochi was oblivious to the emotional chill that emanated from her sister.

"Umeboshi! We get to have our first grown-up death!" She ran the few steps to her sister in an very un-grownup manner and hugged her as well. Like a wriggling puppy, her excitement was impossible to stifle. Ume didn't protest the embrace, but she didn't respond either. Mochi's natural joy bubbled up from some happy well inside her, independent.

"Are we dying separately or together?" asked Ume over her sister's shoulder. Her father pulled the keycard from his pocket and held it up.

"One room, two deaths," he said. Ume shook her sister off and walked to her father. She plucked the card from his hand and looked at the room number. "The penthouse. Thank you, Father. Thank you, Mother. We'll enjoy this present." Her voice was flat.

"Umeboshi, please don't be so distant. You are a woman. This is a special day." Her mother reached forward without taking a step, bending at the waist, and touched Ume's arm. The girl looked down at her mother's hand as if it confused her, and then back up and into her mother's eyes.

"I am very excited, Mother," said Ume in the same, flat tone. She smiled then, the same, fevered dark expression that Azreal had witnessed earlier. Her mother dropped her hand and stood straight.

"Happy birthday then, dears," she said. She looked up at her husband. "Shall we sit and wait?" He nodded. Taking her arm, he escorted her to a sitting area off to one side without another word to the girls. Undeterred, Mochi grabbed her sister's arm and pulled her towards the elevators. Ume allowed herself to be pulled in. As the doors closed, they watched their mother half raise up from the couch. Their father, who had settled back into his mannequin state, looked up at her surprised.

"I love you, my sweet Mochi!" she called. Her eyes glittered wetly in the lobby lamps. She caught sight of Ume, staring back with a dark expression. "And Ume..." The elevator doors closed, cutting off her words. The girls were alone in the elevator. They were passing the sixth floor before either of them spoke.

"She loves you too," said Mochi. Ume made no reply.

"I know she didn't say it, but I'm sure she meant it," Mochi continued. She was smiling but the effect was less sweet in the dim light of the elevator. There was a dangerous sharpness to her, like a kitten playing. "They would probably love you more if you weren't always so gloomy." Still, Ume said nothing. They passed the 11th floor. The elevator stopped moving at the 13th floor.

"No wonder no one likes you," said Mochi as the doors slid open. She stepped out and whistled. Ume followed her. They were in a lush waiting room. Their shoes sank deep into the thick, crimson carpet. The wallpaper was a textured cream color with geometric designs of pressed gold foil. Double doors of polished zebra wood and brass were before them. Ume stepped forward and slid the keycard in the lock. The door popped open with a click. Both girls exhaled.

They were no strangers to wealth. Their parents had always provided them with the best of everything, but their parents were highly conservative—never ostentatious. The walls of their house were cream with white trim. The most exotic item in their house had been the dining room table, made of burl wood, but even that was accompanied by beige upholstered chairs and white dishes. This room was completely different from anything they had experienced.

Like the door, the furniture was made of zebra wood and brass. The lush carpet continued into the penthouse apartment bringing a riot of warmth and color to the two girls who had grown up without it. A red, velour fainting couch could be seen through an open door. Across it was a throw in leopard print. Ume walked through to inspect the next room.

It was set up to be a private theater. A large screen was set into the wall. A comfortable, half-circle couch faced it. Heavy red curtains were hung along the wall. Ume walked to them and groped in the heavy folds until she found what she was looking for—a glass door that led to the balcony she had seen from below. She went to the rail and looked down. Satisfied, she went back inside, leaving the door open behind her.

She rejoined her sister in the main room. All the furniture had been removed and replaced by a low, Japanese style table in the middle. Two cushions sat on either side of the table. A kimono was folded neatly on each cushion. On the table was a pot of tea, two small cups with no handles and two short blades. Beneath each blade was a small card. Beneath each kimono was a braided red cord.

"Looks like a party," said Mochi. "A boring party." She walked to the small table and chose a kimono. It was white silk with pink and red cherry blossoms embroidered across it. She draped it over her shoulders. "But at least we get to keep these." Ume came over and unfolded the other one.

It was black silk with golden orange chrysanthemums embroidered across it. She held it up to her face, feeling the smooth material against her skin. With her face covered, she gave a secret smile and inhaled the scent of incense.

"They had to include one for you," she heard her sister say. Her smile was lost in the folds of silk. She let the robe fall to drape over her arm. Her face was as expressionless as always.

"I know," she said. "I just want to make sure it's been laundered." She bent over and picked up the card and read while Mochi stripped and replaced her outfit with the kimono. She turned before a mirrored wall to admire herself. The clothes she had worn were discarded in a pile.

"The blades are called *tanto*," said Ume. "We're supposed to slice our stomachs from left to right." She read on, and then bent over to pick up the cord. "We are supposed to tie our knees together with this so we can die in a ladylike position." She raised her eyebrows and looked at her sister, dangling the cord. Mochi giggled.

"That's dumb. I thought we'd get something exciting, not some lame, traditional death." She rolled her eyes. "Leave it to lame, traditional parents." She turned away from the mirror and walked to the table to pick up the blade.

"I should just kill you. That would be exciting. Why do we have to kill ourselves?"

"I had the same thought before we even came upstairs," said Ume. A whisper of a smile played at the corners of her mouth. She dropped the card and picked up the other knife.

"I could finally get rid of you," said Mochi. "Just because we shared a womb doesn't mean we have to share a life."

"What we've shared can hardly be called a life," said Ume. "You've made sure to keep me pushed into the corner and out of your spotlight."

"You're still here," said Mochi. "So I haven't pushed hard enough, I guess. But just wishful thinking. Neither of us can kill the other permanently. The resuscitators will just bring us both back."

"I suppose you're right," said Ume. "But we could try." Mochi sniffed.

"You mean I could try. You've never beaten me at anything ever."

Ume just shrugged. "You're right, you'd win anyway." She tossed her kimono back onto its cushion. "This is boring. Come see the movie screen in the next room. It's our own, personal theater."

"Really?" Mochi dropped her blade back onto the table and wandered into the next room. Ume followed.

"This is cool!" Mochi sat down on the half-circle couch. "Turn out the lights and let's see what they have." Ume obediently dimmed the lights while her sister turned on a small screen set into one end of the couch. She bent over the touchpad, making selections. In front of her the wall lit up and music filled the room.

Behind her, Ume was smiling again. She walked up behind her sister on the couch and looked down at her bent form. In her hand, she still held her tanto. In a swift motion, she grabbed a handful of Mochi's hair and pulled her head back.

"Ow! Bitch!" Mochi's voice barely carried over the loud soundtrack that surrounded them. Upside down, she scowled at Ume and reached her hands up to release her hair from her sister's grip. Ume raised the tanto up over her sister and brought it down into her stomach, sinking the short blade to the hilt. She pulled hard to the right, twisting the knife as she cut. She let go, leaving the blade sunk into Mochi's abdomen.

Still holding her hair, she dragged her sister sideways off the couch, onto the floor and across the room. The white kimono was already soaked, the cherry blossoms vanishing in the bright blood. Ume pulled her sister onto the balcony and let go. Mochi doubled over, clutching the blade with one hand. The other she raised up to Ume. She pointed a shaking finger at her.

"Get... help...stupid...hurts"

Ume's face split open in a wide grin. Her eyes were wide with excitement.

"Mochi, guess what?" She started pulling her sister upright and pinned her hunched form against the railing.

"What..." gasped Mochi. Her mouth hung open slack and her eyes were dulling.

"I win," said Ume. She heaved her sister's body over the rail to drop freely until it met with the street, 13 floors below. She watched and savored the feeling of individuality that washed over her. She was no longer a twin. The night air smelled like freedom.

Ume walked back inside, through the loud theater room and into the main area. She picked up her black kimono as the mirrored wall split open. Several individuals in jumpsuits spilled out.

"Is she over the balcony? How did she fall?" someone asked Ume, but she didn't answer. She slipped the kimono over her clothes while the team rushed past her to the next room. She heard voices crackle over a radio.

"Get a team to the ground. She's outside!"

"We won't reach her in time..."

"Stick her anyways! We have to get her back up...!"

Ume walked back to the elevators, still smiling. She pressed the button to go downstairs and caught her reflection in the brass. It was distorted, but for the first time in her life, she saw only one reflection.

"Best birthday ever," she told it. The elevator doors opened, and she stepped inside as an only child.



# FEAR

Of the Dark



TWISTED REALITIES:  
OF MYTH AND MONSTROSITY



NOW I LAY ME DOWN  
TO REAP



CARNAGE  
AFTER THE END  
VOLUME 1



LEGENDS  
of  
URBAN HORROR

*A Friend of a Friend  
Told Me*

BELLOWS OF THE  
BONE BOX



*A Steampunk Anthology*

Mental Ward  
STORIES FROM THE ASYLUM



Slaughter House

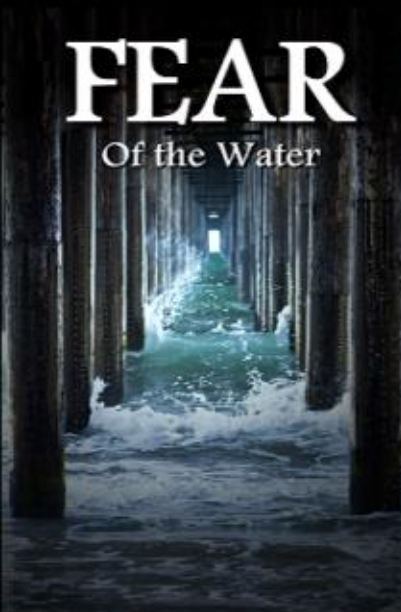
The Serial Killer  
Edition



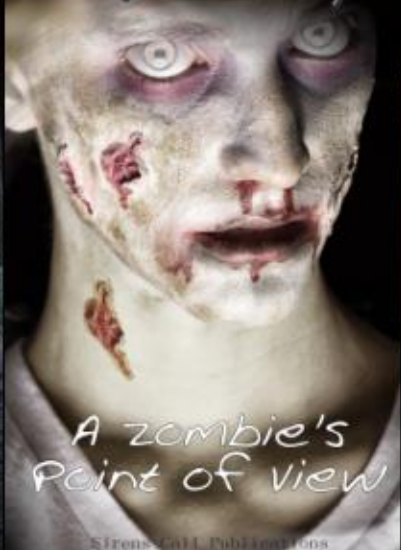
Volume 1

# FEAR

Of the Water



Through Clouded Eyes

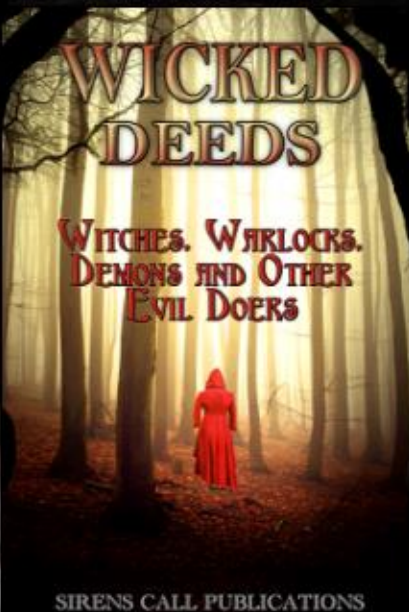


*A zombie's  
Point of view*

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WICKED  
DEEDS

WITCHES. WARLOCKS.  
DEMONS AND OTHER  
EVIL DOERS



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MONSTER  
BRAWL!



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PURVEYORS OF DARK FICTION





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